

RESOURCE PAPER FOR DANCERS AND TEACHERS

Perfectionism

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Revised June 10, 2025, updated and approved

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INTRODUCTION

Striving for excellence motivates you; striving for perfection is demoralizing."
Harriet Braiker

As audiences, we are amazed by feats we could not hope to achieve ourselves and we applaud them. Newspaper reviews often use the words “perfect” or “flawless” to indicate that something desirable has occurred in a dance performance. Perhaps in recognition that a dancer needs to strive high and work hard before he or she can perform well, teachers sometimes try to inspire students to perfection. It is not surprising, then, that goals of perfection may appear both admirable and desirable. But is perfection or excellence most advantageous? Is there a difference between the two and, if so, what might it mean for dancers and for those who teach them? In this paper current ideas about perfectionism, including its positive and negative aspects, are described first. This is followed by an outline of pertinent research into the relationships that perfectionism has with a range of well- and ill-being indicators. The paper also addresses the issue of perfectionism among teachers, as well as students and dancers, and finishes with recommendations for practice.

WHAT IS PERFECTIONISM?

As with many psychological terms and variables, researchers do not fully agree on how best to define perfectionism. Therefore, a two-part definition will first be introduced in order to familiarize the reader with the research context. Following this a practical, but theoretically grounded description, will be presented to guide the rest of the paper.

One commonly used definition of perfectionism is that it comprises “the setting of excessively high standards of performance in conjunction with a tendency to make overly critical self-evaluations.”¹ As is evident from this statement, perfectionism is *multidimensional*: that is, it is not one single characteristic, but a combination of several. As a first category of these characteristics, any or all of the following tend to be included in the perfectionism construct:

- setting particularly high standards or goals, including the goal of perfection
- being highly driven and determined
- for some, a desire for structure, planning, and organization

The definition also makes it clear that there is a “darker side” to perfectionism – a second category of characteristics. This tends to be reflected in the experience of one or more of the following:

- a sense that what one does is never good enough
- worry about making, or having made, mistakes
- rumination, guilt, and doubts
- high levels of criticism from self and/or important others

While this may sound relatively straightforward, there is a complication. Put simply, it centers on whether displaying the characteristics listed in the first category above is

sufficient to be called a perfectionist. Some argue that it is, and thus believe that a positive form of perfectionism is both possible and desirable for high performance.²⁻⁴ Others argue that doing so is a little like acknowledging *one symptom* of an illness while ignoring the full-blown syndrome. For example: noting only a cough while failing to acknowledge that a patient has the flu. Researchers making this argument would reject the notion that there is a “positive” and a “negative” form of perfectionism. Instead, they argue that to be a perfectionist, one has to experience both the positive and the negative sides.⁵ Those who feel they match the first category of characteristics above would thus not be perfectionists, but rather persons who strives toward excellence. For example, in one study of Olympic champions,² it was found that they reported precisely this combination of responses. These successful performers were highly dedicated and worked extremely hard toward very challenging goals, but did not react particularly negatively to mistakes, nor were they prone to feelings of inadequacy.

Whichever position one takes, one major point is worth making clear: it is rare to experience the positive attributes of perfectionism without the negative. Numerous studies in a range of domains indicate that if one does strive for perfection, self-criticism, doubts, and a sense of inadequacy are often the unhappy by-products of that striving.^{1,5} In the interests of conceptual clarity and practical utility, the following terms and conceptualizations are proposed for moving forward:

- Striving for excellence is the pursuit of challenging yet attainable goals. Because goals are *difficult* to reach, high levels of dedication and hard work are necessary. However, because they are *possible* to reach, a positive sense of challenge can nurture one's motivation and the satisfaction of a job well done can be experienced.
- Perfectionism is the pursuit of perfection and, as such, is typically unrealistic and not attainable. Perfectionism also encompasses a highly critical view of the actions and mistakes made either by oneself or others. Since perfectionists never, or almost never, reach their goals, there is a constant discrepancy between where they currently see themselves as being and where they want (and typically feel like they ought) to be. This discrepancy prevents satisfaction and often results in negative thoughts and emotions.

For those interested in elite performance in particular, it becomes important to navigate the narrow path between a healthy striving for excellence and the ultimately detrimental striving for unrealistic perfection. This means how to set *suitably challenging* rather than *unrealistic* goals, and to *remain driven* without running the risk of *never being satisfied*. In more recreational contexts where elite performance is not the goal, participation should be more focused on enjoyment and self-development than performance excellence, but it is still entirely possible that dancers with perfectionist tendencies will appear in such contexts and will need at least as much careful guidance.

PERFECTIONISM AND ITS LINKS TO WELL- AND ILL-BEING

Much research has examined the links between perfectionism and various forms of well- or ill-being. When considered in its entirety, perfectionism is clearly detrimental. For instance, persons who are more perfectionistic also report lower levels of self-esteem and self-confidence, higher levels of anxiety, and higher rates of disordered eating.⁵ However, the multidimensional nature of perfectionism becomes crucial here: when separating out

the “positive” (e.g., setting particularly high standards or goals, including the goal of perfection) from the “negative” aspects (e.g., self-criticism and sense of inadequacy), a more nuanced picture appears. Simply put, the “positive aspects” are largely associated with well-being while the “negative aspects” are largely associated with ill-being. True perfectionists, therefore, typically have the potential for well-being undermined by the accompanying negative thoughts and feelings. Those who manage to strive for perfection while avoiding the negative sides generally report greater well-being. Recall, however, that these individuals are the exception; most perfectionists experience both the positive and the negative sides of it. Therefore, striving for excellence appears more favorable than perfectionism.

It is interesting to note that if a teacher can help students move from perfectionism to a striving for excellence, they will be aligning their students’ achievement goals with research findings not only for perfectionism, but also contemporary motivation⁶⁻⁸ and goal setting^{8,9} theories. Such theories, and their accompanying research evidence, clearly state that goals should be challenging yet realistic, specific rather than vague, and within the performers’ control rather than outside it, for example in comparing one’s ability with that of others. To place these findings in context, links between perfectionism and several key well- and ill-being constructs are described in the following sections. Yet even beyond the psychological and physical benefits described below, striving for excellence may be more appropriate than perfectionism for an art form like dance, simply because personal interpretation is a valuable component of artistry. To be *perfect* often suggests a pre-determined form or mold, while being *excellent* suggests greater fluidity, artistic freedom, and the possibility of going beyond existing norms.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PERFECTIONISM AND FEELINGS ABOUT THE SELF

Research clearly demonstrates relationships between perfectionism and low self-confidence (belief in one’s abilities) and/or self-esteem (perceptions of one’s worth as a person).^{5,10} Such findings stand to reason because holding oneself to aspirations of perfection will nearly always mean falling short of one’s goals. Always feeling inferior to where one wants to be (or, worse, where one feels one *should* or *must* be), logically diminishes self-confidence. If a dancer’s identity is tied up in dancing as the single most important activity in life and there is a belief one must do well as a dancer in order to be a good person, then the more fundamental construct of self-esteem is at serious risk. This is particularly important during times of stress. For a dancer with low self-esteem and high stress levels, chances are high that goals of perfect performance become overly demanding and upcoming shows feel like impending doom rather than exciting challenges.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PERFECTIONISM AND DISORDERED EATING

One of the most thoroughly researched relationships is that between perfectionism and disordered eating.^{5,11-14} A wealth of studies has confirmed that not only is perfectionism an inherent part of established eating disorders, but it is a risk factor for eating disorder development. This means that one would struggle to find an anorexia sufferer who is not also a perfectionist. Moreover, in dance styles where bodily appearance is under constant scrutiny, being perfectionistic about one’s performance may also develop into the belief that one’s body has to be perfect. Severe self-restraint, compulsive exercise, and excessive

attention to body weight and shape thus become more likely. Importantly, research has demonstrated that the link between having perfectionistic tendencies and actually acting on one's desire for thinness becomes stronger during times of stress.¹⁴

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PERFECTIONISM AND ANXIETY

Performers with perfectionistic tendencies are more likely to experience various forms of anxiety.^{5,10,12,15} First, the sense that what one does is never good enough tends to be accompanied by an uneasy, anxious feeling. Sense of control is also an important consideration: anxiety tends to arise when perceiving a lack of control over one's actions and over the likelihood of success - and achieving perfection is, of course, not fully within one's control. It is also important to note that one does not have to be very perfectionistic to experience anxiety. Instead, the relationship is gradual: the more perfectionistic the dancer, the more anxiety and the lower the self-confidence he or she is likely to experience.¹⁰

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PERFECTIONISM AND BURNOUT

Studies indicate that perfectionists are at greater risk of experiencing burnout as a result of their commitment to an activity like dance.^{5,16-18} This typically involves experiencing physical and emotional exhaustion, decreasing levels of performance, and a "falling out of love" with their activity. Motivation is a key consideration here: is the dancer training for an interesting, intrinsically rewarding and well-defined goal, or slogging away in order to "just not fall behind" or to avoid feelings of guilt?¹⁹ Does training and achievement result in satisfaction and pride, or explanations that "it's still not good enough" and just temporary relief at best? If a dancer is driven by a sense of dissatisfaction with progress toward unreachable goals, he or she may overtrain in an attempt to reach those goals, which in turn is a precursor for burnout.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PERFECTIONISM AND INJURY

Finally, it is interesting to note that perfectionism also links to an aspect of ill-being which is typically considered to be mostly physical in nature, namely, injury.²⁰⁻²¹ Specifically, there are indications that those who both pursue unrealistic goals and worry about never being good enough also injure themselves to a greater extent. This stands to reason, because perfectionists typically work very hard – sometimes too hard – and frequently pushing beyond the point of fatigue is an obvious injury risk factor. Perfectionistic dancers may also be more likely to re-injure themselves, because they often return from an injury before it is fully healed. The reason for this may well lie in dissatisfaction with performance. If a dancer constantly feels inferior and inadequate, then only by constantly working very, very hard can that person ever feel close to reaching his or her goals.

PERFECTIONISM AND THE TEACHER

While much perfectionism research has focused on how perfectionistic a person is in relation to his or her own goals and actions, some researchers have taken an alternative approach. Based in a tripartite model, they argue that aside from being perfectionistic toward ourselves (*self-oriented perfectionism*) we can also feel that others expect

perfection from us (*socially prescribed perfectionism*), or we ourselves can demand perfection from others (*other-oriented perfectionism*).²² While as yet not examined systematically in dance, research from other domains suggests that these latter two forms would be valuable to consider in relation to dance teachers. For example, if as a teacher you expect unwavering commitment at all times, 110% dedication to the art form above all other life domains, and technical as well as artistic perfection from your dancers, then you might be an *other-oriented perfectionist*. From there the leap to your dancers developing tendencies of *socially prescribed perfectionism* is not far. One qualitative research study illuminates this scenario:

One particular dancer went on to describe the effects of the level of perfection expected in the dance world, which upon reflection of a performance allows harsh self-judgments with regard to post-performance self-satisfaction or dissatisfaction... this dancer stated: 'From the school days you're made well aware that failure is not acceptable ... sometimes you're made to feel like you failed when really you just weren't perfect.'²³

Given that socially prescribed perfectionism is associated with the ill-being indicators outlined above (e.g., anxiety and burnout), it appears particularly unwise to nurture it, for instance by expecting perfection and demonstrating dissatisfaction with anything less. The same applies to teacher or parental pressure more generally. The dancer quoted above mentions harsh self-judgments as one of its effects. Anxiety in relation to how one's body appears to others and social anxiety more generally are other undesirable outcomes of socially prescribed perfectionism.^{5,12,16} Indeed, it stands to reason that dancers are likely to become nervous in settings where they feel others expect them to be perfect, because how can they ever live up to it? Perhaps other-oriented perfectionism can even cause injury to others: legend has it that Fred Astaire, a noted perfectionist, had Ginger Rogers do so many re-takes of a scene in *Swing Time* (1936) that her feet started to bleed through her shoes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

First: How do I know if my dancers are perfectionistic?

While teachers should not be expected to know every dancer's mind, a few simple guidelines may help to separate more prominent demonstrations of perfectionism from healthy strivings for excellence. Of course, this does not constitute an in-depth psychological assessment and should not be used to create rigid labels for dancers.

With this caveat stated, two things appear important:

1. Talk with your dancers. Try to understand what motivates them to dance, drives them to undergo strenuous training, and how they feel after more and less successful dance classes and performances.
 - a. For instance, when talking about their goals:
 - i. Are they realistic and specific or unrealistic and vague?
 - ii. Do they seem to have high or low self-confidence and self-esteem?
 - b. When talking about the future:
 - i. Do they seem to feel hope for success or fear of failure?
 - ii. Do they focus on what they want to reach or what they want to avoid?
 - c. When talking about life in general:

- i. Is dance seemingly in harmony with other activities (e.g., school, family) or is dance their be-all and end-all?
- ii. Do they seem to experience high or low levels of support from friends and family?

The person most likely to be perfectionistic and thus in need of your support will probably speak of unrealistic goals accompanied by low self-confidence and/or self-esteem, fear of failure, avoidance motivation, and an identity tightly bound to dance. This is especially of concern if they also lack support in other areas of their lives.

2. Observing dancer behavior. While perfectionism is partly in the mind of an individual, it also impacts on behavior.
 - a. Do the dancers eagerly approach challenge or shy away from situations in which they may not appear perfect?
 - b. Are they willing to work on their weaknesses in front of others?
 - c. Are they brave enough to take creative choices which may not “work” and risks them looking silly?
 - d. After mistakes or failure, do they seem to chastise themselves excessively?

Perfectionistic self-presentation means avoiding situations where one cannot appear perfect to others. This is often related to an unwillingness to work on skills one is not good at, and especially doing so in front of others. The uncertainty of improvisational, creative exercises may be particularly tough for some. If such avoidance behaviors are combined with tendencies to be overly critical, self-punishment and never being pleased, you may well have a perfectionist in your studio.

Finally, interactions between dancers and their parents may be instructive. Do the parents seem to convey rigid expectations for their child, such as them having to perform perfectly at all times or be the best? Do they make approval and love contingent on performance? If this is the case, perfectionism will be more likely to develop in the child.

Second: What do I do about it?

Teachers typically teach groups and there is a limit to how far training can be individualized. Chances are that some dancers in your group have perfectionistic tendencies, some strive for excellence, and some do neither. Is this an impossible scenario? Fortunately not. Instead of worrying overly about the unobservable goings-on in dancers’ minds, concentrate your efforts on creating a healthy environment for everyone. In this final section, a small set of very important recommendations are summarized.

Be demanding yet realistic of the dancer.

Encourage dancers to set and work toward their own goals within the constraints of class, and take an interest in their individual progress. Make it explicit that you are interested in excellence, not perfection and that the way to get there is via realistic, challenging goals and flexible, not rigid, demands. Then make this true by using constructive and challenging, but not negative feedback. Verbally state that the classroom is a place to feel safe to take risks, work on skills that are outside one’s comfort zone, and to have fun. Teachers can also encourage dancers to feel pleased with their progress by showing that they, too, become pleased when dancers learn or even just put in effort. Feeling confident, courageous, and

creative comes from careful nurture and appropriate challenge, not from demands of perfection.

If you have dancers with seemingly perfectionistic goals yet *high* levels of confidence, you can commend them for their courage and commitment, while still making them aware that goals should be realistic and that perfection rarely fits that bill. Help them see that they do not necessarily need to lower their standards; just clarify them and work out sensible steps toward their goals. This makes the goals possible to reach, and thereby possible to celebrate when reached! The myth that being constantly dissatisfied is a useful driving force should have no place in 21st century dance practice, because motivation is healthier when it is about striving *toward* something interesting and valuable (such as new creative heights), rather than *away from* something undesirable (such as dissatisfaction with the self or other people's disapproval).⁶

Be supportive of the person.

Value your dancers as people first, performers second. Rounded identities with life experience will be more resilient to stress, bounce back faster after mistakes, and also have more interesting things to say artistically. Encourage them to have friends outside of dance and perhaps to engage in a range of other activities such as art, sports, or music. To be supportive, make feedback non-judgmental and focused on how challenges can be approached positively. Steer attention away from largely uncontrollable factors like body dimensions and toward controllable (and arguably more interesting) ones like artistry and communication.

Be especially supportive of some, yet stay realistic.

Some dancers need more support than others. Perfectionistic dancers with low self-esteem and few activities or support outside dance may be at particular risk of experiencing the negative sides of perfectionism and its associated ills (e.g., low body esteem, disordered eating attitudes). This is especially important during times of stress, so give dancers with perfectionistic tendencies some extra support during performances, exams, auditions, and similarly demanding times. However, remain realistic about your responsibilities; teachers should not diagnose or feel responsible for dancers' personalities or mental health. When things fall outside your expertise, help yourself to help them by having a good network of contacts and a referral system in place. Evidence suggests that cognitive behavioral therapy can be an effective way of dealing with perfectionism.²⁴

Keep things in perspective.

Dance can be wonderful, inspiring, and motivating, but it should not become the be-all and end-all of one's existence. If a dancer appears to be over-training, it is important to monitor workload and discuss the distinction between working hard and working smart. Introducing more mental training can help alleviate some physical fatigue and scientific principles around rest, repair, and periodization deserve serious discussion.²⁵

If a dancer is blowing the importance of an event out of proportion, try to explain that, while you appreciate his or her dedication to dance, it is important to remember that there are other important facets of life such as one's health and relationships. If you keep things in perspective, they are more likely to do the same. Perfectionists also need to practice making mistakes so that they can learn for themselves that it is not life threatening. Sharing

your own mistakes with your dancers – and generally being open and human – will also help keep things in perspective. More generally, gently guide them toward realistic goals and try to get them absorbed in the artistically or musically interesting parts of the performance where there is room for individual interpretation and immersion. As noted by Sylvie Guillem: *"Technical perfection is insufficient. It is an orphan without the true soul of a dancer."*

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