

# Perfectionistic students get higher grades, but at what cost?

December 20 2019, by Daniel Madigan

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Credit: Helena Lopes from Pexels

Student performance matters. Students who perform well have better health, earn a larger income and contribute more to [society](#) than those who perform poorly.

As a consequence, psychologists, teachers and even parents have spent a great deal of time and effort trying to understand what makes or breaks success. Personality factors that explain how people differ may be extremely important in this regard. One prominent trait that has long been tied to [performance](#) is [perfectionism](#). Perfectionists place irrational significance on achieving their excessive standards, struggle with failure and criticism, and may feel the need to be the best at everything they do.

In a new [study](#) of nearly 10,000 students aged 12-21, I found that perfectionism predicted better academic achievement. Perfectionists outperformed their non-perfectionist counterparts in exams, received better grades and had higher grade-point averages. This greater performance persisted through school, college and university.

Not only may perfectionism increase performance, recent [evidence](#) suggests that the number of students considered [perfectionists](#) is increasing—and has been rising for the last three decades.

## **The high price of perfect**

This may all sound like positive news. But perfectionists can pay a high price for their greater performance. This is because perfectionists view anything short of perfect as unacceptable—and when perfectionists make mistakes, fail exams or receive critical feedback, they experience significant psychological distress. This includes stress, [burnout](#) and [depression](#). It may also partly explain why students more generally experience much [higher rates](#) of depression than the general population.

These issues can become particularly problematic during the transition from one stage of education to the [next](#). For example, when a [student](#) leaves college and begins to study at university. Here, they are not only faced with a huge number of new stressors but possibly also worse performance. These issues may even persist beyond education and into

the workplace.

## What parents and teachers can do

So before parents and educators are tempted to promote perfectionism, they must be aware that its performance [benefits](#) will come at a much greater cost when things go wrong.

One thing that may be helpful in these situations is to better recognize perfectionist characteristics. [Perfectionism](#) is a combination of excessively high standards: "I demand nothing less than perfection of myself," and overly critical evaluations of performance: "It makes me uneasy to see an error in my work." Perfectionist students are also rigid in their need for success: "I must always be successful at school."

By being aware of these characteristics, parents and teachers can more easily identify and highlight the differences between reasonable, achievable standards and excessive, perfectionist standards. And students can instead be taught to strive for more appropriate standards.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with high standards. But a focus on more realistic and less irrational performance outcomes will help students cope when things don't go to plan. And by encouraging realistic expectations, both [parents](#) and teachers can help students to better accept their imperfections.

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