

Understanding Self-Sabotage

by

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Why would anyone want to sabotage their own efforts? It's a reasonable question. But, a better-phrased question would be what is the motivation and logic underlying self-sabotage. There is little doubt that it occurs. What is often not recognized is that it serves a purpose. There is a positive intention, a need if you will, underlying the behavior of self-sabotage. There are a number of ways in which we sabotage ourselves and in every single case the self-sabotaging behavior can be viewed as serving some positive need. Let's look at some examples...

One of the more common situations is called "approach-avoidance" in which as we get closer to the goal we have set for ourselves we begin to avoid reaching it. We start to do things that actually prevent us from reaching the goal. Let's say you have set a goal to run 50 miles a week. You begin to notice that at the 45 miles/week stage, you are coming up with excuses not to run, or you are finding little emergencies that need to be taken care of instead of running...or you have to stay late at work, or...There could be a dozen situations or reasons, some appearing quite legitimate, that prevent you from taking that final step towards your goal. And, of course, you may rationalize this failure to reach your set goal and not consider it any form of self-sabotage. And yet, if this situation is viewed as a sabotaging effort then the question can be asked, how is this serving me? What is the positive intention underlying my failure to reach my goal? The answer can be varied. It may be that by reaching the goal, there will be no more goals towards which to strive and to avoid that situation, the sabotage prevents the goal from being reached. In that way, there continues to be goal on the horizon and the positive intention behind that could be simple motivation. It can feel good to have a goal and there can be an emotional letdown when the goal has been reached. Another reason might be that if the goal is reached, friends, family and colleagues...other people, may then become envious and to avoid that conflict, the goal is sabotaged. That positive intention is to maintain friendly relations and avoid unpleasant feelings in others.

Positive intentions underlying self-sabotaging behaviors are not always perfectly rational. The desire to avoid unpleasant emotions in others is understandable; yet, sometimes it is just not possible, nor advisable, to adjust our own behaviors and goals to avoid other people from feeling badly. The intention of preventing us from reaching a goal so that we continue to have a goal in front of us may be rising from the positive intention of helping us have motivation and avoid the letdown of reaching a goal, however there are better more productive ways of addressing those issues. New goals can be established upon the achievement of one goal. In this case, the goal of 60 miles can replace 50 miles or 50 miles can remain but run in less time. But, the subconscious, from whence comes our self sabotaging behaviors, is not always flexible, though it can be quite creative when required. It often does not have the scope and

vision to see alternatives unless prompted. As such, questioning the underlying needs embedded in self sabotaging behavior is valuable and can open the doors of perception to better ways of meeting needs.

Let's take another example. Let's say you find that after several months of a new relationship, it starts to go sour; you begin to notice there are more arguments, often about silly things...things you did not argue about earlier in the relationship. You become increasingly unhappy in the relationship and break it off. It's easy to attribute the problem to the other person. Yet, in a relationship both parties are responsible for the dynamics involved and more often than not communication breakdowns are symptomatic of underlying needs not being met. Though certainly not conscious, self-sabotaging behavior in a relationship has any number of positive intentions. One such intention could be to save the person from intensive pain and hurt that they may expect in a relationship. In effect, their attitude and belief may be something along the lines of "better to get it over with sooner than later so the pain is less." Consequently, several months into the relationship, arguments begin and shortly thereafter the relationship is over all based on an underlying need, and positive intention, of preventing greater pain. If this is understood, steps can be taken to help see that the relationship develops in a healthy way which can act as some insurance against the pain of a break up or divorce down the road. Of course, there are no guarantees and relationships are risky endeavors simply because despite the best intentions, and the most effective behaviors, relationships will change...and some will end, and there will be significant pain. There is always the question of whether or not the time and effort that goes into building a good relationship is worth it, considering the potential for hurt. And, that is where self-sabotaging behavior comes in to prevent the risk of greater pain down the road.

Self-sabotaging behavior is in itself not a bad thing. It is kind of like the flu or a seasonal cold. Such symptoms are indicative that the body is doing its work properly in purifying and healing the body of foreign elements. Likewise, self-sabotaging behaviors are indicative that the mind is trying to meet a psychological and emotional need. That need may be unrecognized; it may be immature or it may be extremely important. If you think you may be engaging in self sabotaging behaviors, take some time to consider that there are underlying needs striving to be met and ask yourself how best you can honor those needs in other ways, ways which do not interfere with the what you are trying to achieve.