

# Overcoming Self-Sabotage

## Objective

To reduce or eliminate self-sabotaging behaviors.

## You Should Know

Self-sabotage refers to destructive or unhealthy behaviors or habits that undermine your goals, efforts, or values. Self-sabotaging behavior is often rooted in anxiety, anger, or feelings of worthlessness.

Most of us occasionally undermine our best efforts by cheating on a diet or being late for an important meeting. However, for some people, self-sabotage is a chronic pattern that leads to significant problems in their life, work, and relationships.

Self-sabotage manifests in many ways. Here are some common examples:

- “Forgetting” deadlines or failing to prepare.
- Chronically tardy, repeatedly arriving late to work or important meetings.
- Abusing alcohol or drugs.
- Procrastinating or putting something off – even though it might be urgent.
- Overeating to deal with stress and anxiety.
- Starting projects but never finishing them.
- Never getting around to doing anything about goals, plans, or dreams.
- Intentionally abandoning or ruining friendships or romantic partnerships.
- Quitting when trying to achieve goals.

Self-sabotage is often fueled by negative self-talk and low self-esteem, leading to feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness – subsequently driving repeated patterns of self-sabotaging behaviors. Self-sabotaging behaviors reinforce a sense of worthlessness and provide justification for negative thoughts.

Self-sabotage damages reputations, because repeated lack of follow through leads others to view the self-sabotaging person as unreliable, unmotivated, uncommitted, lazy, or lacking drive. Repeated failures and disappointments create guilt and frustration. Over time, this feeds shame – further supporting low self-esteem.

## What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

Write down a goal you have had for a long time but have never accomplished.

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Are there particular areas where you are delaying making a decision? Describe.

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Do you lack motivation – even for important tasks? Explain.

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Is there something you do (or fail to do) that consistently frustrates people around you (for example, family members or your boss)? Is there a task that causes you stress or upset because you know you could do it, or do it better? Be specific.

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Describe a situation where your emotions led you to self-sabotage. For example, you might have had a bad day at work, and that evening you found yourself overeating in front of the TV. Be specific.

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Now, review the following information.

**1. Understand the need your self-sabotage fills.** To eliminate self-sabotaging behaviors, you might think being “tough” on yourself is the answer. But that is also a form of self-sabotage because you miss the most important first step: understanding what need self-sabotage fills.

Before you get tough on yourself, offer yourself compassion. Your self-sabotage serves a purpose, so suspend self-judgment and understand it is serving a function. Here are a few examples:

*If you overeat to cope with stress, understand how stress eating “works” to make you feel better after a challenging day at work.*

*If you constantly procrastinate, understand that procrastination helps you avoid your fear of failing.*

When you understand the need self-sabotage fills, you will be able to identify alternative behaviors to fill that need. When you meet that need in other ways, you will begin to reduce self-sabotaging behaviors.

Describe specific ways you self-sabotage.

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What need(s) do these habits or behaviors fill?

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Next, think of three alternative behaviors that address the need in a healthier way.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Plan for obstacles.** You have identified the underlying need and healthier alternative behaviors, but there will probably be obstacles. For example, if your alternative behavior to overeating after work is to have a small healthy snack instead of bingeing on junk food in front of the TV, what might get in the way? It is easy to have good intentions when the conditions are right, but if you want to eliminate self-sabotage, you need to plan for when you are stressed, overwhelmed, or upset.

Using the overeating example, here is a way to anticipate obstacles and plan for addressing them:

*If you want to choose healthy snacks instead of junk food, ensure you always have some healthy snacks at home, and prepare the night before (you can even do this weekly). Using small containers or plastic baggies, portion out snacks you can carry with you in your car, purse, or desk, or have available when you arrive home from work.*

**3. Tolerate emotional discomfort.** The best way to practice building emotional tolerance is to start small:

a) Identify emotion(s) you experience when you stop self-sabotaging habits and choose healthier alternatives. *For example: irritability, fear, frustration, sadness, etc.* List them.

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b) Next, look for other places in your life where that emotion comes up. *For example: you get frustrated when you are waiting in line and the person ahead of you is moving slowly.* Describe.

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c). Instead of immediately trying to get rid of the feeling or distracting yourself, practice tolerating it. *For example: instead of immediately pulling out your phone and checking your email while waiting in line, practice doing nothing and letting yourself feel frustrated for 20 seconds.*

d) Over time, you will gradually increase your tolerance for that emotion in other areas of your life. You can then practice doing the same when you choose alternative healthy behaviors over self-sabotaging behaviors.

**4. Clarify your values.** When you clarify the things that matter most to you – and then connect your new, healthier behaviors to them – it is much easier for them to grow and replace the old self-sabotaging behaviors.

Using the example from above: You want to give up overeating junk food get in shape. The alternative, healthier behaviors might include eating healthy snacks and going for walks each evening. “Getting into better shape” is a value, but it is vague and not very compelling. Researchers indicate the importance of values being visceral and specific. If you want your values to motivate you toward your new behaviors, they must be compelling and specific. So, instead of “getting into better shape,” you might instead say, “to lose 10 lbs. and feel energetic.” This statement is more specific and compelling, but you can do better! What can you do if you have more energy and lose weight? What excited you and lights you up? Maybe you have always dreamed of running a 10K. That is a clarified value, and it will help pull you toward your goal and new behaviors so you can resist old, self-sabotaging behaviors.

Write down three specific, compelling values.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Now, complete the following chart for one week. Describe self-sabotaging behaviors and alternative, healthier behaviors you choose instead. Describe how you feel before and after engaging in the alternative behavior.

Date	Self-sabotaging behavior	Alternative behavior	How did you feel before practicing the alternative behavior?	How did you feel after?

Researchers have found people are unlikely to defeat self-sabotage if behavior is the only element that changes. Thoughts and emotions must also change for long-term success. As you become more aware of the emotions, behaviors, and thoughts that trigger self-sabotage, you can begin to challenge them. Negative self-talk supports self-sabotage. The next time you notice yourself engaging in self-sabotaging behavior, notice your thoughts. Write down all your negative self-talk (even if they seem silly or unrealistic).

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Now you are aware of your negative self-talk. Ask yourself what deeper beliefs underlie these thoughts. Are these beliefs rational? Are they based on any clear facts? Explain.

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Challenge negative thinking with logical, positive affirmations by turning negative thoughts into powerful affirmations. What can you say to yourself that is positive or encouraging? On the lines below, write down a negative thought, and write a positive affirmation to replace it. *For example, "I am so lazy! I sat in front of the TV for three hours and mindlessly ate chips," becomes, "I realize I am being unkind to myself; I am not lazy, I was stressed and exhausted. I am working hard to defeat my self-sabotaging habits."*

Negative thought: \_\_\_\_\_.

Positive affirmation: \_\_\_\_\_.

Negative thought: \_\_\_\_\_.

Positive affirmation: \_\_\_\_\_.

Negative thought: \_\_\_\_\_.

Positive affirmation: \_\_\_\_\_.

Negative thought: \_\_\_\_\_.

Positive affirmation: \_\_\_\_\_.

Negative thought: \_\_\_\_\_.

Positive affirmation: \_\_\_\_\_.

Negative thought: \_\_\_\_\_.

Positive affirmation: \_\_\_\_\_.

Now, connect the positive self-talk to what you can accomplish and what you want to achieve. When your emotions, beliefs, skills, and behaviors are aligned, you can create the mental, emotional, and physical space necessary to do whatever you set your mind to.

What would you like to achieve? Be specific.

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Can you begin by setting and achieving smaller goals, on your way to achieving the bigger ones?  
Brainstorm ways you can do this.

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Use your answers to come up with a message that inspires you to move in a positive direction.  
*For example, "Even though I might not finish the 10K, I know I have the resources and skills I need to complete it. I've worked hard to eat healthier, avoid mindless snacking, and exercise each day. I feel energized and less stressed."*

Your message: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What surprised you as you completed this exercise?

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What did you find challenging about completing this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_  
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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