Perfectionism
(and how to get past yourself to achieve a healthier perspective and reduce stress)

Perfectionism is associated with high personal performance standards ... that doesn’t sound too bad. In fact, at a place like Mt. Holyoke where expectations run high, perfectionism can be related to academic success, organization, and the motivation to do well. Adaptive perfectionists have a healthy perspective – they can accept minor flaws and mistakes while still viewing themselves and their work as successful. Their high performance standards are accompanied by low self-criticism. Maladaptive perfectionists have high standards and are highly self-critical. They consistently perceive themselves as not meeting their own standards. Maladaptive perfectionists tend to be:

- Overly concerned with mistakes (for example, focused on one critical remark on a paper that has earned a good grade and contains many pieces of positive feedback)
- Doubtful about the quality of their work, even when others judge it to be successful (convinced that the professor must be grading them easily, or that they managed to fool their instructor this time)
- Often excessively concerned with others’ expectations and evaluations (fear others will reject them or be disapproving/critical if they are not perfect)
- Concerned with precision, order, and organization (completed assignments never feel finished)
  (Frost et al., 1990)

Some of the negative consequences of perfectionism:
(adapted from http://www.livestrong.com/article/14702-overcoming-perfectionism/#JUMP3)

- Low self-esteem. Because perfectionists never feel "good enough" about personal performance, feelings of being a "failure" or a "loser" with a lessening of self-confidence and self-esteem may result.
- Guilt. Because perfectionists never feel good about the way responsibility has been handled in life (by themselves or others) a sense of shame, self-recrimination and guilt may result.
- Pessimism. Since perfectionists are convinced that it will be extremely difficult to achieve an ideal goal, they can easily become discouraged, fatalistic, disheartened and pessimistic about future efforts to reach a goal.
- Depression. Needing always to be perfect, yet recognizing that it is impossible to achieve such a goal, perfectionists run the risk of feeling depressed.
- Rigidity. Needing to have everything in their lives perfect or "just so" can lead perfectionists to an extreme case of being inflexible, non-spontaneous and rigid.
- Obsessiveness. Being in need of an excessive amount of order, pattern or structure in life can lead perfectionists to become nit-picky, finicky or obsessive in an effort to maintain a certain order.
- Compulsive behavior. Over-indulgence or the compulsive use of alcohol, drugs, gambling, food, shopping, sex, smoking, risk-taking or novelty, is often used to medicate perfectionists who feel like a failure or loser for never being able to be "good enough" in life.
- Lack of motivation. Believing that the goal of change will never be able to be ideally or perfectly achieved can often give perfectionists a lack of motivation to attempt change in the first place, or to persevere if change has already begun.
- Immobilization. Because perfectionists are often burdened with an extreme fear of failure, they can become immobilized. With no energy, effort or creative juices applied to rectify, improve or change the problem behavior in their lives, they become stagnant.
- Lack of belief in self. Knowing that they will never be able to achieve an idyllic goal can lead perfectionists to lose the belief that they will ever be able to improve their lives.
Where to begin:

- Accept your humanity. You have strengths and limitations, just like everyone else in the world. Make a list of the things you do well, and view your limitations as areas for growth or things you are working on.
- Recognize that perfect does not exist. You will make mistakes - they are critical to growth and change. You cannot alter the past, no matter how much you think about it. Learn from your mistakes, and move on.
- Maintain perspective. What are your intentions, your values, and your goals? What is the big picture of your life, and what is the relevance of this one paper/homework/person to that vision? Learn to prioritize in your work and relationships, so that you can put more effort into the things that matter most.
- Be your own friend. Have you ever really listened to that critical voice in your head? Ouch. Would you ever say those things to a friend? Catch yourself in the act of self-deprecation and criticism. Imagine what you would say to a friend in a similar situation, and practice using the same language when you talk to yourself.

Taking action:
Identify and challenge some of your most common cognitive distortions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maladaptive Characteristic</th>
<th>An Example From My Life</th>
<th>Rational Thought to Challenge It</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concern over mistakes</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Doubts about quality of work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concern with others’ expectations/evaluations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on order, neatness, organization</td>
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Get Perspective!
Things I value most:

My academic and personal goals:

Assess:
Are your goals and values reflected in the way you spend your time? If not, what are some things you can change to bring this into balance?

Remember...
Challenging perfectionistic thoughts and beliefs takes time. You did not develop these tendencies overnight. Be patient with yourself and the process!