A person with long hair

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How to Stop

The Self Sabotage

October 31, 2021

Well hello Friends! I hope you had an amazing week.

Today I want to talk about something that I think we’ve all struggled with at one point or another in some part of our lives, and that is Self-Sabotage. It’s something I see my clients do on occasion. I’ve seen it play out with people at work and I’ve done it myself on occasion.

As I said, we all have at some point. So, this episode is going to be super helpful for all of us, I think.

In this episode, we’re going to learn the definition of self-sabotage, how it shows up, WHY we engage in it and how we can stop.

So, let’s start with the definition.

For this I decided to go straight to the source. I googled Websters.

Interestingly, Webster’s didn’t have self-sabotage in their online dictionary, which I thought was odd. But they DID supply the definition of Sabotage, which they listed as “an act or process intended to hamper or hurt.”

So, that’s an incredibly good definition. And we can make it work for Self-Sabotage by just adding “ourselves” at the end. Which would make the definition: “an act or process intended to hamper or hurt ourselves.”

There’s just one thing about that which is the word “intended.” Because when it comes to SELF sabotage, it’s important to know that it’s not always a conscious choice.

In fact, according to psychologists there are two types of self-sabotage: Conscious and Unconscious.

Conscious self-sabotage happens when you’re aware (in the moment) that what you’re doing is actively undermining yourself and your goals - that you’re working counter to what you really want – but you do it anyway. An example of this could be when you KNOW you need to finish that presentation for work but instead of doing that, you binge watch Netflix or meet friends for drinks.

Does that one sound familiar? Probably shows up as procrastination, right? I know I can relate to this one.

And then there’s Unconscious self-sabotage. And that’s when you do something that undermines yourself and your goals, but you don’t realize it until later. Sometimes MUCH later, like when you’re dealing with the consequences of it. An example of this might be habitually showing up late for work or turning in sub-par work. You know you shouldn’t be doing that but you’re not consciously connecting to what’s REALLY driving that behavior which is probably some underlying fear of failure or self-doubt or feeling not good enough. At first, you might chalk it up to being disorganized or to poor planning. But when it keeps happening over and over and over again, at some point you realize, “Oh, it’s a thing. I’m doing it on purpose.”

For some Self-Sabotage is an occasional or point-in-time thing. So, it’s not as harmful. But for others, it’s a deeply embedded chronic pattern of behavior that eventually leads to key issues in their career or some other aspect of their life like their relationships, their financial health or their personal health or wellbeing.

Now let’s go a little deeper and talk about some of the most common ways that Self-Sabotaging behavior shows up.

**Not Showing Up or Showing up Late.** So, we already briefly touched on this one but it’s the most common so worth mentioning again. When you’re consistently showing up late, you’re doing it to avoid something unpleasant. This eventually affects you by eroding trust and respect among co-workers and friends.

**Procrastination**. This is another common one. This is about putting off something we know we need to do - even WANT to do - even though we know it would be better not to, but we just can’t make ourselves tackle that thing in the moment so instead we do other things like Netflixing or fun with friends. This affects you by adding more stress to your life as you must get the thing done in LESS time and not as good a result.

**Perfectionism**. This one affects a lot of us too. This is about nothing ever being good enough, so we tinker and tinker, tinker, revise, and stuff because it must be perfect. It’s closely tied to procrastination because all the tinkering is just a delay mechanism to keep you from finishing the thing.

**Quitting.** This one is about not deeply committing to seeing the things that you start, through to the finish. In your career, this could be about job hopping. In your business it could show up as constantly changing niches or hopping from one business idea to another. In your personal life it could be the dozens of half-finished projects laying around the house.

**Numbing behaviors (overeating, overdrinking, overspending, over-Netflixing, over-Facebooking).** These behaviors make us feel better or calm our anxiety because they soothe us when we’re feeling anxious, overwhelmed, or fearful.

There are many more ways Self Sabotage can show up for us, but these are the most common.

Do any of those sound familiar? Or can you think of some other ways you might occasionally self-sabotage? Like I said, it’s something most of us have done at one time or another.

But now that we’ve got the definition and talked about the distinct types of behaviors, let’s talk about WHY we do it. Because that’s the interesting part, right?

I mean, why would an intelligent, driven person repeatedly do something – either consciously or unconsciously – that doesn’t serve us overall?

Well, it gets back to something I’ve hit on many times before in this podcast, which is about how our thoughts drive our feelings and our feelings drive our actions. If this is your first time listening to this podcast, I invite you to go back to Episode 1 and listen to the 5 interrelated parts of any problem because that will give you a good overview of the cognitive behavioral approach to coaching that I use in my practice.

But the simple answer is that self-sabotage is an ACTION or a Behavior that we engage in because we’re trying to avoid an EMOTION that we don’t want to feel. An uncomfortable or negative emotion.

It might be Fear. Self-doubt. Uncertainty. Not enoughness.

And if we back ALL the way up, we know that the negative emotion we’re trying to avoid didn’t just happen because of something going on – like the presentation we must finish or the difficult report that’s due. It’s NEVER our circumstances or what’s happening to us that causes us to FEEL what we feel. It’s the THOUGHT we have about the circumstance or what’s happening that causes that emotion.

So instead of dealing with or allowing ourselves to FEEL that negative emotion, we soothe ourselves by engaging in behaviors that don’t serve us. Self-sabotaging behaviors.

And when we’re doing things like over-eating, over drinking, going for drinks with friends instead of doing the report, showing up late, endlessly tinkering with the thing we just need to finish and hand in, we FEEL better. We feel better because we’re avoiding dealing with that negative emotion.

That’s the payoff.

That’s WHY we self-sabotage. Because it allows us to not have to feel those negative emotions and instead, we busy ourselves with doing other things that distract us from having to process through or really FEEL those negative emotions.

Usually though, these self-sabotaging behaviors eventually come at a high price. They become a self-fulfilling prophecy of the very thing you fear most.

Constantly showing up late to avoid your feelings of not being good enough or your fear of failure in the job, could very well result in you losing that job or the relationship.

Constantly overeating to avoid feelings of not being good enough will lead to being overweight which ironically will only increase your feelings of not being good enough.

See how that works.

Play any of the Self-Sabotaging behaviors out and examine the impact in the long term and you’ll find that in every instance, those very behaviors that make you feel better in the moment, eventually lead to the very thing you fear most.

So, you might be asking, “Well how do I stop? Especially if I’m going it unconsciously?”

Well, I do recommend that you get some coaching because there’s some complexity to Self-sabotaging behaviors and it takes some deep thought work, done with consistency to really get to the root of what’s going on so you can stop it finally. So, if you’re interested, you can go to thepurposefulcareer.com/privatecoaching and schedule a FREE call. Or, we also have a group coaching choice called Next Level and doors are opening again on December 1st. Go to thepurposefulcareer.com/nextlevel to sign up for the wait list.

But right now, I’m going to give you four things you can do if you recognize that you have some self-sabotaging behaviors.

1. **Be aware of your triggers and how the self-sabotaging behavior serves you**. I recommend you list out all the ways you self-sabotage that you’re aware of. No judgement. No viewing it in a negative light. What we want to do is list each type of behavior and for each, take some time to examine when these behaviors come up for you. What are the triggers? Is it certain types of assignments, certain people, certain events? It’s important to know what is happening that you’re reacting to. (We’ll need this for a later step).
2. **For each self-sabotaging behavior you have, plan some healthier ways to respond in the future**. Because you have triggers and those won’t instantly go away. It usually takes some time. But you can help yourself by thinking through a plan for some alternative, healthier ways of dealing in those situations while you’re solving the deeper problem. So instead of overeating or overdrinking as a way of handling stress, what could you do instead? Instead of indulging in different forms of procrastination, what type of healthy reward system could you put in place, so you tackle that thing you don’t want to do right now?
3. **Prepare for the obstacles or urges to go off plan.** So, if one of your plans is to have healthier snacks on hand when you’re tempted to binge eat, one of the ways you prepare is to ensure you always have that healthier snack in the pantry (and none of the bad). Having a backup plan is important so you can work through the urge or temptation to revert to the more negative behavior.
4. **Learn how to tolerate negative feelings.** Because that’s what the root cause of this is. Self-Sabotage isn’t about the behavior in and of itself. It’s about the emotions you’re trying to avoid by DOING the indulgent behavior. So, it’s really an emotional tolerance problem. Most of us will try to distract ourselves from negative emotions by doing something that makes us feel better or shifts our focus. So here, look at all the self-sabotaging behaviors you listed in #1 and identify the emotions you most often feel in those situations. Is it anxiety? Fear? Self-Doubt? Uncertainty? The truth is, whatever you’re feeling is just an emotion. It’s not dangerous or bad or whatever. It’s just an emotion. And you can start to learn how to tolerate or accept your emotions by first understanding that life will never be all sunshine and daisies. The human experience is meant to include the good and the bad. So you can practice allowing the more negative emotions by being aware of what they are for you and then the next time you feel that, instead of eating a cupcake or having a glass of wine or turning on Netflix, instead just allow yourself to feel it. You can just sit with it quietly for like 10 – 15 seconds to start. Then gradually build up the time. What you’ll realize is that when you’re triggered, you can learn to allow yourself “feel” the negative emotion and that you won’t die. It’s not going to kill you. And you don’t really need that cupcake or glass of pinot.

The most important thing is to have compassion for yourself. Whether it’s an occasional thing or something you do regularly, you can unlearn this behavior. And the type of CBT-based coaching that I’m certified in is the answer. Check out thepurposefulcareer.com/coaching to see the two types and if you want, schedule a FREE 30-minute call and let’s chat. We’ve got the tools and the approach that can help.

Until next time, make it a great week my friends.