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Are You Your Own Worst Enemy?

WebMD Feature from "Good Housekeeping" Magazine

By Hallie Levine Sklar

Maybe The Reason You're Not Reaching Your Goals Is... You. How To Know, And Simple Ways To Stop Sabotaging Yourself

Last week, I hit the supermarket and loaded up on all my favorite junk foods: Krispy Kreme donuts, frozen pizza, and Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey ice cream. It's not for me—it's for my husband, I rationalized, as I pushed the cart up and down the aisles. Never mind that my husband was going on a business trip the next day, or that I work from home and am prone to mid-afternoon snacking. Oh, and did I mention that I'm on a diet?

I spent that hour of shopping in complete denial. Experts would argue that my actions are a clear sign of self-sabotage, preventing me from achieving the much-desired goal of fitting into my skinny jeans. "Everyone knows someone who does it—the coworker who whines about not getting a promotion when she's chronically late, or the woman who complains she's not getting enough attention from her husband even though she's constantly sniping at him," says Carol Kauffman, Ph.D., assistant clinical professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School. "These people are forever working toward some goal that seems elusive. In fact, their own actions are sabotaging them—they've become their own worst enemy."

While it may seem obvious to everyone else, the person engaging in this kind of behavior is usually clueless. "Most of the time, we don't even realize it," says Jay Jackman, M.D., a psychiatrist and career consultant in Palo Alto, CA. "We unconsciously respond to stressful situations in ways that hurt us." A study published by Dr. Jackman and his wife, Stanford economist Myra Strober, Ph.D., in the *Harvard Business Review* found that people tend to sabotage themselves in five major ways: denial, brooding, jealousy, fear of feedback, and procrastination. Sound familiar? Read on.

Denial

This means that "you're unwilling to face reality, whether you just blew your diet by eating 1,000 extra calories or your family's monthly budget by spending \$500 on clothes," explains Pauline Wallin, Ph.D., a psychologist in Camp Hill, PA.

What to do:

Sometimes you do the deed secretly, which can make it feel OK (everyone knows that cookies eaten after midnight have no calories). So be careful not to fool yourself. If you're over-indulging because you're feeling sorry for yourself, "ask what the underlying emotions are," suggests Wallin. In my case, I realized I was eating junk food because I felt bored and lonely when my husband was either traveling or stuck late at the office. So now I go jogging with friends two evenings a week: It gets me out of the house and takes my mind off munching.

Brooding

Everyone obsesses now and again—it's human nature. But brooding can become self-sabotaging when you waste so much time and energy mulling over a problem that you never manage to do anything about it, explains Strober. Research also shows that in women, brooding can lead to depression and anxiety, which can leave you emotionally paralyzed and unable to act.

What to do:

Keep a worry diary. Several studies have found that patients who write about their concerns experience significantly less depression than those who don't. "By writing down your fears, you begin to feel that you're more in control, and that helps you deal with them," explains Rebecca Curtis, Ph.D., a New York City-based psychologist and a professor of psychology at Adelphi University.

Sherri Bohinc, 32, an advertising account executive in San Francisco, gives herself an hour to type up a worry list on her computer once a week. "All my anxieties come out," she says. "Should I become a full-time mom, or continue my career? Did I respond appropriately to my boss's criticism, or did I not? Putting it all out there helps me not think about it for another week." The strategy works, says Curtis, because it gives you a sense of having addressed the concern and allows you to feel comfortable not thinking about it obsessively.

Curtis also suggests that you try this simple visualization exercise: Form a mental picture of your worry, then imagine a positive resolution. "For instance, if you're worried that your boss doesn't like your performance, picture yourself going into her office and having a heart-to-heart in which she praises you for your work," Curtis says. "Imagine it in as much detail as you can—what you see, hear, and feel." You don't have to follow through and actually do it, but "imagining a good outcome will help you feel much more positive, and it will be easier to let the worry go."

Jealousy

Like brooding, jealousy can set you up for self-sabotage by distracting you from what you need to do to solve the problem. "Rather than focusing on what's really wrong with your situation, and

what you can do to improve it, you make someone else—a friend or a coworker—into a scapegoat," explains Dr. Jackman. "And then it's really easy to just give up."

What to do:

When you're jealous, you focus on everything you aren't and everything you haven't done. (After all, if you were happy with your own accomplishments, you wouldn't need to feel jealous of someone else's.) So flip your thinking: If you're starting a home business, don't worry about your friend who was up and running in two months flat. "Focus on the three new clients you did get—rather than on the 20 who went with the other guy," says Kauffman. "And while you're brushing your teeth tonight, ask yourself what you did right today. You'll be surprised at how much you accomplished."

Fear of feedback

Most people avoid feedback because they hate being criticized. "But if you don't get feedback, you have no idea what you're doing wrong," explains Dr. Jackman. "You become your own worst enemy because you persist in the same destructive behaviors."

What to do:

If you're concerned about something personal, reach out to your friends; they can act as a sounding board. You don't necessarily have to spend hours with them: Sometimes, firing off an e-mail asking for an opinion is enough. And if it's a problem at work—you were passed over for a promotion (again) or are not included in a project you'd asked to be a part of—talk to a trusted colleague. She can help you figure out if you're somehow at fault.

Procrastination

Putting things off undermines your chances of succeeding—it's a way of setting yourself up for failure. "You left something to the very last minute, so there's no way you'll do as good a job as if you'd tackled it earlier, when you had more time," explains Curtis. Procrastinators tend to be less healthy and make less money than those who tackle problems and projects straight on, reports a review published in January 2007 in the journal *Psychological Bulletin*.

What to do:

If you're procrastinating because you're overwhelmed, try breaking down each task into smaller parts and focusing on one at a time. Carlene LeBlanc, 40, a contractor in Canton, LA, felt completely at sea when she lost her customer service job in March of last year. At first, the only work she could find was at a fast-food restaurant. Then she heard about another opportunity—but it required contractor's certifications. "I kept thinking, There's no way I can do all this," she says. "But I realized that my attitude was sabotaging me. So I broke up what I had to do into smaller goals. I set the bar low and kept raising it bit by bit until I got the certifications."

Dr. Jackman and Strober also found that people who give themselves rewards for their achievements are less likely to engage in negative behavior like procrastination. "The reward can be as small as a manicure," says Strober. "It's your way of patting yourself on the back for positive behavior."

And when the occasion warrants, treat yourself like a queen. When Lisa Grossman, 36, decided to go back to school to become a teacher, she rewarded herself after every exam period with a romantic dinner with her husband. "Knowing I had that to look forward to made the late-night studying much more palatable," she says. After three long years of going to school, interning, and continuing to work two days a week at her old job, her efforts paid off: She starts teaching her first class of high school math in the fall.

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