

Don't Let Perfection Be the Enemy of Productivity

by Alice Boyes

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Summary. Perfectionism is often driven by striving for excellence, but it can be self-sabotaging. There are three big mistakes that tend to kill perfectionists' productivity. First, they are often unable to designate any decision as unimportant which prevents them from quick... [more](#)

Productivity isn't about getting *more* done. It's about *what* you get done. Three aspects of perfectionism can interfere with your ability to prioritize the most important tasks.

1. You're reluctant to designate decisions as "unimportant."

There's an argument that, for unimportant decisions, you should either decide quickly or outsource the decision.

But perfectionists have a hard time designating decisions as unimportant. They like to be in control of everything. Why? Because imperfections bother them more than they do other people. If something goes wrong, perfectionists might feel explosive frustration or a niggling sense of irritation that's hard to ignore, and they don't want to take that risk.

Sometimes, perfectionists are so accustomed to micromanaging that it doesn't even occur to them that any decision is unimportant. They're blind to it. They habitually and automatically classify everything as worthy of their full effort.

Solution: In modern life, decision fatigue can be intense. A perfectionist can learn to love giving up control over some choices if they pay attention to how good it feels to be relieved of the decision-making burden. Try using heuristics to quickly decide or delegate with the expectation that you will get much faster and pretty good decisions overall but not perfect ones. For instance, one of my heuristics is: if I've thought about doing something three times, I will get on and do it without further deliberating. For a useful decision-making matrix, see this tweet.

2. You feel morally obligated to overdeliver.

The belief that you need to beat expectations in any situation can manifest in many ways.

Let's say someone offers to pay you \$1,000 for a service. If you're a perfectionist, providing \$1,000 of value might not seem like enough. You might think that you need to give what your

competitors would charge \$1,500 for because you want to outperform. You think: “If I don’t overdeliver, I’m underdelivering.”

Or if you judge that 24 hours is a respectable timeframe in which to respond to a colleague’s email, you might set your own bar at within six hours. The key point is that you believe what’s generally reasonable doesn’t apply to you, and your own standard needs to be different.



Sometimes this line of thinking comes from wanting an excessive cushion; for instance, you think “if I aim to deliver 1.5X or 2X value for all the services I provide, then I’m never going to under-deliver.” It can also be driven by anxiety, insecurity or imposter syndrome; for instance, you think the only way to prevent anyone from being disappointed or unhappy with you is by always exceeding expectations. Perfectionists also sometimes imagine there will be catastrophic consequences if they fail to overdeliver; for example, they worry a client won’t want to work with them if they take a day to answer an email request, even if it’s a non-urgent query and they’re happy with everything else.

Solution: Have a plan for how you'll course-correct if you notice these thought patterns. Understand what it's costing you to always aim for outperformance. What else don't you have time, energy, attention, and willpower for? Perhaps your own health, your big goals, or your family. If you assess that the costs are significant, try having a rule of thumb for when you'll overdeliver. For instance, you might decide that in three out of ten situations in which you have the urge to do so, you will, but not in the other seven.

Situation-specific habits can help you, too. For instance, if a reporter sends me more than six questions for an article they're working on, I'll generally answer six or so questions in detail, and either minimally answer or skip the others. (I probably give *better* answers using this strategy because I focus on the areas in which I have the most interesting things to say.)

3. You get excessively annoyed when you aren't 100% consistent with good habits.

When perfectionists want to adopt new habits, they tend to fall into one of three categories. They bite off more than they can chew and their plans are too onerous to manage; they avoid starting any habit unless they're 100% sure they can hit their goal everyday, which leads to procrastination; or they take on only those habits that they can stick to no matter what.

Flexibility is a hallmark of psychological health. You need to have the capacity to take a day off from the gym when you're sick or just got off a late flight, even if it means breaking a streak. You should also be able to shift away from habits that were once important to your productivity or skills development but that you've outgrown. Maybe as a beginning blogger, you vowed to always post three times a week, but now that's burning you out or, as a new real estate investor, you always attended a monthly meetup, but now you get little out of it.

Sometimes the more-disciplined behavior (deviating from an ingrained habit or pattern of behavior) looks like the less-disciplined one (taking a break). But when conventional self-discipline turns into compulsion, perfectionists may actually be held back by it.

Solution: Have a mechanism in place for checking that you're not sticking to a habit just because you're worshipping at the altar of self-discipline. If you've never missed a workout in two years (or any other habit), it's likely there were some days when getting it done wasn't the best use of your time. Regularly review the opportunity cost of any activities or behaviors you diligently do to make sure they are currently the best use of your physical and mental energy.

Perfectionism is often driven by striving for excellence, but it can be self-sabotaging if it leads to suboptimal behavior like continuing habits beyond their usefulness, overdelivering when you don't have to, or overthinking every decision you make.

Alice Boyes, PhD is a former clinical psychologist turned writer and the author of *The Healthy Mind Toolkit*, *The Anxiety Toolkit*, and *Stress-Free Productivity*.

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