

## THE PRESSURE TO BE PERFECT A SILENT CRISIS OF OUR GENERATION

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### **Abstract**

*Pursuit of perfection is a personal attribute once thought to be a sign of ambition or a character trait, but it has become a psychological challenge in today's students and young professionals that is growing unnoticed. This article is a narrative literature review of the growing culture of perfectionism in today's society, which stems from a culture of academic competition, social media comparison, and increased expectations from parents and institutions. The review is based on peer-reviewed studies, meta-analyses, and national surveys, most published between 2017 and 2025, and includes studies of the link between the relentless pursuit of perfection and anxiety, depression, burnout, and disordered coping behaviours, particularly among students in challenging, professional careers like nursing. It also emphasizes the role of digital platforms in increasing the social comparison and social self-presentation pressures that further widen the perceived and actual self-presentation gaps between how young people report they are doing and how they feel they are doing. The review also reveals a knowledge gap in the literature about students in particular professions and provides the background for the review in the context of nursing education. Lastly, the article emphasizes protective factors, such as social support, self-compassion, and institutional responsibility, that can be used to turn perfectionism from a silent crisis into a manageable trait, if not a positive one. The objective is to teach pupils and teachers that perfectionist pressure is not an individual thing, but a generational issue, and a subject of discussion and a focus for change.*

### **Introduction**

Each generation has its own invisible load, which sometimes gets the face of perfectionism for today's generation. These days, young people have it hard, from keeping up a perfect grade point average to having a perfect photo on social media; one thing is for certain: there is an unspoken rule in their world that anything less than perfect is a failure. This pressure is especially hazardous because it seldom shows up with a lot of noise. It's not the same as an open secret: It lurks behind late-night study hours, behind photos that have been manipulated by filters, and behind the constant worry of not doing enough.

The article delves into the causes of this pressure, its impact on mental and physical health, and the need for it to be given a much greater priority than it currently is, particularly in the education

of students in high-stress subjects like nursing, where the pressure to perform perfectly can have consequences on the level of the individual as well as the wider community.

### Background

Perfectionism is usually described as a need to have very high personal standards, and a lot of self-criticism if they are not reached. It is a multidimensional construct, with at least three different forms: self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism, all referring to the desire to be flawless.

While striving to excel can be motivating and even adaptive, perfectionism can become rigid, fear-driven, and a source of one's self-worth, and is widely recognized as a vulnerability factor for a variety of psychological problems, not a harmless personality quirk. The recent surge in interest in this trait by researchers, educators, and mental health professionals over the last few decades has been attributed to this increase in the overall population of young people and the strong association between this trait and anxiety, depression, and burnout, especially in educational environments.

### Literature Review

There is a wealth of literature reporting trends of increased perfectionism among students in recent decades and its relationship with the academic, social, and digital context to impact mental health outcomes.

Journal articles in recent years have clearly revealed the positive and negative relationship of perfectionism with psychological functioning among students, specifically when perfectionism is manifested in a negative way, through fear of failure and constant self-judgement. Research with graduate and university students has found perfectionism to be a transdiagnostic process; that is, it is not specific to one mental health problem; it is concurrently linked to and exacerbates a number of mental health challenges. Its rise has been attributed to wider cultural changes, such as more competitive educational settings, a drive for measurable performance and a parenthood culture of high expectations and anxiety, that impact young people in their education long before they start at university.

This transition from one generation to the next is not an isolated event; many of its consequences have been measured directly. A large meta-analysis of perfectionism scores in U.S., Canadian, and UK college students (N>41000) revealed a consistent increase in perfectionism scores on every perfectionism dimension since 1989.

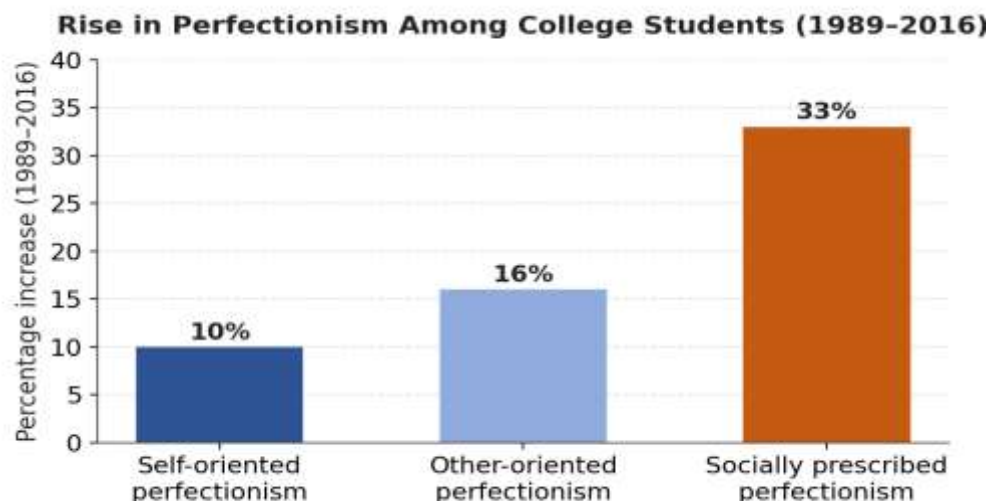
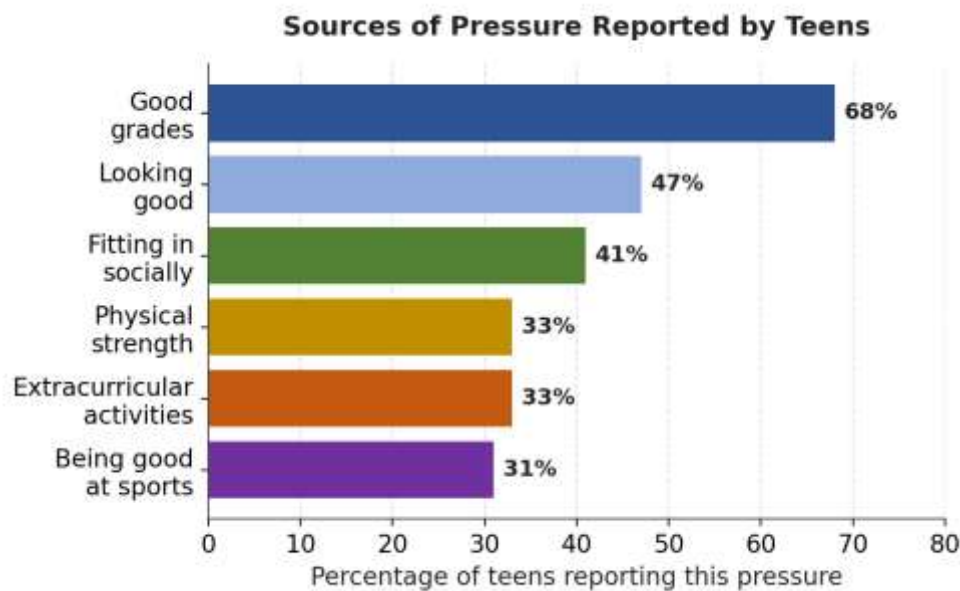


Figure 1. Percent change in perfectionism scores among college students from 1989 to 2016 (Curran and Hill, 2017).

Social media has a special ability to bolster this trend. Studies with adolescents and young adults have confirmed that excessive self-presentation and upward comparison in social media are well correlated with greater perfectionism and disordered coping strategies, like eating restriction. Likewise, research with youth finds that image-based platforms that present consumers with curated and filtered lives of others may contribute to increased perfectionistic thinking about oneself and exacerbate body image issues. What is the consequence of this generation? An endless parade of edited and idealised versions of other people's lives, more than your peers and colleagues than you are.

Recently, the country's youth conducted a nationwide survey of adolescents to gauge the various influences of these pressures upon them. As can be seen below, academic performance is by far the biggest pressure and is followed closely by appearance and social fitting-in, indicating how much social comparison, whether offline or online, has become ingrained in students' lives.



*Figure 2. Teens' experiences of sources of pressure (Pew Research Center, 2025).*

This is a pressure that has been well documented to have consequences. In a large-scale meta-analysis of the relationship between perfectionism and depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive tendencies in adults, the results showed a robust and consistent relationship between perfectionistic strivings and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and obsession/overcontrol. Perfectionism specifically has been correlated with academic burnout, defined as three components: emotional exhaustion, cynicism towards studies, and a diminished sense of accomplishment, even in high-achieving students (Freund et al., 2017; Orzech, 2012; Orzech, 2014). A study of more than 1400 adolescents conducted within schools provides a snapshot of how ubiquitous this stress has become: the vast majority of students surveyed indicated they were experiencing high levels of academic stress, and a small minority indicated low levels of academic stress.

Levels of Academic Stress Reported by Students

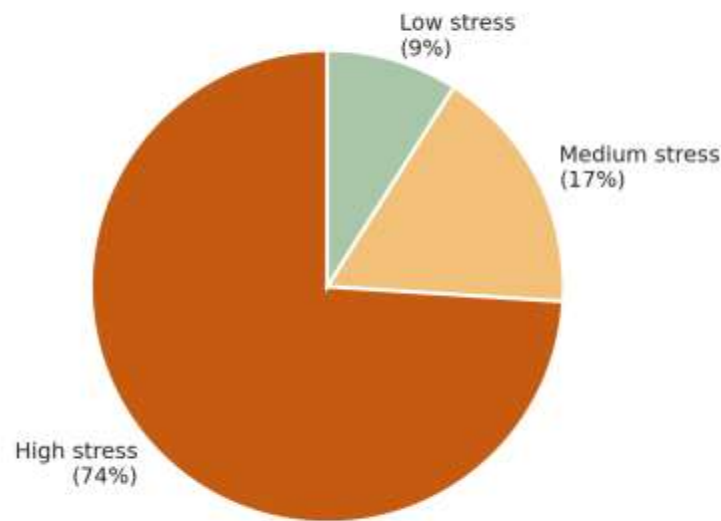


Figure 3. Academic stress reported by students (from a study conducted in the school premises in Belagavi district, India).

### Research Gap

Although there is a large and expanding literature exploring perfectionism in students, most studies have included large, general university samples, most of which have been conducted in Western cultures and few of which have investigated perfectionism directly in students within specific academic disciplines and/or academic pursuits with high stakes such as nursing, especially in South Asian academic contexts. Moreover, although many studies have reported on prevalence and correlates of perfectionism, very few have summarized this evidence in a way that is accessible to students and linked generational trends to the day-to-day school and clinical stresses experienced by students.

This article makes an attempt to fill that void by summarizing the recent literature on perfectionism, academic stress, and social media pressure, and placing this new evidence in the context of nursing education, where the fear of making a mistake has academic and clinical implications, and where student well-being has direct implications on the patient well-being of those students in the future.

### Methodology

The study method adopted in writing this article is the narrative literature review; not a primary data collection. Studies were found between 2017 and 2025 and included relevant peer-reviewed articles, meta-analyses and reputable survey reports, primarily published between 2017 and 2025, via the academic databases and repositories: PubMed Central (PMC), Frontiers, BMC Public Health, and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, as well as via data published by established research organisations, such as the American Psychological Association and the Pew Research Center.

Search words used were linked to suggestions of perfectionism, academic pressure, student mental health, social media and perfectionism, and academic burnout. Sources were chosen due to their relevance for students and youth, the methodological credibility as peer-reviewed journal articles or research reports from well-known research institutions, and the availability of open, verifiable

references that would be accessible independently. The information from the selected sources was then reported narratively (not statistically) to build a picture of perfectionism development, its sources and impact on the well-being of students, focusing on the implications for the well-being of nursing students.

### Discussion and Recommendations

Pressures discussed above are given more significance to nursing students. In the clinical setting, time constraints, accuracy, and rapid decision-making are required, as well as emotional stability, and these skills need to be done under scrutiny and supervision. If fear of failure becomes pervasive, it can result in chronic stress, disrupted sleep, self-doubt, and even withdrawal from peers and mentors, at exactly the right time. This cycle can not only have a negative impact on the school student, but it can also have a subconscious influence on future healthcare workers and their ability to deal with pressure in the workplace.

There is some good news in the research that accompanies these red flags. Peer, family, and faculty social support are also protective factors in reducing the relationship between perfectionism and burnout, even in the presence of academic stress. This doesn't mean that there's a need to remove high expectations, but instead establish a space where failures are not seen as a personal failing, but an opportunity to learn.

On an individual level, it's a matter of small changes: Not letting self-worth be defined by achievement; not trying to pretend that first attempts are perfect; and not brushing off stress conversations with a smile on her face. At the institutional level, teachers and clinical supervisors may contribute by affirming effort and growth, not just perfect results, and by sharing openly with colleagues their own failures as par for the course to be discussed at professional development but not to be hidden.

### Conclusion

The anxiety for perfection doesn't usually come all at once, but rather slowly, over a period of time, as they get compared and held to high standards and fear being perceived as inadequate or incapable. This stress can affect pupils' academic work and impact on the longer-term mental health and working resilience of today's learners – and especially of those undergoing training in challenging roles, such as nursing. It's important to recognise that perfectionism is not a failing, but a generational trait, so the first step is to acknowledge that perfectionism is a problem. This silent crisis can be addressed, if it's not addressed already, with more support systems, more open discussions about failure, and a change in the emphasis from only measuring worth by perfect achievement.

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