FREE GUIDE · SELF-WORTH

Perfectionism and “not good enough”: collecting the evidence

Where the fear of not being good enough comes from, the disguises it wears, and how small experiments build real confidence.

You reread the email five times before sending it. You spend three hours on a task that needed one. Someone says “well done” and your brain replies “anyone could have done that.” Someone makes a small criticism, and it plays on a loop for a week.

Underneath a huge number of problems I see, from anxiety and overworking to people-pleasing, procrastination and low mood, sits one quiet, powerful fear: **I’m not good enough.** This guide is about where that fear comes from, the disguises it wears, and how to collect the evidence that changes it.

Where “not good enough” comes from

The psychotherapist Alfred Adler, whose ideas I trained in, believed that feelings of inferiority are universal. Every child is small, dependent and less capable than the adults around them. That’s normal. It becomes a problem when a discouraged child organises their life around never having to feel it again.

Brains learn by collecting evidence, and children collect it from whatever is on their shelf. Being “the clever one”, so every struggle felt like a threat. Being compared, even lovingly. Love that seemed to depend on being good, helpful or quiet. A brain that worked differently (ADHD, dyslexia, autism) in a world that kept telling it off. None of these needs a villain. Most parents were doing their best.

Through childhood, your brain runs a long process of trial and error, keeping the strategies that seemed to work and dropping the ones that didn’t. By about 12 to 14 it has more or less settled on an operating system, and most of us keep running it for the rest of our lives unless it gets an update. So the rules you follow now may have been written by a much younger you.

Two things can be true at the same time. People tried really hard, *and* it wasn’t quite what you needed. That doesn’t make it anyone’s fault. It just makes it what happened.

The disguises

“Not good enough” is so painful that your brain rarely lets you feel it directly. Instead it builds solutions, and they can look completely different on the surface:

- **Perfectionism:** if everything is perfect, nobody can criticise me. But perfect doesn’t exist, so you’re permanently failing.
- **Overworking:** if I’m useful enough, I’ll finally be enough. The finish line keeps moving.
- **People-pleasing:** if everyone is happy, nobody will be disappointed in me. You lose yourself trying.

- **Procrastination and avoidance:** if I don’t try, I can’t fail. If I leave it to the last minute, any failure is about time, not me. Brilliant protection; it quietly shrinks your life.
- **Defensiveness:** admitting a mistake would mean I’m worthless, so I fight back. Often mistaken for arrogance. Usually the opposite.
- **Comparison** and **self-criticism:** constantly checking where you stand, and getting in first before anyone else can.

Here’s a distinction worth sitting with: **not wanting to be disliked is very different from wanting to be liked.** Wanting to be liked moves you towards people and life. Not wanting to be disliked is defensive: it keeps you braced.

Why disapproval feels so dangerous

Think about our ancestors living in small groups. What happened to someone who wasn’t seen as good enough, who didn’t pull their weight? They risked being cast out, and alone, they probably didn’t survive. So human brains seem to treat any sign that someone doesn’t like us as danger. A frosty email can set off the same alarm as a threat to survival: we’re in trouble, I’m worthless, it’s a disaster. That’s one theory among several, but it explains a lot about why criticism hurts so much more than it “should”.

Why your brain keeps the wrong score

Your brain’s bookkeeping is biased. Psychologists have shown that bad experiences tend to weigh more heavily than good ones of the same size (“bad is stronger than good”). One criticism outweighs ten compliments. That made sense for survival: missing a threat was more costly than missing a treat. But it means your brain’s summary of you is built from a lopsided file.

It’s also why affirmations often fall flat. You can’t tickle yourself, because your brain predicts the touch and cancels the surprise. In the same way, telling yourself “I am wonderful” rarely lands, because your brain knows exactly where it came from.

Confidence comes from evidence, not belief

Many people *know* they’re capable. They just don’t believe it yet, because they don’t have enough evidence. You can only change a narrative by collecting enough experience to the contrary. That means two things:

1. **You have to try things.** Evidence doesn’t collect itself, and avoidance keeps the shelf empty.
2. **The things have to be small enough to succeed.** Set a huge challenge and fail, and you’ve filed evidence on the wrong shelf. So set the bar low enough that you always win.

Stupidly small experiments

Pick something your “not good enough” brain would normally stop you doing, and make it stupidly small. Send one email after reading it once. Leave one small mistake in. Say “I’m not sure” in a meeting. Ask for help with one thing. Before you do it, write down what your brain predicts will happen. Afterwards, write down what actually happened. The powerful moment isn’t being told it’ll be fine. It’s your brain finding out

for itself.

Good enough is your best crack at the whip

“Good enough” isn’t settling. It’s your brain’s current best attempt, with the time, tokens and experience you have today. It isn’t finished, and it keeps evolving. Next time you’ll know more and do it differently. That’s how learning works.

Good enough for whom?

A lot of perfectionism is performed for an invisible audience: the imagined people judging how it looks. Try asking a different question. Not “will this look okay?” but “does this feel good enough to me?”

Your worth isn’t earned

Many of these strategies rest on an assumption that your worth has to be earned: that you’re only as valuable as your last achievement. I don’t believe that. I think your worth is there as a given, and always was. Part of the work, done slowly and through experience more than words, is letting your brain discover that you’re still valued on the days you achieve nothing. Adler’s followers had a lovely phrase for this: *the courage to be imperfect*.

A conversation with your brain

“Brain, you’re saying this isn’t good enough.”
“It isn’t. It could be so much better. Everyone will see.”
“Could it be better with more time, more tokens and more experience?”
“Obviously.”
“Do we have those right now?”
“…No.”
“Then this is our best crack at the whip today. It’s good enough. If they criticise it, we’ll learn something, and we’ll still be us.”

When to get more help

If perfectionism or self-criticism is wearing you down, stopping you starting things, or tangled up with low mood, anxiety or eating difficulties, therapy can help you understand where it came from and build new evidence safely. If you’re in crisis, call NHS 111 and choose the mental health option, or Samaritans on 116 123.

Worksheets

You’ll find these printable worksheets at the end of this PDF:

- **The evidence jar**: a log of everything your “not good enough” brain said you couldn’t do
- **Stupidly small experiment planner**: predict, try, notice what actually happened

- **Spot the disguise**: which strategies is your brain using to avoid feeling not good enough?

Further help

- Mind: self-esteem: information and tips.
- NHS Every Mind Matters: practical tips for wellbeing.

Written by Dr Monica Berntsen, HCPC-registered Consultant Psychologist and Neuropsychologist. This guide is for general information and isn’t a substitute for individual assessment or treatment.

Want some help with this?

I offer online therapy across the UK. Get in touch at drmonicaberntsen.com/contact and I’ll suggest the best next step.

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WORKSHEET 1

The evidence jar

Every time you do something your “not good enough” brain said you couldn’t (or shouldn’t, or would mess up), write it here. When your brain tells you you’re not good enough, read some of it back. Not to argue. Just to show it the evidence it hasn’t been filing.

Date	What I did	What my brain predicted	What actually happened

WORKSHEET 2

Stupidly small experiment planner

Set the bar so low you’re almost certain to win.

The experiment (make it stupidly small)

What my brain predicts will happen. How sure is it? (0–100%)

When and where I’ll do it

What actually happened

What my brain can learn from this

Next experiment (a tiny bit bigger)

WORKSHEET 3

Spot the disguise

Tick the strategies you recognise, then pick one to experiment with.

Disguise	Do I use this? Where?	What is it protecting me from?
Perfectionism		
Overworking		
People-pleasing		
Procrastination / avoidance		
Defensiveness		
Comparison		
Self-criticism		