

# ADHD Perfectionism

## When high standards stop helping and start making it harder to begin, finish or recover

Perfectionism is not a diagnostic symptom of ADHD. However, some people with ADHD describe becoming caught between executive-function difficulties and very high standards: wanting to avoid another mistake, compensate for inconsistency, prevent criticism or make an important task feel completely safe before it is finished.

NICE recognises that ADHD may affect organisation, time management and motivation, and recommends individualised support, environmental modifications and structured psychological intervention when appropriate. These principles can be useful when perfectionistic coping adds further pressure to an already demanding task.

**High standards are not automatically a problem.** The difficulty begins when the standard becomes so rigid, vague or punishing that it prevents starting, finishing, learning, resting or asking for help.

### 1. Fear of criticism

A task can become less about doing the work and more about preventing anyone from finding fault. The person may check repeatedly, delay sending, over-prepare or avoid starting. **Try:** define what the task actually requires, identify whose feedback matters, and separate constructive correction from a judgement of personal worth.

### 2. An open-ended task

When there is no clear endpoint, the brain has to decide repeatedly what to include, how detailed to be and when to stop. **Try:** create an artificial boundary — a word count, time limit, number of sections, checklist or agreed definition of finished.

### 3. Comparing with others

Comparison can quietly move the finish line. Someone else's polished result may become the new minimum without knowing their time, resources, experience or support. **Try:** return to the purpose and criteria of your own task. Ask, "What does this need to do?" rather than "How do I make it as impressive as theirs?"

### 4. Past mistakes replaying

A previous error can make a new task feel dangerous. Replaying it may increase checking and hesitation. **Try:** extract one useful lesson from the old mistake, build that lesson into the process, then stop requiring the current task to erase the past.

### 5. Unclear "good enough" point

Without a stopping rule, every improvement suggests another possible improvement. **Try:** decide the stopping rule before fatigue takes over: required information included, checked once or twice, meets the brief, ready to be used.

### 6. High personal importance

The more something matters, the more pressure there may be to make it flawless. Important applications, client work, creative projects or emotionally meaningful tasks can therefore become harder to complete. **Try:** distinguish importance from perfection. A meaningful task can be imperfect and still achieve its purpose.

**NOTICE THE LOAD • PAUSE • REDUCE DEMANDS • RECOVER**

# The perfectionism loop

Perfectionism can look productive from the outside because it may involve a great deal of effort. But the cycle can also consume time, increase stress and make executive functioning harder.

| Stage            | What it can sound like                 | A useful interruption                            |
|------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| High standard    | "This has to be excellent."            | Define the actual purpose and required standard. |
| Uncertainty      | "How will I know it is right?"         | Create a concrete finish line.                   |
| Overthinking     | "I need to check everything again."    | Limit checking in advance.                       |
| Delay / overwork | "I cannot send it yet."                | Use a time boundary or external deadline.        |
| Exhaustion       | "I have spent all my energy on this."  | Protect recovery and reduce the next demand.     |
| Self-criticism   | "Why does everything take me so long?" | Review the system, not your worth.               |

## Building a 'good enough' finish line

**Purpose:** What does this task need to achieve?

**Minimum:** What must be present for it to be usable or acceptable?

**Maximum:** How much time, checking or detail am I willing to give it?

**Finish:** What observable condition tells me to stop?

**Release:** What will I do immediately after sending or finishing so I do not reopen it automatically?

## For partners, family and supporters

Telling someone to "just stop overthinking" may add pressure without giving them a stopping point. It can be more useful to ask what the task actually needs, help identify the first step, agree a realistic finish line or offer to review one specific part. Avoid becoming the permanent reassurance system; the aim is to build a workable process the person can increasingly use for themselves.

## At work or in education

Clear briefs, written priorities, examples of the expected standard, realistic deadlines and explicit definitions of completion can reduce ambiguity. NICE recognises written instructions, reduced distractions and structured environmental modifications as examples of ADHD support. NHS guidance also lists quiet workspaces, written instructions and help planning and structuring tasks as possible reasonable adjustments.

## A message from Maggie

Sometimes perfectionism looks like caring deeply, but underneath it can be fear: fear of getting it wrong, being criticised, disappointing someone or proving an old judgement true. You do not have to stop caring about quality. The goal is to find the point where care has done its job and pressure has started taking over. Good enough is not giving up. Sometimes it is the skill that finally allows something meaningful to leave your hands and enter the world.

# My Perfectionism & Good Enough Map

Use this when you notice a task expanding, stalling or taking far more energy than you expected.

## What is the task actually for?

Describe its purpose in one or two sentences.

|  |
|--|
|  |
|  |

## What am I afraid will happen if it is imperfect?

Criticism, rejection, embarrassment, disappointing someone, looking incompetent, regretting it later?

|  |
|--|
|  |
|  |

## What does the task genuinely require?

List the non-negotiable criteria — not every possible improvement.

|  |
|--|
|  |
|  |

## My 'good enough' finish line

What will be true when this is ready to stop? Make it observable.

|  |
|--|
|  |
|  |

## My checking limit

How many reviews, edits or checks are reasonable for this task?

|  |
|--|
|  |
|  |

## What can stay imperfect?

Name details that do not need further work for the task to succeed.

|  |
|--|
|  |
|  |

## What will help me release it?

Deadline, trusted reviewer, send button ritual, moving to another room, planned break, deleting duplicate drafts?

|  |
|--|
|  |
|  |

## A sentence for when the urge to redo appears

For example: "More editing is possible, but it is no longer necessary."

|  |
|--|
|  |
|  |

# Further reading and professional context

Perfectionism can occur with or without ADHD and may also be associated with anxiety, obsessive-compulsive difficulties, trauma, high-pressure environments or learned responses to criticism. It is therefore more useful to understand the individual function of perfectionism than to assume ADHD is always the cause.

## Book recommendations

**Taking Charge of Adult ADHD** — Russell A. Barkley. Practical, evidence-informed strategies for adult ADHD and executive-function support.

**How to ADHD** — Jessica McCabe. Accessible ADHD-informed strategies for task initiation, executive functioning and working with the brain rather than against it.

**Overcoming Perfectionism** — Roz Shafran, Sarah Egan and Tracey Wade. CBT-based approaches for understanding and changing unhelpful perfectionistic patterns.

**The CBT Workbook for Perfectionism** — Sharon Martin. Practical exercises for examining standards, self-criticism and more flexible responses.

## Professional sources

**NICE NG87 — Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: diagnosis and management.** NICE recommends holistic, individualised ADHD care, discusses environmental modifications, and notes that ADHD can affect organisation, time management and motivation. For adults where non-pharmacological treatment is indicated, NICE recommends a structured supportive psychological intervention focused on ADHD; this may include CBT.

**NHS — ADHD in adults.** NHS information describes ADHD management including lifestyle measures, workplace or study changes, medicines and talking therapies. Examples of reasonable adjustments include a quiet workspace, written instructions and help planning and structuring tasks.

This resource is psychoeducational. Perfectionism is not an ADHD diagnostic criterion and this guide should not be used to diagnose ADHD. If perfectionism, anxiety, checking or avoidance is significantly affecting daily functioning, appropriate professional assessment or therapy may be helpful.

**Space to Breathe Therapy**