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Why people self-sabotage, and how to stop it

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Why people self-sabotage, and how to stop it

People sometimes choose to say and do things that defeat their own goals. The science of self-sabotage explains why and offers solutions.

David Chan

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Self-sabotage occurs when we want to achieve a goal and then go about getting in our own way, as if to make sure what we want does not happen. Rationally, it is hard to understand why anyone would do that. In reality, all of us self-sabotage now and then, in varying degrees.

Psychologists study self-sabotage because normal people do it even though it is maladaptive, which seems puzzling.

Self-sabotage can occur in two types of situations. The first concerns self-discipline. The second is in interactions with others. Most of us are familiar with the first but much less so with the second. But we do need to pay more attention to the latter, which is when we harm ourselves by undermining or destroying our relationships with others.

SELF-DISCIPLINE

But first, let's talk briefly about self-discipline.

Research on "self-handicapping" has shown that people sometimes do things to hurt their own chances of success in order to avoid taking responsibility for their subsequent failures.

So, students or workers sometimes choose to play or stay up late, instead of studying or resting, just before an important examination or presentation. When they do poorly, they blame their friends, that glass of beer, Netflix or some external factors rather than their own lack of ability, effort or dedication.

We can think of similar situations like setting a goal to exercise and lose weight and then going about with activities and eating habits that are self-defeating in achieving the goal.

In these self-discipline situations, a key psychological process underlying self-sabotage behaviours is the need to protect one's self-esteem in anticipation of potential failure. Studies have shown that although self-esteem

may remain intact temporarily this way, such behaviours in the long run exact long-term costs.

Not only is there failure to attain the desired goal, the real cause of failure is masked. The negative emotions, thoughts and outcomes associated with goal failure will also eventually erode self-esteem.

There are strategies, based on evidence, to avoid this trap. Examples include focusing on how we can control our own effort and discipline to affect outcomes, learning to avoid procrastination, engaging in self-monitoring, and setting goals that are specific, challenging and realistic.

SELF-OTHERS INTERACTION

Self-sabotage can happen during interactions with others, be it in relationships in our personal life, at the workplace or in politics.

Self-sabotage in these interactions begins when we say and do things that lead others to have negative perceptions of us.

Let's be clear on a distinction. Avoiding actions that create negative perceptions is not the same as being dishonest in interactions or being populist and pandering to prevailing public sentiments. Being tactful is not inconsistent with being truthful.

Note, though, that it hurts instead of helps when we say and do the right thing but in the wrong way or at the wrong time.

An example of this is when a supervisor correctly points out the mistakes of his subordinate but not in a constructive way.

The supervisor may be factually right but self-sabotages by going overboard in scolding the subordinate in the presence of his co-workers. Not only does he fail to achieve his goal – for example, getting everyone to learn from the mistake made – he ends up creating in others negative perceptions of him as a person, rightly or wrongly.

His action may end up giving the impression of incivility and exaggeration, or worse still, bullying and self-righteousness. And he may not even be aware of it.

This is partly because not many, if any, would tell those in power when they are wrong, for fear of the repercussions.

The problem is compounded when a person in authority surrounds himself with people who would say only positive things to please him. The self-defeating behaviours get reinforced; the goals keep getting thwarted.

Of course, people do not plan to

sabotage themselves, which is why when people see that their actions have contributed to unintended negative consequences, they ask themselves, "Why did I do that?" and think counterfactually, "If only..."

Some do gain self-awareness from these questions and learn to do better the next time. But for those inclined to blame others, they are likely to commit similar mistakes repeatedly and develop the habit of self-sabotage.

STEPS TO STOP SELF-SABOTAGE

How to counter self-sabotage?

Based on research evidence, I

suggest three steps. These seemingly obvious steps are worth reinforcing and reflecting. We often hear them espoused rather than see them in action.

BE HUMBLE

Some counsellors have said that addressing self-sabotage begins with recognising its signs, such as deterioration in our relationships with others. But the real first step is to learn to be humble.

Without humility, we will never truly recognise the signs of self-sabotage in our interactions with others, even when everyone else around us sees them clearly.

Being humble is less about impression management and more about being aware that we really don't have all the answers and that others, especially collectively, may know many things that we don't. That is why, be genuine when consulting others – not just to identify solutions, but also to understand the nature of the problems.

So, being humble means starting with the premise that you don't know everything, you may not be the best, and you need the help of others. It also means accepting that we may have made mistakes so that we can more easily identify, acknowledge and learn from them.

BE HONEST

Honesty in relationships is about telling others the truth. Lying, misrepresenting facts and covering up will backfire when the truth is discovered.

Honesty is also about being objective. Do not deceive by presenting one-sided arguments, armed with selective data chosen only because it is consistent with the position you want to advocate. People can see through the biases soon, if not immediately, since no one has monopoly over all relevant information and expertise.

To be honest and objective means to ascertain facts and evaluate analyses, arguments and perspectives in a dispassionate manner, without fear or favour. This often involves taking a moment to suspend our personal beliefs and subjective preferences.

It also means revisiting our own assumptions, considering the weight of the evidence, and seriously entertaining the possibility that others are right and we are wrong. In the light of new evidence or information that is credible and critical, have the intellectual honesty and political courage to revise our prior position.

Honesty is especially important when we interact with others in a feedback process. When giving feedback, do not sugar-coat, but do not be offensive. Be courageous and constructive. When taking feedback, do not pretend to agree, but do not be defensive. Be truthful but tactful.

How we give and take feedback is as important as the feedback content. A constructive feedback process is critical for the feedback to be effective.

BE HUMANE

Sometimes, we self-sabotage our relationships because we don't treat people in a humane manner when dealing with disagreements.

Among the many dimensions of humane treatment, being kind and being empathetic are two important ones that directly affect the management of disagreement.

When we have a strong disagreement with others, don't say things just to make them look bad or embarrass them. If we find fault on every detail, we come across as doing a witch-hunt. It is self-defeating because the key points we want to make will get diluted, if not lost, in the details.

We end up looking non-objective and being seen as taking things personally when we should not. It backfires badly if what we say is not exposing actual wrongdoing but only serves to disparage others instead of addressing the substantive issues that matter most.

So, focus on what is important

and not the relatively trivial. Choose which battles to fight. It is wise to be gracious and generous in spirit when doing so does not compromise the truth.

When we treat others who disagree strongly with us in a humane manner, the kindness we show is a strength and not a weakness.

Evidence and experience tell us that when we treat others kindly and with respect and dignity, we can make everyone more reasonable and focus more on the positives, cool a contentious issue into a non-issue, and earn public goodwill from observers.

Empathy is another effective counter to self-sabotage in relationships. Empathy involves considering how others feel and appreciating their concerns, constraints, aspirations, resources and experiences.

When we get outside our own perspectives and try to understand the position and frame of reference of those who disagree with us, we are likely to become more informed, wiser, less impulsive and more equipped to deal with disagreements.

TAKING SELF-SABOTAGE SERIOUSLY

Our negative behaviours in self-sabotage are influenced by our negative emotions like anxiety, anger, disappointment and disgust. When we take steps to be humble, honest and humane, we become better in moderating these negative emotions.

We also become more likely to refrain from acting or reacting impulsively in ways that self-sabotage relationships, such as generating more heat to the disagreement through patronising and provocative comments, and saying or doing the right thing in the wrong way or at the wrong time.

The three H steps help us pause and remember the three Rs – refrain, reflect and resolve – so that we can make good progress towards our goal.

It does not matter who we are or how smart we think we are – we are all "capable" of choosing to think, feel and act in ways that defeat our own goals. No one is immune to self-sabotage.

We need to take this seriously, especially in relationships and when interacting with others, because such maladaptive functioning can lead to worse outcomes than we realise.

Each thought, emotion and behaviour does not occur in isolation. They result from and lead to one another, spreading into a spiral of negative outcomes.

Be it in our personal life, at work or in politics, the science of self-sabotage can help us stop self-defeating behaviours and learn lessons that enable us to do better in future.

When we are more humble, honest and humane, we are less likely to self-sabotage our relationships with others. This helps us achieve our goals effectively and minimise unintended negative consequences.

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