

# Self-critical perfectionism gnaws on students' well-being already in lower secondary school, says study

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Young people's perfectionism is manifested as concern over their competence and fear of making mistakes.

A new study among ninth-graders attending lower secondary school in Swedish-speaking areas of Finland identified four perfectionistic profiles with varying associations with students' psychological well-being. The study was conducted in collaboration between the University of Eastern Finland and Åbo Akademi University. The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Learning and Individual Differences*.

Perfectionism is characterized by [high standards](#) and striving for excellence, but it also involves concerns over one's own performance and dissatisfaction with one's achievements.

In other words, there is both a positive and a negative side to perfectionism. Different individuals, however, place different emphasis on strivings and concerns.

"We identified four distinct perfectionistic profiles: moderately concerned (relatively low strivings and relatively high concerns), perfectionists (high strivings and high concerns), ambitious (high strivings and low concerns), and non-perfectionists (low strivings and low concerns)," Doctoral Researcher Anna Kuusi of the University of Eastern Finland says.

The findings are in line with previous studies conducted among general upper secondary school and [university students](#). The present study is the first among lower secondary school students in Finland.

"Recent years have seen an increase in both perfectionism and exhaustion among young people, so it is important to determine at what stage and in what forms these experiences emerge," Kuusi notes.

**Most ninth-graders are moderately concerned—perfectionistic profiles are associated**

## with well-being

The study showed that perfectionistic profiles are substantially stable: around 80% of the students maintained the same profile over the school year.

However, some significant transitions were observed as well: some students transitioned from moderately concerned to non-perfectionist or perfectionist, or from perfectionist to moderately concerned. The profiles and transitions were also associated with well-being.

"Although both ambitious and perfectionist students were highly engaged and had high strivings, perfectionists displayed more burnout and anxiety and depressive symptoms than ambitious students, who only displayed a little of these. Both of these profiles, i.e., ambitious and perfectionist, which are characterized by high concerns, were associated with poorer well-being."

The moderately concerned profile was the most prevalent, and it can be thought to represent the typical ninth-grader. According to Kuusi, this is noteworthy because students with this profile also displayed relatively high emotional exhaustion as well as anxiety and depressive symptoms, compared to students with a non-perfectionist or an ambitious profile.

Transitions between profiles were also associated with well-being. A transition from moderately concerned to perfectionist was associated with higher exhaustion, whereas a transition from moderately concerned to non-perfectionist was associated with fewer anxiety and [depressive symptoms](#).

"The findings show that it is particularly important to understand how students' self-criticism and dissatisfaction with their own achievements are linked to poorer well-being. High goals and engagement do not

guarantee the well-being of a student if, at the same time, they are very concerned about their performance," Kuusi concludes.

The data used in the study constitutes part of the broader longitudinal research project Student Well-being and Learning in Future Society led by Åbo Akademi University. Ninth-grade students from lower secondary schools from different regions of Swedish-speaking areas of Finland responded to surveys conducted twice in the [school year](#) 2019–2020.

**More information:** Anna Kuusi et al, Lower secondary students' perfectionistic profiles: Stability, transitions, and connections with well-being, *Learning and Individual Differences* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.lindif.2024.102419](#)

Provided by University of Eastern Finland

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