

Chapter 3

Load Lighteners

Imagine your town or community is putting on a carnival or a fair with lots of fun games, like a three-legged race, a scavenger hunt, and a water balloon toss. There are even a lot of tasty snacks, like popcorn and funnel cakes. Everyone is having a great time . . . but you have a backpack full of bricks on your back. The games are a lot harder for you, and they're not really fun. Even eating snacks and talking to friends is hard, because the weight of those bricks makes you uncomfortable.

As you read in chapter 1, being a perfectionist is like wearing a backpack full of bricks all the time. Some people have had it on so long, they don't even realize how much it's pulling them down. Even if they are aware of it, they might think that's just how life is, and there's nothing they can do. But there *are* things you can do to lighten the load and enjoy yourself more.

This chapter describes seven of those things. I call them "**Load Lighteners**"—strategies you can use to take a brick or two out of your backpack right now. They'll help you feel less burdened by worry so you can enjoy the fun things in life.

Using Load Lighteners



You can use these Load Lighteners at home, at school, when playing or practicing, or any time you feel fear or worry about how well you're doing. They'll help you cope with your feelings so you can feel better about yourself. The Load Lighteners are numbered, but you don't have to do them in any order. Try as many of them as you like and see which ones work best. The more you do, and the more often you do them, the better you will feel.

#1: Dive In

Are you the kind of perfectionist who often procrastinates? Somewhere deep inside, do you secretly fear getting started on things because you don't want to face the thought of doing a less-than-perfect job? If so, start something—like your math homework, an art project, or your blog entry—right now, before you feel totally prepared. You can always go back later and make changes. After you dive in once, try it again with something else you've been putting off. The more times you dive in, the easier it will become for you to start things. And maybe—just maybe—knowing you weren't as prepared as you could have been will free you up to do a less-than-perfect job, but still a job you can be proud of.

#2: Not "Right," Just Write

Use the journal you started in chapter 1 to do other activities in this book, especially the ones in chapter 5. But your journal isn't just a place to do activities. It can also be a private place to write about your thoughts and feelings as you work on lightening the load of your perfectionism. Or just to write about what's going on in your life, or to draw pictures.

When you write about your thoughts and feelings, you can learn to understand them better. You might learn things about yourself you didn't know, and you can even figure out solutions to problems you have. Over time, as you do the activities in this book and work on your perfectionism, your thoughts and feelings will change. If you record your thoughts and feelings in your journal, you can see that things *are* getting better, even if sometimes it doesn't *seem* like things are getting better.

Here are some things you can write about:

- Make a list of things that help you relax and worry less.
- Write about something you did well.
- If you're worried about a big project coming up, write about that. Break the project into smaller parts and make a plan for doing each part.
- When are you happiest? Write about it.



Remember, there's no right or wrong way to write in your journal—you just do it!

#3: Crack Up

Next time you feel stressed about doing well on something, or about what others might think of you, find something to laugh at. The more laughing you do, the better. Laughter releases chemicals called “endorphins” in your body that make you feel better. It's also good exercise—you use most of your muscles to laugh! All of this can help take your stress level down and give you more energy to face your work. Relaxation and humor can help you try things even if you are scared or worried about what might happen.

Here are a few ways to get you cracking up. You can probably think of others, too:

- Watch your favorite funny movie.
- Read a funny book or Web site.
- Draw a silly picture.
- Call a friend who's funny.
- With friends or siblings, make up a goofy play and perform it—just for yourselves.

#4: Move It

The fear and worry that go along with perfectionism can put a lot of stress on your body. Some kids get headaches or stomachaches, and some feel burned out, tense, crabby, or tired. If you feel lousy in any of these ways, or if you just want to have something to take your mind off the fear and worry, get active. Exercise is a healthy way to burn off some of that stress. It helps you release nervous energy and clear your mind.

You probably have some favorite ways you like to exercise. Here are some ideas you might add to your list:

- Run around the block.
- Play basketball at the park.
- Walk your dog (if you don't have a dog, ask if you can walk a neighbor's dog).
- Ride a skateboard, bike, or inline skates.
- Go swimming with friends or family.
- Do active chores: sweep the kitchen, dust, rake leaves, or shovel snow.
- Do jumping jacks in your living room.
- Dance to your favorite music.



#5: Imagine Someone Else Did It

If you're mad at yourself for doing something less-than-perfectly, imagine someone else did it instead. For example, let's say you get a disappointing grade on a test, give up the losing goal as a hockey goalie, or lose a fantasy football game, and you feel really bad about it. You might even think you're some kind of loser for letting this happen.

Take a minute to pretend it wasn't you. It was a friend or someone in your class who made the mistake. What would you think of that person?

Now, imagine something else. Imagine that person, besides getting a disappointing grade like you, also does all the good things you do, too. He or she tries hard, cares about improving, and sometimes gets higher grades. Imagine that person, like you, also is friendly and caring. What would you think of that person now? Would you think he or she is not good enough? Probably not. Probably, you'd be a lot easier on that person than you are on yourself. You deserve the same treatment!

Do this exercise every time you start getting down on yourself for not being good enough. It will get easier and easier to see yourself in a way that is more fair to you.

#6: Just Say No

You read in chapter 1 how many perfectionists are overloaded. They try to do too many things, and they try to do them all perfectly. Here's something you can do to lighten your load: the next time someone asks you to volunteer to do something, try saying, "Sorry, but I'm really busy right now and I can't do it. Thanks for asking, though!" Make sure you are polite but firm. Setting limits for yourself is a way of taking care of yourself.

Important note: Some things that are part of everyday living you usually can't say no to, like homework and chores around the house! You can still say no to other things, though.

#7: Do Something That Can't Be Judged

Sometimes it feels like everything you do is either good or bad. If you need a break from worrying about how well you're doing at things, do something that *can't* be done well—OR poorly. Watch a favorite TV show, for example. You can't do that badly. Here are some other ideas:

- Take a walk.
- Email a friend just to say hello.
- Read a book.
- Call a grandparent.

- Play with a younger sibling, or color or do a puzzle (don't compete!).
- Go to a playground.
- Listen to music.
- Write in your journal.

All these are positive things to do because they help you feel good—and some of them make others feel good, too. And no matter how things turn out, you can't do them poorly. Enjoy the positive feelings!



Tell your friends and family about the Load Lighteners, and ask for help when you need it. Show them how you've done some of the activities—maybe they'd like to do some of them with you!

