



Self-Sabotage

Self-sabotage is exactly what it sounds like:

Self-sabotage happens when a person does something to hinder their own success. These actions may be destructive and negatively impact many life areas including substance use or mental health recovery as well as other related areas including relationships, education/career, finances, or any other important life ambitions.

Simply put, self-sabotage happens when we get in the way of our own goals (either knowingly or subconsciously)

***Warning – This can be a challenging topic to discuss.** Because there are often unconscious factors at play in the process of self-sabotage, to learn to stop this destructive process a degree of **insight and self-awareness is needed**. We need to be able to honestly look at ourselves and our own patterns of behaviors and decision-making to start to break patterns of self-sabotage

Part 1 – Dissecting Self Sabotage – The following is a list of ways that people may sabotage their own progress. Some of these ways are direct and others can be subtle. As a group, come up with real life examples of each one below:

Accidents – Some accidents are just accidents, but others can be self-sabotage. It depends on the person and the situation. ***Read and discuss these examples then continue to do this for all of these aspects of self-sabotage that follow:***

- “I accidentally took one of my aunt’s prescription pain pills right before my court date and tested positive on my drug test”
- “I accidentally called my ex for the first time in months, who then proceeded to come over with drugs and we got high and blew through all the money I had been saving for a down payment to finally move out on my own”

Procrastination – Waiting until it is too late to take care of something important can be a form of self-sabotage as demonstrated in these examples.

- “I didn’t get into the educational program I was hoping for because I waited too long to put in an application, and I missed the deadline
- I kept waiting and waiting to make an appointment for the psychiatrist and then my mental health declined pretty rapidly, so I had to go to the ER, and I got admitted to the inpatient psych unit and missed my job interview”

Failing to take the opportunity – Similar to procrastination. sometimes we just don’t take advantage of a favorable circumstance that comes our way then realize it later when it is too late

- “I could have had that good job working with my cousin, but I turned it down for months and now my brother has the job, and he is doing well, making great money and I am still broke”



Doing the wrong thing without thinking – Failure to think without acting can be a form of self-destruction

- “I was a week away from graduating this substance use program as I had made excellent progress for several months then suddenly, I just impulsively used and failed my last drug test!”
- “I stayed away from the neighborhood where I used to get drugs for weeks then the day of my job interview, I just took the exit on the highway without thinking and next thing I knew it I was buying stuff, using and I missed the appointment”

“Amnesia” (Forgetting what we have learned when we know it was working) – Self-sabotage may involve forgetting to do what we know works and helps us cope and make progress, as in this example:

- “I was practicing relaxation and stress management skills that I learned in treatment, every morning before work to manage my anger on the job, then over time I just started forgetting to do this and one day shortly after that I went to work and got fired for yelling at an annoying customer”

Perfectionism – Waiting for the perfect moment or having standards that are just too high can actually be a form of self-sabotage as in these examples:

- “Opportunities to better my life have come and gone because I keep waiting for the ideal or “perfect” situation that never seems to come because my standards are unreasonable and unrealistic”
- “I never went to art school as I had dreamed of doing for years because whenever I try to put together a portfolio I keep on throwing my work away after its done because I never feel like its good enough”

Purposely doing the wrong thing – This may be the most blatant form of self-sabotage; when we consciously do the wrong thing full-knowing it is going to be destructive at some point

- “I finally had the relationship I was waiting for and what did I do? I cheated and now it’s over”
- “After a year of grinding it out and staying out of trouble, probation was set to be over in three weeks. Then I just went out and got high because I just felt like it and I didn’t give a crap about the consequences. I got caught and now if I don’t go to jail, probation is going to be extended”

Other – *Can the group come up with any other examples of self-sabotage?*





Part 2 – Reasons for Self-Sabotage – Why do people sometimes derail their own progress? Consider a few below and discuss each one as a group:

Fear of freedom – This may be difficult to admit but sometimes people sabotage their progress because progress is scary. For example, a person can become “comfortable” being watched over or monitored in a mandated situation. The thought of being free to make decisions with no one watching can actually be frightening. Fear of completing a program can feel the same way

Fear of progress or responsibility – It can be easy to say “I want that job” or “I want that education” but then actually having to do it can be scary. People can self-sabotage based on a hidden fear of new challenges or responsibilities. Progress brings added pressure. Again, this fear can be difficult to identify and admit

Fear of Failure – Similar to the examples already discussed, fear of failure can cause some people to prevent themselves from having to even try. “If I don’t put myself in a position to try, then I don’t have to worry about failing”

Comfort in Chaos – People can sustain negative situations based on a form of “comfort” with the lifestyle. An example would be someone reasoning that by staying addicted to substances, at least that was a lifestyle they are used too as compared with having to grind it out and try to compete in the sober world

Shame and Insecurity – People can sabotage progress based on an inner lowered sense of self-worth. Unresolved feelings of shame and guilt can cause someone to feel like they don’t deserve to do well. This can be a form of self-inflicted punishment. This can even be rooted in unresolved childhood issues or trauma

Anger and resentment – Unresolved anger or resentment toward oneself or others can fuel self-sabotage. For example, a person can sabotage their own life as a form of revenge toward their parents or someone else who may have hurt them. Anger at society can also fuel self-sabotage

Negative Associations – Surrounding yourself with people who put you down, discourage you, or consistently disappoint you can be a form of self-sabotage. These people can be like a weight around your ankle as you are trying to successfully swim to the surface.

Other – *Can the group think of other reasons why someone may sabotage their own progress?*

Part 3 – Stopping the pattern of self-sabotage – *Three key aspects:*

1. **Recognize** – This activity up to this point has been focused on gaining insight into patterns of self-sabotage. It can be challenging, but when something goes wrong it is important to ask honest questions of ourselves and give honest answers. For example:
 - a. Something just went wrong – Ask:
 - i. Is there any chance I allowed that to happen?
 - ii. Am I afraid of progress or responsibility?
 - iii. Did I let anger or resentment get in my way of making a good decision?
 - iv. Do I have any other unresolved issues holding me back (like poor self-esteem or shame)
2. **Use Supports** – Recognizing these things ourselves can be difficult. Having a support system in place who will honestly speak with us can be extremely helpful. A sponsor, a counselor, or any really close friend or family member who “tells it like it is” when we need to hear it can help to prevent self-sabotage. Being able to talk through fears, resentments and insecurities can also prevent self-sabotage before it happens. Also changing negative peers can help as self-sabotage can be contagious
3. **Develop new, healthy habits** – Self sabotage can be likened to a bad habit we may need to break. Starting new habits that build self confidence and improve healthy decision-making is essential in stopping patterns of self-sabotage. We can train our minds to learn to make positive decisions with time and practice