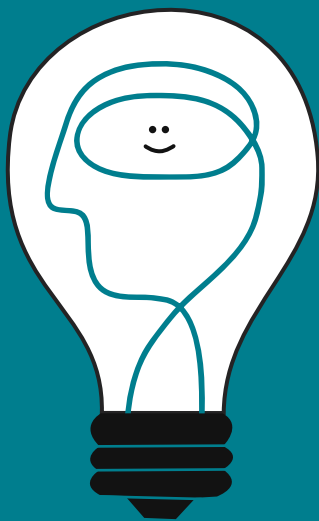


If you're always being told "You're too hard on yourself",
this book is for you.

PRACTICAL PERFECTION

Smart strategies for an excellent life



KELLY EXETER

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*For Bernadette—
who is never afraid to ask the hard questions and
point out when I'm missing the obvious.*

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INTRODUCTION

“I think you’re being too hard on yourself.”

Ever heard those words? I certainly have. Anyone who has high expectations of themselves has.

Always well-meaning. Often true. Seldom helpful at the time.

Because of *course* we’re hard on ourselves! How does one achieve anything in life without setting high standards and then working our butts off to meet them?

Striving to meet these standards does tend to come with some pitfalls however. For a very long time, these three things were the story of my life:

- Burnout
- Overwhelm
- That feeling of being a hamster on a wheel.

So while I got to tick lots of boxes and strike lots of things off lists, all of the above meant I wasn’t being the person I wanted to be.

Constantly tired and irritable? Tick.

Always vague and distracted? Tick.

Completely unable to sit still and just relax? Tick.

And that was *before* I had kids.

Some people say having kids killed their ambition. Not me. Having kids *added* to them. Now, as well as wanting to hit all my personal goals *and* be an amazing wife/daughter/sister/boss/friend, I also wanted to be a kick arse mother.

Except I suddenly had a lot less time to achieve it all.

So it will come as no surprise to hear that 18 months after my first child was born I had a complete breakdown. All that striving and holding myself to unrealistic standards didn't so much tip me over the edge as hurl me into a deep, dark hole of stress, anxiety and depression.

I tried every strategy and tactic I knew to claw my way out of that hole. But in the end I succumbed, completely losing myself, my confidence, and any sense of who I was.

So what got me out of the hole? Well, I became *very* self-aware (therapy will do that for you), and this allowed me to notice how I kept repeating certain patterns of behaviour. Once I started seeing these patterns in myself, I also began seeing them in the highly-driven people I tended to surround myself with.

We were all constantly flirting with overwhelm and burnout. We seemed to think if we weren't right on the edge, then we weren't pushing hard enough. Whenever a tiny bit of space opened up in our lives, we had to fill that space immediately. And yet we would complain how

we always felt like hamsters on a wheel—running our little butts off but getting nowhere.

What was driving this behaviour? More often than not it was our pursuit of perfection.

WHAT DOES PERFECTIONISM LOOK LIKE?

When we think of perfectionism, we tend to think of people who need to be perfect at *everything* they do. (That's why I've never thought of myself as a perfectionist—there's plenty of stuff I can be half-arsed about!)

But in reality, perfectionism can present itself in a number of different ways. Researchers Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett offer three sub-scales of perfectionism¹:

- **Self-oriented perfectionists** adhere to strict standards while maintaining strong motivation to attain perfection and avoid failure. They also engage in stringent self-evaluation.
- **Other-oriented perfectionists** set unrealistic standards for significant others (e.g. partners, children, co-workers), coupled with a stringent evaluation of others' performances.
- **Socially-prescribed perfectionists** believe others hold unrealistic expectations for their behaviour (which they feel they can't live up to). And they

experience external pressure to be perfect, believing that others evaluate them critically.

So it appears I'm a self-oriented perfectionist. (And the fact you're reading this book means you're probably one too.)

But it's not all bad news. A 2005 study by Jeffrey Kilbert, Jennifer Langhinrichsen-Rohling and Motoko Saito found that:

“. . . self-oriented perfectionists are those who derive a sense of pleasure from their labours and efforts, which in turn enhances their self-esteem and motivation to succeed and eventually helps them to develop a sense of control over their environment.”²

This finding is important in the context of this book. Why? Because it reflects where I have gotten to with my own brand of self-oriented perfectionism: a place where I feel like I'm in control of my life (as much as anyone can be) and thriving as a person instead of constantly teetering on the edge of overwhelm and burnout.

How did I get here? Well, I developed a framework for myself.

THE PRACTICAL PERFECTION FRAMEWORK

The first thing I need to do here is define the word 'striver' because I'm going to be using it a lot in this book. In my experience there are two types:

1. Your typically Type A, highly-driven, achievement-junkie.
2. People who don't feel they fit into the category above, yet expect a lot of themselves and are constantly endeavouring to meet those expectations.

When I use the word 'striver' in this book, I am referring to both.

Now that I've got that clear, let me share with you one big thing I learned in therapy: we can't really change the aspects of our personality that are hardwired into us. Once a striver, always a striver.

But we *can* become more self-aware. We can learn what things are stopping us from living our best life, and develop strategies to manage those things.

When I started paying attention to what was going on in my life, I found that to feel happy, content and fulfilled, I needed three things to be present:

- **Passions:** things that got me out of bed in the morning with a smile on my face.
- **Priorities:** knowing what actually mattered most to me, and then making the conscious decision to focus hard on those and let go of the rest.
- **Productivity:** the ability to get things started *and* finished.

Looking back, I can see that whenever one of those three key things was lacking in my life, problems arose.

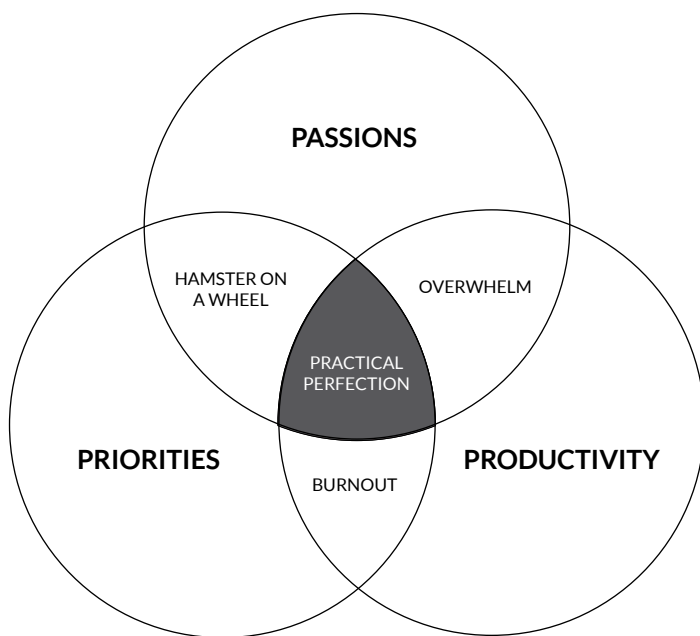
For example:

Productivity + Priorities = Yes, I got a lot of stuff done. But without any of my Passions, I **burnt out** because there was nothing to buffer the stress and anxiety that tends to go with the striver life.

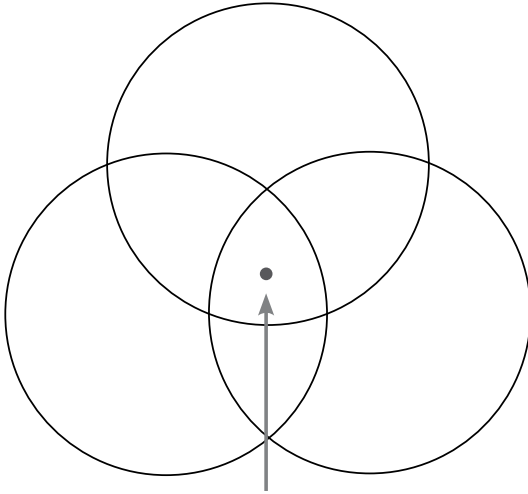
Passions + Productivity = I was doing a lot of things I loved and getting a lot done. But without Prioritisation life felt out of control and I was in a permanent state of **overwhelm** because every opportunity or request seemed like a good idea.

Priorities + Passions = I had lots of ideas, and enough time and drive to chase after every one of them. But I never seemed to finish anything before moving on to the next. In the absence of Productivity I was extremely busy, but not actually achieving anything—the proverbial **hamster on a wheel**.

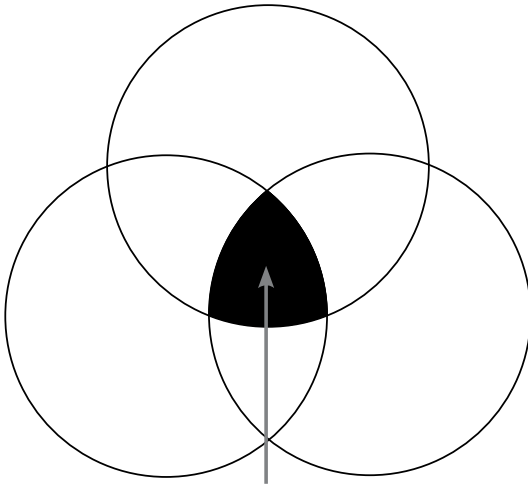
But when all three were present I entered a **zone** of what I call **Practical Perfection**—a place where I felt content, fulfilled, and able to deal with life's (inevitable) challenges as they arose.



And that whole ‘zone’ thing is one of my favourite aspects of the Practical Perfection Framework. Those of us with perfectionist tendencies usually strive for a ‘**sweet spot**’ in life—a place where all the planets align and we feel like we’re ‘there’. Unfortunately, that state of perfect balance only lasts for a moment before things inevitably shift and the moment is gone. How utterly depressing and demotivating!



What we tend to aim for: a sweet spot



What we should aim for: to get 'centred' and operate within the optimal 'zone'

Entering a '**zone**', however, is much more achievable. And whenever you slip out of the middle zone of Practical Perfection into one of the other areas (which will happen, because—life!), the framework tells you what you need to get centred again.

- **On the brink of burnout?** Time to inject some more **Passions** back into your life.
- **Overwhelmed?** Time to get on top of your **Priorities**.
- **Feeling like a hamster on a wheel?** Time to put your head down and get **Productive**.

If you're a self-oriented perfectionist like me, then you probably like to feel in control of your life (as much as that's possible). The Practical Perfection Framework gives you both the feeling of control you crave *and* a strong foundation for building an excellent life.

WHAT DOES AN EXCELLENT LIFE LOOK LIKE?

Well, one thing's for sure, it's not the 'perfect' life because there's no such thing. And chances are everyone's 'excellent' life is slightly different. But for me (and hopefully for you), an excellent life is one where:

- You get to achieve what you want *without* the constant stress and overwhelm people who set high standards for themselves tend to experience.
- You have time and space to be good to those closest to you.
- You have time and space to be good to the world.
- You have time and space to be good to *yourself*.

In the past, whenever the pressure was on I'd fall back into the same old behavioural patterns. And those patterns always led me down the paths of overwhelm, burnout and feeling like a hamster on a wheel.

These days, the Practical Perfection Framework warns me when my feet are heading down any of those paths much earlier, and tells me what I need to do to 'return to centre'.

HOW THIS BOOK WILL WORK

This book has three main sections: **Burnout**, **Overwhelm** and **Hamster on a Wheel**. Each section talks about how we end up feeling that particular way, and how we can use Passions, Priorities and Productivity respectively as antidotes.

The final section of the book will demonstrate how tying all of the above together with one vital, common thread will help you achieve an excellent life.

If you've just picked up this book I recommend reading it from cover to cover, as each section builds on the one before. But once you've finished it you can open the appropriate section whenever you need practical tips to deal with a specific 'thing'.

Speaking of practical ...

Everything I talk about in this book I've tried myself. None of what I share is 'in theory'. I know these things work, and not just for me. I've shared most of these ideas on my blog, and dozens of people have said my methods also helped them achieve significant breakthroughs.

I sincerely hope some significant breakthroughs are lying in the coming pages for you too.

[Let's get started ...](#)