

Perfectionism and fear of failure

'Fear of failure' is defined as the fear of failing in situations that involve, or seem to involve, being judged. Even the idea that you may perhaps be judged is sometimes enough to prompt 'fear of failure'. Failure means not meeting your own high expectations (perfectionism). These high expectations are not always recognized as such, as the person setting them considers them entirely normal. If these (extremely) high expectations are not met and they do not cause a problem, there is nothing wrong with this way of thinking. However, if the high expectations are linked to a lot of self-criticism, we call it 'fear of failure'. Fear of failure is linked to negative feelings, disproportionate study stress and the use of avoidance strategies, such as procrastination, avoiding study altogether, studying all night, etc.

QuickScan

- Are you scared of being judged and/or failing?
- Do you have high expectations of yourself/are you a perfectionist?
- Are you more critical of yourself than of other people?
- Do you put off studying or study for far too long?
- Do you often compare your work with that of other people?
- Have you noticed that you are mainly negative about yourself or your work?
- Do you spend a lot of time thinking about what would happen if you were to fail?

Approach

What can you do yourself?

There are a number of things you can do yourself to reduce your fear of failure: set yourself concrete study goals and devise a concrete, realistic study schedule, ask other people how they cope with fear of failure, find a good study/relaxation balance and think about whether you actually gain anything by putting things off or studying for far too long. Is this what you really want to achieve?

What can we do for you?

Fear of failure/perfectionism can be treated very effectively with cognitive and behavioural therapy. We offer both short-term individual consultation and courses (e.g. Mindfulness). Visit <http://psychologists.tudelft.nl>.

More information

- No Fear of Failure: Real Stories of How Leaders Deal with Risk and Change (Gary Burnison), ISBN13: 9781118000786