

LIFEHACK

Expand your toolbox of life skills and strengthen your mental wellbeing



Optional Module

Overcome perfectionism & fear of failure





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How to Use this Workbook

LifeHack is a self-help programme in which you learn various life skills for all sorts of situations you might encounter in life. This program is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and consists of reading material and interactive exercises. Four domains are covered: your emotional well-being, your studies, your social life and your self-esteem.

Each domain consists of one main module and two related optional modules. The best way to do the programme is to complete one domain per week by doing the main module and any of the optional modules that seem relevant to you. Therefore, the whole programme will take approximately 4 to 6 weeks.

You can find a list of resources in the community [here](#) when you need support. Counselling and Psychological services are available at HKU for current students. It is free-of-charge, professional and confidential. Don't hesitate to seek help if needed.

Enquiries and Feedback

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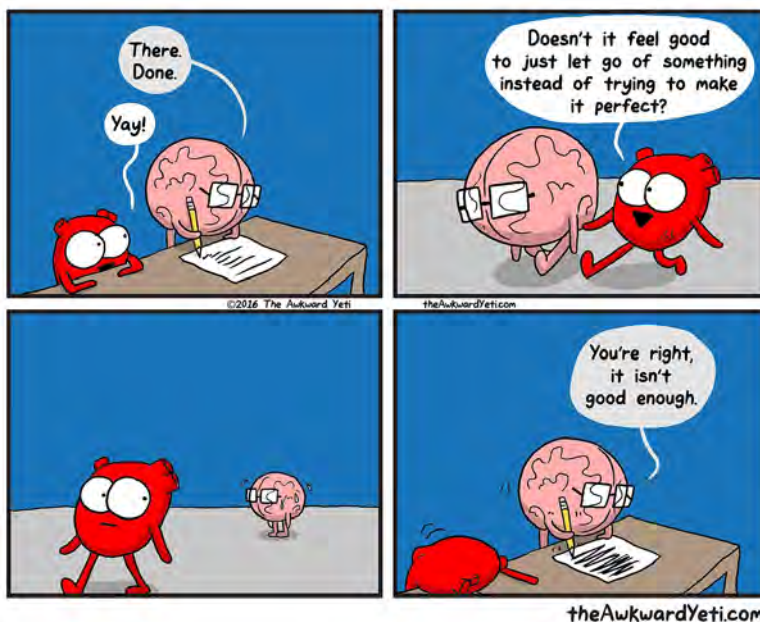
Overcome perfectionism & fear of failure

Introduction

Are you afraid to fail sometimes? Do you have high demands for yourself which are hard to meet? Many students suffer from fear of failure or perfectionism. If you do too, you're in the right place.

After today, you will...

- Better understand what fear of failure and perfectionism are
- Be aware of your own levels of fear of failure and perfectionism
- Learn 3 steps (containing 6 hacks) to decrease the fear of failure and perfectionism



Comic by [The Awkward Yeti](#)

Before we get into it: describe your personal goal(s) with regards to perfectionism or fear of failure. What would you like to achieve after doing this module? (answer A)

Let's go!

What are fear of failure and perfectionism?

Let's kick it off by defining these two concepts a little more:

(The Video transcript is available on p.21)



Do you suffer from fear of failure? If so, in what domain(s) or areas of your life?

Do you experience perfectionism? And if so, which type(s) do you experience (self-oriented, other-oriented or socially prescribed)?

Characteristics of perfectionism and fear of failure

Below are common characteristics of perfectionism and fear of failure, which ones do you experience? Check all that apply.

Cognitive and emotional symptoms:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling of falling short | <input type="checkbox"/> Being very critical |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling of not meeting demands | <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty accepting mistakes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Overvaluing the opinion of others | <input type="checkbox"/> Thinking that others are better than you |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having negative thoughts | <input type="checkbox"/> Not believing compliments |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rumination | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling responsible for everything |

Behavioural symptoms:

- Procrastination
- Sleep problems
- Setting unrealistic goals or standards
- Avoiding shame and humiliation
- Striving for perfection
- Freezing
- Underachievement
- Having a blackout
- Always looking for confirmation

Physical symptoms:

- Palpitations
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Muscle tension
- Hyperventilation
- Headache
- Biting nails
- Dry mouth
- Stomach- and intestinal problems

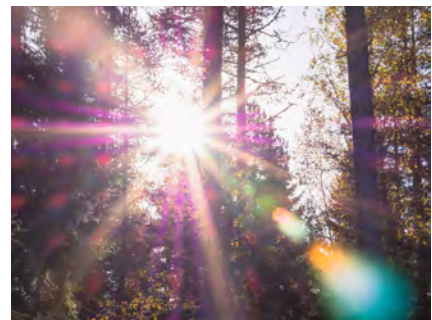


How do these symptoms affect your life?

And how would your life be if you didn't suffer from these things?

Bright side

It's not all bad though! Perfectionism and fear of failure can also have their uses or benefits. For example, most top athletes are a little perfectionistic and this can drive them to perform optimally, which is why they become the best in their field. And a little bit of worry or fear can also be a motivator, as you'll be encouraged to prevent the outcome you fear: for example study just a bit better for that exam you really can't afford to fail.



How have fear of failure or perfectionism had a positive impact on you and your life?

Still, if fear of failure or perfectionism really bother you, it's important to work on them. Which is what we'll do next! There are 3 steps for this, let's go over each of them.

1. Deal with negative thoughts & feelings

The first step is one you can apply whenever you are in the moment; feeling anxious or worrying about something. It contains 3 hacks to deal with worrying thoughts.

Hack #1: Exaggerate your butt off

This is an awesome technique you can use any time you find yourself worrying about something. It only takes a minute or so, and you can easily do it in the moment when you're feeling overwhelmed. You simply take something you worry about and exaggerate the negative consequences to the point they become absurd and laughable.




An example

An exam is coming up and Sophie thinks she might fail. She's very worried about it; it's an important test and a lot depends on it. She worries so much she can't sleep at night. Sophie uses the exaggeration technique in the following way:

She imagines she did indeed fail. But she didn't just fail: she has the lowest mark anyone has ever gotten in this course. The teacher even sends an email about it to all students from the entire university. The dean then calls her to say she may never set foot at the university again. And in the evening she sees her grade is front-page news, and is even discussed on the tv...

Sophie thinks it's funny to let her thoughts go like that. The exaggeration eases her fear of failing and makes her worry a lot less. A few days later she takes the exam and ... she passes!



Let's practice using this technique. Think of something you're worried about, preferably a situation concerning fear of failure or perfectionism. What are you worried about?

Now write down all the negative things that could happen, but exaggerate as much as you can. What are the most absurd possible outcomes? Be creative and go wild!

NEXT LEVEL HACK

The more vividly you can imagine it, the better this technique works. You can stimulate this even more by writing down the exaggeration, making doodles about it or making it more vivid some other way.

What kind of effect did exaggerating have on your worries?



Hack #2: Floating leaves on a moving stream

If you're into meditation (or are willing to give it a shot - which we totally recommend), you can try this really cool mindfulness exercise. In it, you learn how to let go of your negative thoughts. It takes about 7 minutes, so it's great as a grounding exercise when you know something big or important is coming up that you're concerned about.



Try it now!

Take something in mind that you worry about and do the meditation:

[\(The meditation transcript is available on p.22\)](#)



What did you think of this exercise? How did it affect you?

NEXT LEVEL HACK

If you enjoyed this exercise, download and save the recording somewhere on your phone or computer so you have instant access next time you need it!



Hack #3: The struggle switch

Suppose you have a 'struggle switch' in the back of your mind. When the struggle switch is on, you fight the physical or emotional pain that is coming. You try to get rid of it or avoid it. Suppose you feel a fear of failure or perfectionism arising. When the struggle switch is on, you want to get rid of the fear as soon as possible. You think: "Oh no, there it is again, why does it keep coming back?"

Now you experience fear about the fear, and maybe some other emotions such as anger or sadness about the fear.



But what if the struggle switch is off? In that case, whatever feeling you may experience, how unpleasant it may feel, you don't fight it. The fear will be there, but you say to yourself: "Ok, I may have sweaty palms, trembling legs and negative thoughts. I don't like this and it feels awful, but I'm not going to waste my time and energy on it. I'd rather put the effort into things that are worthwhile and meaningful."

When the struggle switch is off, the fear may come and go, but you'll not waste your time and energy on it. When it's on, it will work as an emotional amplifier, your emotions will be more intense, stay longer and have a more negative influence on you.

Describe something you struggle with, something related to fear of failure or perfectionism:

To what extent do you accept your (negative) emotions in this situation?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

**completely fighting,
avoiding or trying to get rid of them**

completely accepting them

Explain your rating: would you say your struggle switch is on or off for this thing?

So how to flip the switch?

As counterintuitive as it sounds, accepting your emotions and letting them be is actually a much better way to deal with them. In other words: it's better to turn off the struggle switch. How do you do that, you ask? 3 steps:

1. Notice your emotions
2. Name them
3. Consciously allow them

Practice it now with the struggle you described above. Think about that thing, and notice the emotions that pop up when you do. Take a minute to let it wash over you, there's no rush.

Now name your feelings and say them to yourself in the construction: "I notice a feeling of ...". Which feelings did you notice and name?



Lastly, try to let the feelings just be there. You don't have to like them but just allow them. Simply take notice and observe what happens in your mind and body. You could feel a strong urge to fight your feelings or change them, or to distract yourself. If you have these kinds of urges, simply acknowledge that they are there without actually acting upon them. It can help to visualise yourself literally turning off the struggle switch in the back of your mind.

Try it for a minute or so. How did it go, what did you notice?

Next time you feel a strong emotion, picture the struggle switch and follow these three steps. With time and practice, you'll notice that your negative emotions get more fleeting and that you get much better at letting them go.



2. Focus on you, not others

The second step is a more general beneficial change to your thought patterns, rather than 'damage control' when you're full of worries and emotions. It has to do with focusing more on ourselves, rather than comparing or worrying about what others will think.


Hack #1: Stop comparing yourself with the best

People compare themselves with others all the time. We compare how we look, our grades, how many friends we have, and infinite other stuff.



Do you have a habit of comparing on the things you have fear of failure or perfectionism for?

On average, do you compare yourself to people who are doing better than you or who are doing less good than you? And how does it make you feel?



If you compare yourself to people who are doing less good than yourself (who look less good, get lower grades, have fewer friends), you'll probably feel quite happy with yourself. But if you only compare yourself to people who are doing better than you, this will probably affect your mood and confidence in a negative way.

So if that second one is exactly what you do, stop! Next time you compare, catch yourself and either

- stop it completely, for example by purposefully thinking about something else,
- compare yourself to an earlier version of yourself (but only for those topics that you've improved upon over time)
- or choose to compare with those who are doing worse than you.

How others changed their comparing habits

Melle likes to draw, but would always compare herself to amazing and successful artists

But now: Now when she notices that she does that, she grabs one of her earlier sketchbooks to see how much better she has gotten over the years. She compares herself to herself.

Rajan used to be very fit, but has gained a little bit of weight in the last year. His friends are all fitter than him and it made him very insecure.

But now: Rather than looking at his friends, now Rajan makes it a point to look at other 'average' bodied guys. Compared to them, he's still relatively fit. He compares himself with those that are doing less well.

Keisha is the only single person in her friend group. Everyone else is in great relationships and she gets jealous of that sometimes.

But now: She makes it a point to stop those kinds of thoughts through the power of distraction. She starts singing 'Single Ladies' by Beyonce to herself (or in her head, if she's in public) and that usually stops her comparing thoughts.

"All the single ladies, put your hands up!"

So next time you notice you're comparing yourself to those that are doing better, what will you do to stop that?

Hack #2: Pay less attention to what others think of you

Most of us spend way too much time focusing on what others may think of us. Evolutionarily speaking, this makes sense: we want to maintain the relationships we have with others. But if we have the feeling that others disapprove of us, this may impact our self-esteem negatively.



How is this for you? For which topics do you care more than you'd like about what others think of you?

How does this affect you, your mood or your confidence/self-esteem?

Watch this video to understand how to stop caring what others think of you.

(The video transcript is available on p.24)



Summing up, here are the six ways to pay less attention to what others think of you:

Six ways:	Rationale behind:
Remind yourself that most people aren't really focused on you	They're much busier with their own lives (and with worrying how they come across) than they are with you.
Shift your to who you want to be	What do you like and what do you want? Set your own standards to live by, rather than focusing on what others might think, want or expect.
Accept your flaws	We hold all sorts of negative beliefs about ourselves, and one way to break free of these is by being kind to ourselves and treating ourselves the same way we would a close friend.
Be selective about the things you care about	Not everything is important and the unimportant things aren't worth your time. Try to distinguish between the two and put energy into only the important things.
Accept that not everyone will like you	You don't like some people, and some people won't like you. And that's ok. Focus on the people that do like you and accept you the way you are.
Take on challenges	Letting your fears dictate your actions will only make them grow, so feel the fear and do it anyway.

Which of these 6 things do you already do and which could you start implementing (or more often)?

For the things you want to start implementing, describe what you can do exactly. Use the tips from the video and the summary above for inspiration:



3. Change your mindset

And last but not least: a huge component of breaking free from fear of failure or perfectionism is by overhauling your general mindset.

People with fear of failure or perfectionism hold all sorts of negative beliefs about making mistakes. They feel they should know and be able to do everything immediately.

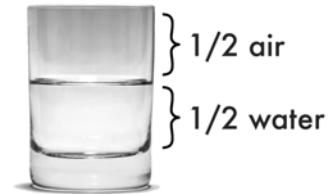
In contrast, people without fear of failure or perfectionism mostly feel they can learn the skills they would like to have by practicing.

These correspond with what are called a fixed mindset and a growth mindset.

- People with a **fixed mindset** think you're born with skills (or without), they avoid challenges and feedback because those are 'proof' that they can't do something, and give up easily.
- People with a **growth mindset** think skills can be learned, they embrace challenges, actively look for feedback to grow, and persist in the face of setbacks.

'Failing' is also viewed differently by each of these. For people with a fixed mindset, it means they cannot and will not be able to do it. For people with a growth mindset, failing means they can't do it YET. That's quite a difference.

Keep in mind a person is never 100% one or the other. You can have characteristics of both mindsets, and it can fluctuate across time and different situations.



So technically, the glass is always full

What kind of mindset do you think you have when it comes to the thing(s) you feel fear of failure/perfectionistic about; a fixed or a growth mindset? How do you recognize that?

How to shift into a growth mindset

If you notice you have a fixed mindset, work on shifting it into a growth mindset. How? By replacing your fixed thoughts with growth thoughts. Simply adding the word 'yet' to the end of a thought already helps. You can also remind yourself that almost everything can be improved upon or that almost everything can be viewed as a learning opportunity.

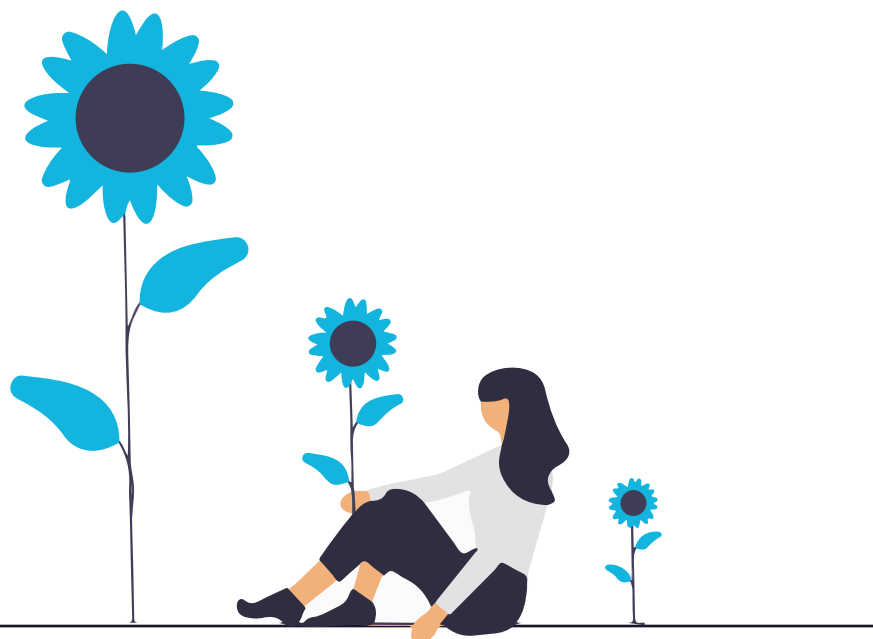
Examples of fixed mindset:

Fixed mindset:	Make it "growth":
I'm just not good at ...	I'm not good at ... YET. That's because I barely put any effort into improving, and nobody gets good at anything without practice.
I really don't want to have the evaluation talk with my internship supervisor, what if they aren't happy with me...	Without feedback, I won't know what to work on. And it's much worse to go through my entire life making the same mistakes over and over, than to hear it now and improve.
I don't get it, I'll never pass the exam	That I don't get it right now, doesn't mean I'll never get it. I'll learn it and pass if I give myself some time and put effort into it.
This is way too difficult for me.	If it weren't hard, I also wouldn't learn so much from it. So let's go!

What kind of fixed mindset thoughts do you have? Think of different areas of your life and write as many as you can:

Now for each of these, turn them into growth mindset thoughts. Use the examples above for inspiration:

Keep these two types of mindset in mind. When you notice you're thinking 'fixed', work on changing towards 'growth'!



Hack wrap-up



You made it all the way here, you rockstar you!

Now let's take a look back at what you said at the beginning of this module.

This is what you wanted to achieve with regards to perfectionism and/or fear of failure:
(refer to answer A on p.2)

How will you move forward with this goal, using the tips from this module?

This module in bullets:

- People with a fear of failure have the feeling of falling short and not meeting demands. Perfectionism is characterized by striving for perfection and setting high standards.
- If you notice yourself worrying, use the 'exaggeration' hack or do the 'floating leaves' meditation to be able to let go of these negative thoughts.
- If you're feeling emotionally overwhelmed, purposefully turn off your 'struggle switch' and accept your feelings.
- Make it a habit not to compare yourself to those that are doing better than you.
- Work on your mindset: change your fixed mindset thoughts into growth mindset thoughts. Embrace the word 'yet'!



Hey, psst! Does the optional module 'Impostor syndrome, begone!' sound useful as well? Then head over there as soon as you complete this module, since you're **on a roll** now anyway ;)

What did you think of this module? Please let us know your views [here](#).

Supplementary Information (I)

Video transcript of Fear of failure and perfectionism

The average human being doesn't like to fail, and would rather things be great rather than imperfect. But if you suffer from fear of failure or are a perfectionist, this goes beyond the 'expected' levels.

So what is fear of failure? It might seem obvious, but underlying this fear is often the feeling of falling short, and of not meeting demands or expectations.

People who fear failure tend to hold the subconscious belief that failing leads to negative consequences such as judgement, rejection or disaster. They also overvalue the opinions of others, and cannot handle set-backs well. As a coping mechanism, they might try to avoid situations that could lead to shame and humiliation altogether. And if the situation can't be avoided, there can be physical reactions like palpitations and sweating.

Common domains for fear of failure are sports, cognitive performances such as exams, social activities such as giving a presentation, and one's own appearance.

Then what is perfectionism? And how does it differentiate from fear of failure? They overlap a bit, as perfectionists also overvalue what others might think, have difficulty handling setbacks and avoid the (risk) of shame. But what makes it different, is that perfectionists are motivated by a strive for flawlessness, rather than a fear of failure. Perfectionists tend to set ridiculously high standards, because 'perfect' is impossible after all.

There are three types of perfectionism:

The first is **self-oriented perfectionism**. This means that you set unrealistic goals for yourself and are highly critical of yourself (to the point of being harsh to yourself).

The second is **other-oriented perfectionism**. Here, you have unrealistic expectations of others and critically evaluate or judge them if they don't meet those expectations.

Lastly we have **socially prescribed perfectionism**, which is feeling pressured by your environment to be perfect because others have high standards and expectations of you. Keep in mind that these standards aren't always 'real', sometimes we just make wrong assumptions about what others think and want.

Supplementary Information (II)

Meditation transcript

Here is a simple, but powerful diffusion activity that involves you actively, but gently separating yourself from your thoughts.

This activity won't stop you having particular thoughts, but it will help you to appreciate that your thoughts are separate from you.

So let's begin.

Get into a comfortable position, and gently close your eyes if you're happy to do so.

Now imagine that you're sitting on the bank of a river, watching the water slowly flowing downstream.

Imagine that it's a warm sunny day and you're alone and that you're calm and relaxed as you watch the river gently passing by.

And as you're watching this, you notice that there are some tall trees slightly upstream, and that occasionally a large leaf drops from one of the trees and slowly glides through the air, until it settles on the surface of the water.

And then the river carries the leaf gently downstream.

Watch this happen.


Watch as a leaf drops into the water, and slowly travels past you before being carried further downstream until it disappears from view.

As you imagine this scene, various thoughts may occur to you.

You may have memories of past events, or thoughts about the future.

Some of these thoughts may be worrying, or happy or sad.

When a particular thought catches your attention, imagine placing it on a leaf that's floating downstream.



Transfer the thought, directly onto the leaf. As an image maybe, or perhaps is a word or message written on the leaf.

So remain in that settled position, there on the riverbank, watching the leaves pass by.

If a thought occurs to you, gently place it on a leaf and watch as the leaf carries it downstream and eventually passes out of sight.

Let things happen naturally, as you notice what's going on.

If no leaves come, or if a leaf disappears, just notice.

If you're distracted by a noise, or by a feeling in your body, just notice that too, and let it pass.

And if at any time, you're distracted from the activity, gently bring yourself back to the riverbank and the river flowing by.

So now let's spend another 3 minutes doing this activity in silence.

Imagine seeing the riverbank, the river, the trees the occasional falling leaf, and you, placing an image a thought or a feeling on one of the floating leaves.

And now, in your own time, gradually and gently, bring yourself back into the room and focus your attention on your immediate surroundings.

Supplementary Information (III)



Hey, Psych2goers, and welcome back to another video. Thank you all so much for the love and support that you've given us, enabling us to make yet another exploration into everyday psychology. So let's begin.


Do you invest too much value into words uttered by strangers? No matter what you do or say, how you act or the decisions you make, people will always have an opinion of you.

And if you let them get to you, you'll allow other people's opinions to not only hurt you, but oftentimes define you. Granted, our insecurities and hypersensitivity are also formed due to trauma suffered in early childhood or negligent and abusive parents. Not only that, but social media has also set widely photoshopped expectations of who or what we should be. But if you could stop caring about what others thought, what would happen then? The possibilities are endless. But one thing's for certain you would feel a lot lighter and happier. So here are six ways to stop caring about what other people think of you.

Number one, not everyone cares. Are you too anxious about being liked by others? Are you worried about the impression you made on someone you've just met? The truth is, everyone is plagued by insecurities and they might be too busy to immediately recognise yours. So it's most likely they too are fretting over the same thing all around you, people have enough to occupy their minds. They're way too busy thinking about their families, work and whatever else to form a detailed opinion about you. It may sound harsh, but the idea of not having all eyes on you feels liberating, doesn't it?

Number two, who do you want to be? Do you place too much value on others opinions of you? How important is setting and living up to your own standards? To you, the only opinion that should matter to you is yours. The value of another person's opinion should correlate with the nature of your relationship to that person. By allowing others opinions to influence and dominate your life, you're handing them your power and agency. If you can relate to this, ask yourself what do you want and what do you like? Are you making these choices solely to impress others? Viewing your decisions through this lens will help you become self-assured.

Number three accept your flaws. Do you strive for perfection? Is it by choice? Or do you feel compelled? Such a pursuit is fruitless. When you're more concerned about someone's perception of you, it becomes damaging to your self-esteem and confidence. Some negative perceptions of ourselves have been ingrained into our subconscious since childhood. Tackling these thoughts can be difficult when you internalise them and operate based on past erroneous perceptions. One way to break free from these shackles is self-acceptance. Self-acceptance is a journey to embrace all of the facets within yourself unconditionally. The journey can be difficult, as it requires you to trapeze along the fine line of acceptance and complacency. It serves as a building block for self-esteem and personal improvement.



Four be selective about the things you care about. Have you read “The subtle art of Not Giving a F*ck , Not Giving Enough” by Mark Manson? The bright Orange book with black bold titles like its cover, the book presents bold ideas. On page five, there's a simple but powerful concept. One of the first theories presented states that the key to a happy life is to be selective about the things you care about. This revelation is not new, but reading it helps put things in perspective. Spending your time fretting over the most insane things makes you lose focus on what really matters.

Five accept that not everyone will like you. As Jane Austen would say, “it is a truth universally acknowledged”. In life, some people will like you and others might not, and that's okay. Your uniqueness and the qualities that you possess make you who you are.

It's no less than a challenge. It is no easy feat facing someone who has negative views of you. But most of the time, that's their mindset and their mindset only, it has nothing to do with you. There will be people who will accept all of you, people who will be supportive and kind. These are the people who deserve to walk with you.

And six, take on the challenges. Are you afraid of making mistakes? Do you have a knack for cognitive distortions and negative patterns of thinking? It's an evolutionary trait that was formed to keep your ancestors from danger. However, it often keeps you from going after the things you want in life. You worry about ending up looking like a fool because of a mistake. But mistakes are inevitable, and avoiding them is futile. When you surpass your fear of making mistakes and build resilience to the pain that may come from failure, you will be unstoppable. One way to deal with anxieties about messing up is to make a list of all the possible things that could go wrong. This can help create some distance between ideations and reality. It also allows you to logically process possible outcomes and provide solutions. If it feels as though you can't handle the outcomes on your own, you can then ask someone supportive and reliable for help. It's fine to want to make a good impression on others.

In the end, the reason why we all care so much about others is because of our survival instinct. After all, our happiness and quality of life depends on the quality of our relationships. We want to be in their good books so that we can develop and nurture our relationships with them. But learning to dial down that inner self-conscious voice also is important. It allows you to create space for things that matter and can help you lead a happy and fulfilled life. We hope we were able to give you a little insight into some of the ways that can help you to stop putting too much stock into others opinions of you.

Do you have this tendency? Let us know in the comments below. Please be sure to hit the like and subscribe button and share it with someone who cares a little too much about what others think. Hit the notification bell icon to get notified whenever Psych2Go posts a new video. And as always, thanks so much for watching. We'll see you next time.