

What To Do When Things Aren't Going Perfectly

Written by MIT students for
imperfect@mit



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- A campaign to debunk the myth of perfection and prevent student burnout; raise awareness of the negative fallout of intense pressure; and spark action across all gender, racial, ethnic, and social groups.

The Firehose of MIT

Many of us may hope or expect to stand out at MIT the same way we did in high school: **succeeding on intelligence alone**, putting minimal work into classes, concentrating on a smorgasbord of activities, and somehow achieving enviable results.



There are hundreds of extracurricular activities, and it is tempting to be involved in all of them. There are hundreds of classes, and it is tempting to take the “toughest” ones. There are hundreds of ways to schedule your time, and it is tempting to take the last-minute approach and still expect the best. But combining these opportunities and desiring a social life **is like lighting a Molotov cocktail**.

imperfect@MIT recognizes that **there are times when your ambitions may overwhelm you**. We’re here to tell you that your best efforts are good enough. In fact, they’re perfect.

Why imperfect@mit?

The myth of "effortless perfection" is strongly promoted on high-achieving campuses. The term comes from a study at Duke University that found students feel pressured to be smart, accomplished, fit, attractive, and popular, all without visible effort. When unable to attain this ideal, a sense of failure sets in. Coping strategies for dealing with this pressure include self-criticism, chronic dissatisfaction (the feeling of being “never good enough”), and even self-harm.

imperfect@MIT is a campaign to debunk the unhealthy, unhelpful, unrealistic “effortless perfection” myth. Student community leaders and groups who inform the campaign include MedLinks, Active Minds, and the Student Health Advisory Committee.

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Imperfect@MIT is a campaign for students that has been launched as an antidote to the unhealthy, unhelpful, unrealistic influence of the “perfection” myth. We seek to raise awareness of the prevalence of the issue on campus. As we identify the negative fallout of this intense pressure, we hope to spark social action across all gender, racial, ethnic, and social groups, dispelling the idea that these issues are isolated to any one particular group.

Contact us:

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Recommendations

Resources recommended by these students:

Academic

TAs—talk to them early and often

The Writing Center— help with any and all writing assignments, but book your appointment ahead of time:

<http://web.mit.edu/humanistic/www/writcent.html>

TSR (Tutorial Services Room)—open to anyone, offering tutorials, course bibles, study space, and many other resources:

<http://web.mit.edu/tsr/www/faq.html>

Tutoring—most of the frosh core classes offer free tutoring through their department

Stress management

GRTs—residential support to help deal with stress

S³—Student Support Services, for help with academic overload and other academic stresses:

web.mit.edu/counsel/www/

MIT Medical—for help with stress-related problems:

MIT Mental Health Services

MIT Center for Health Promotion and Wellness

medweb.mit.edu/wellness/mentalhealth/

medweb.mit.edu/wellness/topics/stress.html

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4 Ways that Students Recover from Setbacks

1) Learn how to recover self-esteem quickly

- Personally, I have trouble and **feel “not good enough”** for some time. I have to strive to change that, because it destroys my productivity for a while, leading to more failures. I now realize the more time I spend **down on myself**, the harder the next task will seem. I don't see things as a failure, but more a new goal for improvement.
- Deal with setbacks by doing **something you are good at** and are proud of being good at so you feel accomplished despite the setback (chess, distance running, sports, other class, socializing, networking, etc.). Do NOT turn to overeating or drinking alcohol to feel better. None of those habits will make a lasting change.
- Failure is tough. Sometimes I have those days when **even “login failed” can get me down**. However, I find that I am able to move on if I realize where I am: MIT. Even a failure in a sea of geniuses is still a genius. Hope for the future is what keeps me going. If I don't **help build what's coming**, who will?

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2) *Help is not a 4-letter word (well, it is, but...you know what we mean)*

- **Talk to your TAs** and professors **early and often!** I can't count how many times students' final grades have been bumped up by positive interactions with the teaching staff (in office hours, tutorials, recitations, anywhere). We really want to reward enthusiasm, curiosity and hard work. - An MIT TA
- **GET OVER YOURSELF! GET HELP!** I still always try to push myself to figure things out on my own, but some things I really can't get on my own. Working with friends still pushes you to think things over, lets you hold on to some self-esteem, but it **humbles you and builds camaraderie**. You've got to have something pushing you through the tough times, though – if you lose curiosity and passion, you can't succeed.
- **Go to tutoring** with friends. It's easy **not to get down on yourself** when you go to others and see that they are having the same problems as you. I have to remind myself that I can't think of everything, and someone else may think of something that I didn't.
- Don't hang out with **friends who increase your stress** – hang out with people who comfort you. And remember that **everyone has different strengths**. It is overwhelming to assume you'll be the best at many different things.
- Do your best, but remember that you are here for the experience. Focus on yourself as a whole package. **Take time to develop as a person** and make friends. This is what you will remember in the end, not **how high a grade you got in 18.02**.

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3) *Regain perspective on where you are on the planet*



- A test can be bombed easily here with the same knowledge going in as a perfect score at a less-rigorous school. My self-esteem rebounds, but I am **always making a plan for the next time** so I can succeed.
 - I try to put things in perspective and move on to the next challenge. **My standards here are based on myself**, while in high school, they were based on others.
 - Are Olympic athletes the best in the world at many different sports? **Why should I expect myself to excel in everything** when I'm at a place full of academic Olympians?
 - You learn who your best friends are at MIT – those who help you in your lowest points, whether academic or otherwise. **The people who help along the way are “keepers”** and it's great to realize they'll always be there for you.
- ### 4) *Identify your signature strengths.*
- **Stubbornness has been my saving grace for most of my life** – I am Stubborn with a capital “S”... and punctuated with an exclamation point and bold, underlined, italicized font. I'm (slowly) learning that stubbornness **sometimes means understanding limits** and when to say no, but it's definitely not easy.
 - I have a love of learning and an ability to not take things too seriously. When I learn something new, **I usually get really excited about it** and I want to do the corresponding pset. I can realize that a test is just one test, etc., and **I can see the big picture**. Rarely do I freak out about anything academic.
 - I'm a good listener, **I motivate the people around me**, and I understand the big picture topics (if not always the small details).

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