

When High Performers Struggle

What our research found about perfectionism, uncertainty, fear of judgement and distress in working professionals

The people organisations worry about least are often the ones carrying the most. They are capable, conscientious and reliably deliver. They are also, in many cases, perfectionists, and perfectionism has a well-established link with anxiety, depression and burnout.

This guide summarises research carried out by The Performance Club's founder, Stacy Thomson, for her MSc in Occupational Psychology at Goldsmiths, University of London. It asked which kinds of perfectionism are linked to distress in working professionals, and why. The answers point to things organisations can change.

The stakes are not small. In Great Britain, the Health and Safety Executive estimates that 964,000 workers were suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2024/25, accounting for 52% of all work-related ill health.

Perfectionism is not only a personal trait. One of its most harmful forms is the belief that other people demand perfection, and that belief is shaped by the environment people work in.

IF SOMEONE NEEDS HELP NOW

If there is an immediate risk to life, call **999**. Samaritans are available free, 24 hours a day, on **116 123**. In England, NHS 111 (option 2) connects to an urgent mental health service.

01

About the study

- 162 working professionals, all in employment, recruited through LinkedIn and professional networks. 57% were women and 43% men.
- A wide range of sectors, including financial and investment services (17%), healthcare and the third sector (16%), consultancy (14%), the public sector (10%) and legal services (6%).
- All levels of seniority, from entry level to senior. Almost a third (31.5%) held senior roles.
- Each participant completed six established, validated questionnaires measuring perfectionism, intolerance of uncertainty, fear of negative evaluation, anxiety, worry and general psychological distress.
- The study was approved by the Goldsmiths ethics committee, and responses were anonymous.

Perfectionism was measured using Hewitt and Flett’s Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, one of the most widely used models in the research literature. It distinguishes three forms of perfectionism, which turn out to matter a great deal.

02

Three kinds of perfectionism

FORM	WHAT IT IS	HOW IT CAN SOUND AT WORK
Self-oriented	Demanding perfection of yourself: very high standards, and harsh self-scrutiny when they are not met.	"If it isn't flawless, it isn't finished."
Socially prescribed	Believing that other people expect you to be perfect, and that you will be judged harshly if you are not.	"The partners expect perfection. One mistake and I'm finished here."
Other-oriented	Demanding perfection of other people, and judging their performance stringently.	"I can't delegate this. Nobody else will do it properly."

High standards are not the problem in themselves. Striving for excellence can be healthy and motivating. The difficulty comes when standards become rigid and all-or-nothing, and when a person’s sense of worth depends on meeting them.

03

Finding 1: two forms of perfectionism were linked to distress

People with higher levels of self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism reported more general psychological distress and more anxiety. Both forms were significant predictors of general psychological distress.

Other-oriented perfectionism, on its own, was not linked to the person’s own distress. That does not make it harmless. Wider research associates it with blame, hostility and low trust towards others, so its cost may fall on the team rather than on the perfectionist.

WHAT THIS MEANS

Socially prescribed perfectionism is about perceived expectations: what people believe the organisation demands of them. Organisations cannot change someone’s personality, but they do shape what people believe is expected.

Finding 2: uncertainty and fear of judgement sit in the middle

The study looked at two possible mechanisms that might explain why perfectionism leads to distress.

Intolerance of uncertainty

Finding ambiguity threatening and hard to bear, and believing that uncertainty is unfair and gets in the way of functioning.

At work: struggling with unclear briefs, shifting priorities, restructures and decisions that are still pending.

Fear of negative evaluation

Apprehension about being judged critically by others, often accompanied by shame and embarrassment about mistakes.

At work: over-preparing, avoiding speaking up, dreading appraisals, and taking feedback as a verdict on their worth.

Both were strongly linked to self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, and both were strongly linked to distress and anxiety. Each accounted for a substantial share of the variation in distress. In other words, the perfectionists who struggle most may be those who find uncertainty hardest to tolerate and who most fear being judged.

WHAT THIS MEANS

Uncertainty and the risk of judgement are things organisations create, every day, through how they communicate change, give feedback and respond to mistakes. They are levers, not just traits.

Finding 3: worry may be hiding in plain sight

Previous research has described perfectionists as chronic over-thinkers. In this study, though, none of the three forms of perfectionism predicted worry on its own once the others were taken into account.

One explanation, suggested by other researchers, is that perfectionists often regard worry as useful: a sign of diligence and a way of preparing. If so, they may not experience or report it as a problem, even while it adds to anxiety and makes it harder to switch off.

WHAT THIS MEANS

Do not rely on people to tell you they are worrying too much. In high performers, worry can look like conscientiousness.

06

What organisations can do

DRIVER	WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE	WHAT HELPS
Perceived demands for perfection	Long hours, re-checking, difficulty finishing, anxiety before deadlines	Define “good enough” for routine work. Say explicitly where standards can flex and where they cannot.
Intolerance of uncertainty	Stress during change, repeated requests for clarity, avoiding decisions	Communicate early during change, including what is not yet known and when it will be. Give clear priorities.
Fear of negative evaluation	Over-preparation, silence in meetings, defensiveness about feedback	Build psychological safety. Give regular, specific, balanced feedback, so that criticism is not the only kind.
Mistakes treated as failures	Hiding errors, blame, delay in raising problems	Respond to mistakes as information. Senior leaders can model this by talking about their own.
Other-oriented perfectionism in leaders	Micromanagement, poor delegation, harsh judgement of others’ work	Coaching for leaders on standards, delegation and the impact of their expectations on others.

Three wider points:

- Treat high performers as a group to support, not a group to rely on. Distress in conscientious people often stays hidden until it becomes absence or departure.
- Equip managers to recognise perfectionism and to have the conversation. Workshops and Champion training help.
- Look at the environment as well as the individual. If perceived expectations drive distress, the most effective interventions are often cultural.

07

The limits of the study

Like any single study, this one has limits. The data are self-reported and collected at one point in time, so the findings describe associations rather than proving that one thing causes another. Some participants were known to the researcher, which may have influenced responses, although all answers were anonymous. The study used

one model of perfectionism, and the sample covered many professions, so the results may differ within specific industries. The findings are, however, consistent with a substantial body of earlier research.

A REFLECTION FOR HR AND SENIOR LEADERS

Think about the people your organisation relies on most.

What do they believe is expected of them, and is that what you actually expect?

How much uncertainty are they carrying right now, and how much could you reduce?

What happens in your organisation when someone makes a mistake?

Would you know if one of your best people was struggling?

The most reliable people are not always the most resilient. Sometimes they are simply the best at hiding the cost.

FURTHER GUIDANCE

- Work-related stress, depression or anxiety statistics in Great Britain, 2025, Health and Safety Executive (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/assets/docs/stress.pdf>)