



# **LETTING GO OF THE NEED TO BE PERFECT**

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*"Perfection exacts a toll. Perfect technicians have to live up to their reputation, and where other musicians can get along on style, artists of the Heifetz class are expected always to be transcendental... It was said of him that he did not have a face; it was a mask and nobody could get behind it."*

Harold Schonberg about violinist Jascha Heifetz

Are you one of those performers who leaves your best performances in the practice room?

Prior to performance do you think about the mistakes you made in your last performance or do you constantly worry about the mistakes you may make in this performance?

Do you want to perform well so badly that you practice right up to performance day and sometimes continue to "fix" and self-coach even during the performance?

After the performance, is it difficult to let go of mistakes because you keep beating yourself up for not playing or singing better?

When people compliment your performance, do you often deflect their comments with, "I didn't do as well as I would have liked." or "Well, but what about that fast section?"

**Have no fear of perfection - you'll never reach it. —Salvador Dali**

<b>Am I a Perfectionist?</b>	<b>True</b>	<b>Somewhat True</b>	<b>Somewhat False</b>	<b>False</b>
Nothing good comes from making mistakes.				
I must do things right the first time.				
I must do everything well, not just the things I know I'm good at.				
If I can't do something perfectly then there is no point even trying.				
I rarely give myself credit when I do well because there is always something more I could do or could have done.				
Sometimes I am so concerned about getting one task done perfectly that I don't move on to other tasks.				
Often I find that I put off starting a task because I fear that I won't be able to perform perfectly.				

If you responded to most of the above statements with 'True' or 'Somewhat True,' then perfectionism might be something you want to work on. If you responded otherwise, you still might want to read on and learn some skills that might come in handy in the future.

**"A beautiful thing is never perfect." —Proverb**

Anyone who hears world famous American cellist Yo Yo Ma perform will think he was just born a higher, expressive being. However, he wasn't always such an expressive performer. In fact, it was an incredible failure once that really put him on the path to expressive performing:



"I was nineteen and I had worked my butt off, I knew the music inside and out. While sitting there at the concert, playing all the notes correctly, I started to wonder, 'Why am I here? What's at stake? Nothing! Not only is the audience bored but I myself am bored.' **Perfection is not very communicative.**"

This was his '**aha moment**.' The burden of striving for one flawless performance after another taught Ma that there is often a tradeoff between perfection and expression. "If you are only worried about not making a mistake, then you will communicate nothing," he says. "You will have missed the point of making music, which is to make people feel something,"

You might be asking at this point, but the music business is highly competitive—don't I need be perfect to have any chance at all?

**There is a big difference between the healthy and helpful pursuit of excellence and the unhealthy and unhelpful striving for perfection.**

So what is the difference?

Most perfectionists—as opposed to excellentists (made it up—but good, huh?)—put a great deal of pressure on themselves to meet extremely high standards which powerfully influence the way they think about themselves.

Let's dig deeper...

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you hold yourself to extremely high standards (perfection) that anyone else can recognize as unreasonable?
- Do you judge your self-worth based largely on your ability to strive for and achieve this unreasonable standard?
- Do you experience negative consequences of striving for such demands, yet continue to go for them despite the huge cost?

These questions may help you see that it is generally a good idea to have high standards. Having goals helps you achieve in performing and life, but when your goals are either unachievable or take a great toll on you, it makes it difficult to feel good about yourself. This is when it's important to recognize that it's not excellence you're going for anymore—it's perfection. One last question:

### **Is it ever really possible to be perfect?**

Many musicians can struggle under the pressure of public performance. If performers like Yo Ma can feel the effects of perfectionism, so can you. **Perfectionism** can keep you from reaching your full potential because you become anxious, tense, and you try to over-control your performance—all signs of music performance anxiety.

Performers who strive for excellence and musical artistry and who work so diligently to achieve their dreams are highly susceptible to perfectionist thinking. It's not surprising that a strong work ethic can quickly go beyond excellence and turn into trying too hard. Striving for perfection can cause performers to set unrealistic goals and to focus on outcomes and results. Perfectionism shows itself in many ways including fear of failure, fear of embarrassment or of making mistakes, worrying about results, and sometimes the loss of motivation or even the loss of your love of playing or singing.

What makes this a tricky challenge for musicians is that there are clear advantages to perfectionism especially when it comes to practice. They include having a strong work ethic, an intense commitment to your goals, and a willingness to continue learning and improving. These advantages are what can mask this extremely difficult mental barrier to performing freely without performance anxiety and fear.

We find it difficult to convince performers who strive to be perfect that it really does hold them back. They resist having to change the beliefs that have seemingly helped them achieve some of their goals. As a perfectionist, you unknowingly adopt very high expectations about your performance. Not achieving these expectations can result in frustration, anxious feelings of failure, and low confidence. High expectations about winning, being cast in the part, winning the position, or performing perfectly leave musicians feeling frustrated or helpless.

Perfectionists think that maintaining strict expectations is a good thing—what every musician should do, and that the only other option is accepting mediocrity. If failing to meet your expectations causes you to become frustrated and become overly fearful, this will block you from achieving your full performing potential.

**"I would rather have ideas and some difficulties of technique than a perfect technique and no ideas." —Mstislav Rostropovich**



Many of you may have seen the psychological thriller, **The Black Swan**. In this fictional portrayal of perfectionism, *Nina*, a promising ballerina, pushes herself beyond the bounds of her mental and physical health to be perfect. It is very tiring, discouraging, and often destructive to continually attempt to impress others, avoid making mistakes, and perform perfectly all the time. Perfectionism has a certain attraction for some of us. It just seems

to suck us in and seduce us into actually believing we can achieve it. Why?

Those of us with perfectionist tendencies probably perceived very early in life that we were valued primarily for what we achieved or accomplished rather than for ourselves. As a result we learned to value ourselves for the quality of what we produced and on others' approval. This lesson and the behavior it causes leads to performance anxiety and other related fears.

Let's look at some of the lies perfectionism whispers in our ears. These lies instill in us an attitude of fear—fear of failure, fear of making mistakes, fear of disapproval—and a rigid attitude of either/or thinking (“Either I make it to the finals or I’m no good.”) and language peppered with “shoulds” (“I should be better by now.”) and “musts” (“I have to win.” or “I must not make mistakes.”).

When we recognize that we are actually thinking and believing these lies, we can examine the facts—the reality behind the lies—and take the first step to crawl out from under the crushing burden of perfectionism.

### **Lie #1: “I can achieve perfection.”**

First and foremost, we keep thinking that we can achieve that perfect performance, avoid all mistakes, and therefore, impress everyone so they will accept us and always like us. In fact, **perfection is a myth**. It is definitely time for new behaviors and thought patterns and a new goal. If not perfection, then what? Excellence?

### **Lie #2: “My performing has to be perfect to be acceptable.”**

Refer to the above. If we accept that perfection is a myth, then we must come to terms with the fact that we need a new goal for our performances and that we can be accepted no matter how we perform. We can now loudly proclaim: **“I will perform to the best of my ability for TODAY!”**

### **Lie #3: “It is terrible if I make a mistake.”**

Let's first talk about that “if.” WHEN you make a mistake it is not and will not be terrible. Making mistakes can be a clear sign that you are learning and that you are challenging yourself. We need to get to the point that we can recognize that mistakes or setbacks can point us in the next direction. **Mistakes are, if we choose to see them this way, tools for learning.**

**Lie #4: "If I am perfect, then people will love me, love my performing, and accept me."**

Looking for acceptance from outside sources will not end well. If you didn't perform another note—didn't play or sing another concert or audition, you would still be valuable and worthy of love and acceptance. Your performing is something you do—not who you are. Differentiating this will save hours, and in some cases, years of heartache and trouble. The fact is: **"Although I continue to strive to improve and be the best I can be, I am acceptable just the way I am."**

**Lie #5: "If I mess up, it will be awful—I will be embarrassed and others will be upset with me and reject me."**

We never plan to make mistakes or have memory slips and it is usually not a pleasant experience when we do, but it is part of performing. **In fact, it is a necessary part of the learning process.** Once we accept that we can use these experiences to refine our skills and shape our abilities, we will be a much healthier and happier performer.

**Lie #6: "People expect me to be perfect."**

Really? First of all, this expectation is unattainable and unrealistic. Secondly, people—audience members, teachers, coaches, friends, and family—want to be moved by you and your music not by a perfect rendition. The people who work with you and care about you want you to be free and confident in your ability to bring your music authentically to life for yourself and for your audience. **In fact, "People want to share your music and your performance—an act that expresses what words cannot and goes beyond any expectation of perfection."**

**Lie #7: "I can't begin to work on a new piece until the one I am currently working on is 'ready'."**

Perfectionists often procrastinate and have trouble moving on to new pieces for fear they will not be able to perform them well enough. Having more than one piece or several pieces in progress at one time allows you to vary your practice and transfer what you are learning from work to work. Break the cycle of procrastination by just diving in—*sans expectation!*

**Lie #8: "I should be able to perform perfectly."**

**In fact, NO!** Remember to recognize which statements come after every "*I should*." They may often be unrealistic, strict expectations or unhealthy beliefs that you—that all of us—can do without! Think about what you truly desire. You desire to be the best you can be. Other words to describe this kind of performing might be "excellent" or "in the moment" or "*whole*." I say "*whole*" because the word perfect comes from the French word "*parfait*" which comes from the Latin "*perfectus*" which means "*complete*." Somewhere in history we added "without flaw" to this definition. What if we could perform for this moment—not focused on the past (that mistake we just made or breath we just forgot) or in the future (worrying about remembering the next section or the fingering in the next phrase). What if you were able to claim, **"I am able to perform fully immersed in this moment."**?

**Lie #9: "I am an idiot because I...missed that change, cracked on that note, had to stop, etc., etc."**

We are all human. That does not make us idiots. That makes us human. Work to eliminate name-calling from your self-talk. When we perform we will make mistakes. Notes will crack. We will become distracted and forget a word or have a memory slip. We work and design practice to intensify and narrow our focus and to acquire a technique that will serve us well. When mistakes inevitably happen, use them to help direct your practice and make you even better. **"I accept that I am wonderfully human. I will embrace and accept my whole performance without judgment."**

**Lie #10: "I'm not good enough and probably never will be."**

This may be the worst and most insidious lie of all—that we will probably never measure up. This thought is never useful and needs to be stopped. Itzhak Perlman definitely had it right when he said, *"...everybody has a different kind of talent and a different timetable as to when it develops..."* What Perlman is helping us understand is that our progress and our performing life is a continuum. You have all seen those maps at malls that indicate: YOU ARE HERE. Well at the time of any performance we are in that very spot—HERE. We are no longer where we were yesterday or where we were in practice and we are not yet where we may wish to be, but we can count on being right here, right now—in *this very moment* doing our best. How can anyone—even YOU—ask for more?

Perfectionism is a symptom of a belief system we accepted years ago. We keep feeding that system when we continually repeat these lies to ourselves. By recognizing and accepting the facts instead, you can take the first step in breaking the cycle of perfectionism and start enjoying the process and your performing even more!

**To escape criticism - do nothing, say nothing, be nothing. —Elbert Hubbard**

Now, it's time for you to take action. On the following page is a chart that will help you identify the impact that perfectionism may be having on your performing and your life.

To help you decide whether you want to change the way you strive and learn to set reasonable and achievable goals and standards, complete the following worksheet:

**Once you accept the fact that you're not perfect, then you develop some confidence.  
—Rosalynn Carter**



## Your Change Process

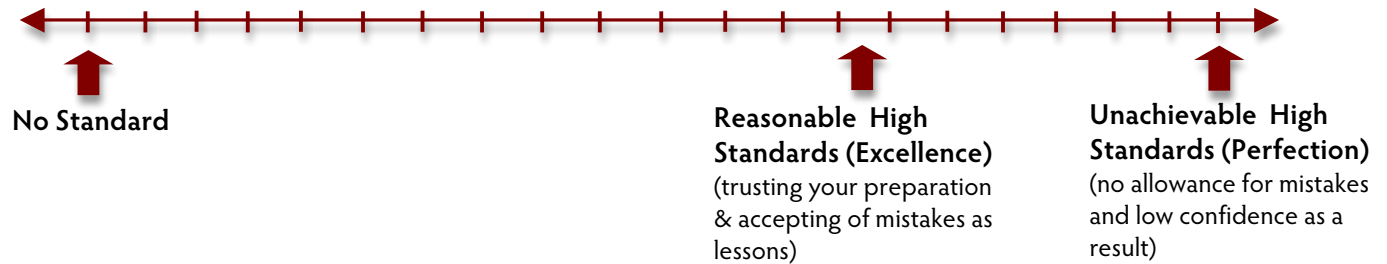
Take a moment to reflect on the way you strive to perform and what kind of standard you have...

<p><b>List the negative consequences of pursuing unreasonable/unachievable high standards or perfection.</b> (for ex: you might give up too easily on difficult pieces or procrastinate starting a new piece if the current one is not perfect)</p>	<p><b>List the positive consequences of pursuing unreasonable/unachievable high standards or perfection.</b> (for ex: people praise you when you work hard)</p>
<p><b>List the personal benefits that you expect if you were to let go of unreasonable/unachievable high standards or perfection.</b> Think about a general goal and how you will have to change in order to achieve it. (for ex: if I allow myself to strive for 80% instead of 100%, I will be a happier and freer performer)</p>	<p><b>List the personal costs that you expect if you were to let go of unreasonable/unachievable high standards or perfection.</b> What will you need to give up in order to change? (for ex: doing things differently will take you out of your comfort zone)</p>

What did you learn from doing this exercise? How ready are you to let go of the need to be perfect? Take a few moments to jot down your thoughts.

## What Will Letting Go of the Need to be Perfect Involve?

Relaxing your unreasonably high or unachievable standards and thinking in shades of grey.  
Coping with perfectionism or overcoming perfectionist tendencies involves thinking in shades of grey. Realistic performing standards are not black and white, they fall on a continuum. Don't think you will have to give up your standards altogether. You just need to relax them a little so it won't cost you so much to pursue them.



Being prepared to venture outside your comfort zone and try new things.

In order to let go of your need to be perfect you will need to be open to adopting new thoughts and new behaviors that might make you uncomfortable at first. You may even be fearful of letting go of your extremely high standards.

Making a commitment of time and effort.

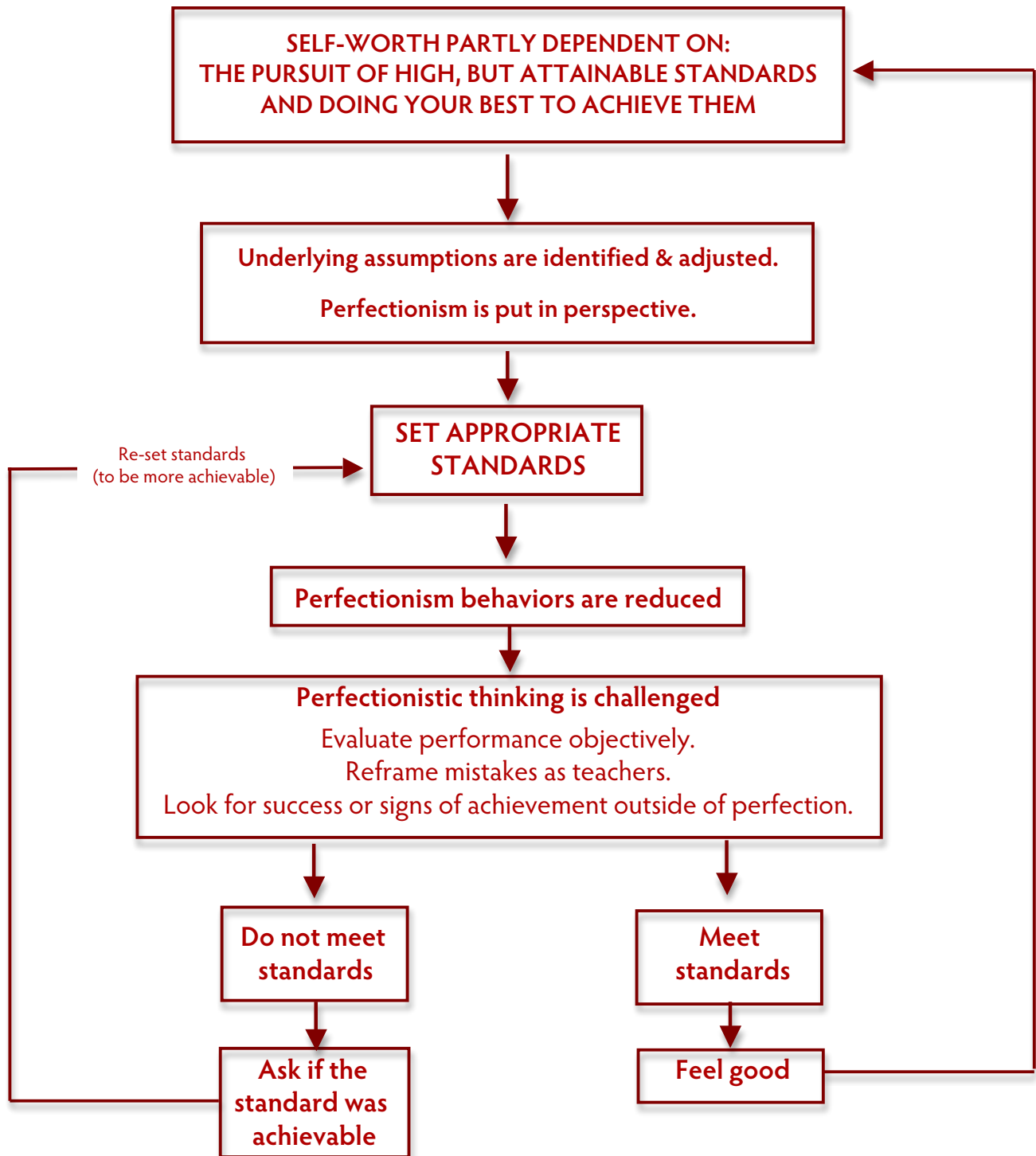
Letting go of perfectionism will require time and effort.

## Coping Tips

Change is not easy or comfortable for most people.

1. **Remember that practice does not make perfect.** Remind yourself that practice prepares you to trust your preparation so you are free to perform your best.
2. **Give yourself permission to make mistakes.** We all make them. Making a mistake and learning from it is a sign of progress!
3. **Remind yourself of the unhelpful consequences of your perfectionism.** (refer to your chart on the previous page).
4. **Learn to laugh.** Happy people know how to laugh and not take themselves so seriously.
5. **Reward yourself often.** Give yourself a pat on the back when you've accomplished something outside of your comfort zone.

## Model of the Pursuit of Excellence



**"The maxim that 'Nothing avails but perfection.' may be spelled 'Paralysis.'  
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**