

## Perfectly



**“You’re perfectly average.”** If you were told that, would it be an insult? For most Americans, being called average is the same as being called mediocre, ordinary, tolerable, or boring, and in today’s world, those are a disgrace.

For instance, consider these statistics: A study of college students that ran from 1989—2017 revealed during that time there was a 30% increase in students’ belief that they must appear perfect for others to approve of them, and in the 1950’s, 12% of teens considered themselves to be “an important person.” By the late 1980s, 80% held that opinion.

**So, we must be important, and we must be perfect.** These beliefs create an internal equation that can’t possibly add up. Every person makes mistakes, and most of us will never reach the “big leagues” in anything that we do. This misalignment between [beliefs and reality](#) leads to some interesting questions:

- Is perfection a reasonable goal for a specific endeavor?
- What does it mean about us and the tasks we take on, if we try our best but aren’t the best?
- Is it reasonable to believe that all that stands between us and a quick slide down the slippery slope of laziness and apathy is the pressure applied by endless expectations of excellence?

As a species, our progress from the savannah to the stars was only made possible by individuals and groups striving to be and do “more.” This curiosity, this yearning for growth, is to be celebrated and supported, but there is a tipping point when drive becomes destruction. It’s not necessarily the degree of a person’s ambition, however, that creates problems, it’s the way they react if they fall short of achieving their goals.

If personal perfection is the only acceptable outcome, that means:

- We have to limit ourselves to only doing things that are guaranteed to succeed.
- We must never be satisfied with “good enough” in any aspect of our lives.

## Average

These are both hallmarks of perfectionism, when someone sets unrealistically high standards and then feels worthless if those standards aren’t reached or unsatisfied if they are. [Perfectionists are harmed](#) by their pursuit of the unattainable because ultimately, there is no such thing as perfect.

**It is possible to split progress apart from perfection** though, by shifting our [focus](#) to include not just “Results” but also “Process.” On one hand, it’s important to keep an end result in mind, because it offers us a landmark to move toward. We can only plan effectively if we know what we’re planning for. We can only navigate accurately if we know where we want to go.

On the other hand, paying attention to the process by which we choose to get there offers us opportunities to learn more about ourselves and our world. It’s even possible that what we learn will end up helping us to refine, or even change, our end goals.

Being curious about our objectives and the choices that will move us closer to or farther away from them is a very different experience from the unrelenting pursuit of an unreachable goal. Perfection demands everything all the time. Accepting averageness allows us to be kinder to ourselves and others. It’s possible to strive for improvement while we learn from mistakes. It allows us the opportunity to put forth great effort, in the face of knowing that we might fail, because we are confident that what we will learn from our failure will be worthwhile.

Being perfectly average isn’t an insult. Embracing “average” can allow us the freedom and the energy to grow in new and surprising ways!

Many highly intelligent people are poor thinkers. Many people of average intelligence are skilled thinkers. The power of a car is separate from the way the car is driven.

*Edward de Bono*

**Taking care of ourselves can take a lot of support. We’re here to help!**  
*Ask a nurse or provider if you’d like to talk.*

As we work on actually embracing our perfect averageness, many of us also have to work through the creeping feeling that while **we** understand exactly how incredibly, overwhelmingly, irrevocably mediocre we are, other people somehow haven't clued into that (yet), but when they do, we're done. This is the inner voice of "Imposter Syndrome."

Researchers have identified [5 types](#):

- Perfectionist - Focuses on perfect execution of all things, all the time.
- Natural Genius - Expect they should get everything right on the first try.
- Expert - Deeply afraid of being seen as stupid. Collects trainings and certifications.
- Soloist - They'll do it their way, and they'll do it alone. Asking for help is a sign of weakness.
- Superhuman - They should be able to handle every detail of every role in their lives. Flawlessly.

What do they all have in common? Equating perfection with success and anything else with failure.

Non-imposters have a different take on the same subjects:

- They know it's okay to ask for help and actually seek it out when they need it.
- They're driven to improve, not because they're afraid of being exposed as a fraud, but because they know they're a "work in progress."
- They give themselves the time to learn new things and opportunities to practice new skills, expecting only improvement, not perfection.
- They're comfortable with the knowledge that sometimes they will fail. They don't relish it, but they aren't afraid or ashamed when it happens.
- They welcome and seek out constructive criticism because they know feedback is the only route to improvement.

If you'd like to learn more about how self-efficacy can overcome imposter syndrome, check out ["It's Okay, You're Not a Fraud."](#)

What if they figure out I'm a fraud?



The best way to prove yourself is to improve yourself.

Adam Grant

**Just like most of us don't want to be considered average, most of us would prefer to avoid criticism.** When we sense incoming criticism, it's a common reaction to throw up our internal blast shields and prepare a counter-attack. To protect ourselves, we shut down any incoming information, and, if possible, reduce contact with the person that criticized us. We seek comfort in our friends, in our support network, and it's important to have these people in our corner. But what if our ideas around criticism need the same kind of reframing that being average does?

**There's another kind of network that's just as important, but often neglected - [our challenge network](#).** That's a group of people that we trust to give us the feedback that we need (but that may not be easy to hear) so that we can get better at what we do. Because the problem is that if we never hear that information, we don't improve. Receiving criticism effectively requires us to be most interested in improvement and least interested in maintaining an image. It means seeking out trusted critics and engaging in listening to their observations. It means actively practicing hearing what may be uncomfortable to hear. Receiving criticism effectively means learning to shift from "proving mode" where our internal conversation is all about proving the other person wrong, to "improving mode" where we want to know both what we're doing well and ways that we can get better.

**When we're on the receiving end of feedback, it turns out that we're actually being evaluated in two ways:** on whatever task, behavior, skill, or product is "on the table," and on how well we take the feedback about that task, behavior, skill, or product. How did I score on being receptive? Was I open or defensive? These are questions that we can ask our challenge network. "When you give me feedback, how do I come across?"



**But what about giving criticism?** Just like there are ways to improve how we receive it, there are ways to improve how we give it. How do we keep honesty and candor from becoming veiled cruelty or aggression? We make sure that we are being both challenging AND caring.

- Go in humble. Before you launch in, take a moment to consider the fact that you may not have all of the pieces of the puzzle. Stay open and curious about the other sides of the story/situation.
- Go in with a sincere desire to be helpful, and state that upfront. It's easier for someone to hear criticism if they believe that it's meant to be helpful.
- If you can't do those two things, don't offer the criticism. You've left the arena of challenge network and become something else entirely.