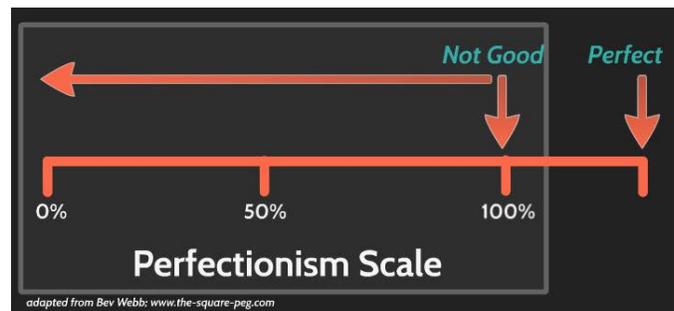




## Challenging Perfectionism & Managing Anxiety

**Perfectionism (noun):** “a disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable”  
(Merriam-Webster)



Perfectionists have learned to tie their sense of self-worth to their accomplishments. We learn this from messages we receive from family, teachers, and the culture at large. Perfectionism is often associated with unhelpful thinking patterns, like catastrophizing (“If I don’t get an A in this class, I’ll never be successful.”), overgeneralizing (“My performance in this class confirms that I’m a terrible student.”), personalizing (“She’s really cranky because she doesn’t like to be around me.”), labeling (“I’m stupid.”), jumping to conclusions (“I’ll never get a good letter of recommendation.”), magnification/minimization (“This is the best/worst thing that could possibly happen.”), and unrealistic expectations (“I should be the best in the class.”). Those ways of thinking also affect the way we feel and what we choose to do. Indeed, perfectionism is associated with self-doubt, self-criticism, shame, and avoidance behaviors like procrastination.



In order to quiet that inner (shaming) voice, we have to learn to really look at what that voice is saying and to challenge its rationality. That's hard to do, because shame is an experience that we tend to try to avoid. When we feel the shame of "I'm not good enough," we will either redouble our efforts in an attempt to become "good enough," or we will retreat and disengage in the hope that others won't recognize our inadequacies. Brené Brown says,

"Shame derives its power from being unspeakable. That's why it loves perfectionists—it's so easy to keep us quiet. If we cultivate enough awareness about shame to name it and speak to it, we've basically cut it off at the knees. Shame hates having words wrapped around it. If we speak shame, it begins to wither. Just the way exposure to light was deadly to the gremlins, language and story bring light to shame and destroy it."

By changing the way we think, we can change the way we feel and the behaviors we choose to engage with. In listening to our inner dialogue it can also be helpful to keep our ears perked for words like, "Should," "Must," "Can't," "Never," and "Always," because these words are often signs that we are not being fair or realistic in our self-appraisals.



The following questions can help us to find new ways to look at our experiences.

- Is there substantial evidence for my thought?
- Is there evidence contrary to my thought?
- Was I thinking about others and what they might be thinking about me?
- What would I say to a friend in this situation?
- Will this matter a year from now? How about five years from now?
- What might some other explanations for my situation be?

As you learn how to identify irrational thinking, you can begin to practice changing your self-talk into more rational, fair, and even compassionate statements.

**Remember, there is a difference between striving for excellence and demanding perfection.**