

PRIZING IMPERFECTIONS

Denying flaws in oneself requires psychological gymnastics of striving for perfection at all costs or displacing imperfection (hostility, disapproval) onto others. In both cases, feelings of defectiveness and vulnerability have been buried. Although compulsive personalities can be demanding, they expect the same or more of themselves and feel responsible to prevent minor mistakes and major disasters. The anxiety of this enormous task is avoided by intellectualizing and taking pride in strict standards. Guarded people are less demanding of themselves because they displace (project) their flaws and self-loathing onto others. Resulting tension is handled by lashing out, and the loss of relationships is replaced with pride in independence and decisiveness. Five or more items marked below suggests that the self has been disenfranchised of its right to err.

| Personality Types | |
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| Compulsive Personalities ¹ | Guarded Personalities ² |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Have concern with details, rules, or schedules that interferes with happiness. <input type="checkbox"/> Are devoted to work and productivity to the exclusion of leisure activities. <input type="checkbox"/> Have overly strict standards that can prolong task completion and cause indecision. <input type="checkbox"/> Feel responsible for everything and need to prevent chaos, disorder, and mistakes. <input type="checkbox"/> Want others to do everything “right” and may do things themselves to avoid errors. <input type="checkbox"/> Dominate peers and subordinates but are very respectful of authority. <input type="checkbox"/> Are overly conscientious and strict about morals, ethics, or values. <input type="checkbox"/> Are unable to discard worthless objects even when they have no sentimental value. <input type="checkbox"/> Have difficulty spending money so it can be saved for catastrophes. <input type="checkbox"/> Can appear rigid, possessive, intellectual, conventional, or dependable to others. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Have unfounded concerns that others want to hurt or take advantage of them. <input type="checkbox"/> Worry about and doubt the loyalty or trustworthiness of friends and associates. <input type="checkbox"/> Are often suspicious about faithfulness of partners without proof of wrongdoing. <input type="checkbox"/> Read criticism or threats into harmless comments or events. <input type="checkbox"/> React angrily when they imagine their character, space, or reputation has been attacked. <input type="checkbox"/> Carry grudges and do not forgive insults, injuries, or slights. <input type="checkbox"/> Are reluctant to confide in others due to concerns of betrayal; are secretive. <input type="checkbox"/> Believe they know what others are thinking without asking and discard facts that don’t fit their preconceptions. <input type="checkbox"/> Can appear suspicious, tense, cold, humorless, aggressive, and observant. |
| <p>¹ Adapted from criteria on pp. 672–673 with permission from the <i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i>, 4th edition. Copyright 1994, American Psychiatric Association.</p> <p>² Ibid. pp. 637–638.</p> | |

ORIGIN OF PROBLEMS

People with these characteristics had controlling parents with high or unrealistic standards—“You must do better to be worthwhile” or “You must be special, different, and loyal, but you are inherently flawed.” Both types may take on characteristics of their cruel or controlling parent(s) to keep the “defective” parts of themselves in check. Guarded people may find that being a good, lovable person is so far out of reach that, as adults, they avoid intimacy unless they can control partners or they choose sadistic partners who recreate their childhood drama. Compulsive people generally had consistent discipline and could escape punishment by meeting demands. They may choose free-spirited, loving partners who represent the side of themselves that they suppress.

Compulsive personalities are often first-born and even as infants can have difficulty experiencing pleasure. Guarded people may be predisposed to overrespond to their environment and have difficulty inhibiting impulses (to strike out) under stress.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

Modifying high standards, allowing emotions, and being more accepting and less attacking can be threatening. Such changes can make you feel defective and vulnerable. However, staying the same creates self-fulfilling prophecies that your significant others will not succeed or betray you. Recognizing what you are doing is a giant step forward. No matter how good you are at meeting your standards or scrutinizing others, you will have moments of great tension. These are opportunities for growth. Keep a journal of upsetting incidents and use them to turn inward and identify what others' behavior means about you.

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| Directions: Mark any of the thoughts that you get in your worst moments. Then, identify beliefs you would like to have and affirm these new ideas regularly. | |
| Turn Defeating Thoughts into | ... Beliefs That Promote Change |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm defective if I make a mistake, <input type="checkbox"/> if my loved ones make mistakes, or <input type="checkbox"/> if I don't fix problems the "right" way. <input type="checkbox"/> I can be certain of the future by taking the right course of action or saving things. <input type="checkbox"/> If people are friendly, they are using me. <input type="checkbox"/> If people are distant, they don't like me. <input type="checkbox"/> People are deceptive and untrustworthy. <input type="checkbox"/> I feel worthless if people reject, deceive, or criticize me, and I'm entitled to retaliate. | <input type="checkbox"/> I have value even if I make mistakes. <input type="checkbox"/> Others can make mistakes and learn from them. <input type="checkbox"/> I'm responsible only for my part. <input type="checkbox"/> There are many ways to do and fix things. <input type="checkbox"/> I can handle mishaps in the future. <input type="checkbox"/> Most people have genuine, worthy qualities. <input type="checkbox"/> Others have needs and struggles of their own. <input type="checkbox"/> I can find good intentions and ask questions. <input type="checkbox"/> I'm worthy despite others' comments and actions. <input type="checkbox"/> I can defuse criticism and find out its cause. |

BEHAVIOR EXPERIMENTS

It will be easier to identify your defeating thoughts by intentionally creating situations that bring them to the surface. Pick any of the following exercises that sound hard or distasteful and find a family member or friend to be your coach.

- Challenge your beliefs. Seek feedback about reasonable standards for and perceptions of people. Ask teachers, therapists, or others who have enjoyable, satisfying lives.
- Notice tension that occurs when others don't behave as you want. Learn to catch these reactions and take a moment to count to three while you inhale and to six while you exhale. Remind yourself, "I'm still worthy when others act in ways I don't like."
- Create a catastrophic fantasy of the failure or deception you fear. Focus on any tension and use the breathing described above to help it pass. Make your fantasy so extreme that it's ridiculous. As your stress lessens, practice healing thoughts—"I can handle future mishaps. I can understand the emotional pain that causes others' undesirable actions."
- Identify changes that would lower your standards by 25%. Put them into action little by little. Intentionally make minor mistakes, be silly, or reveal a truth about yourself. Go on a (blindfold) trust walk or fall into your coach's arms.
- Role-play handling upsetting comments. Agree with any (possible) truth in criticism and ask questions to understand how your behavior is difficult for others. Log attacks you make on others and find ways to reword them.
- Identify early abuse or pressure from caretakers that made you feel flawed. Use fantasy to help your young self understand what he or she could not comprehend as a child.