

Self-Sabotage — Why Good People Hurt Themselves

by [Mike Absatz](#)

What is self-sabotage? It is when people who seem to have everything going for them engage in some foolish behavior that either kills them, hurts them, or gets them into trouble. People use drugs, break the law, steal, starve themselves, find and stay in abusive relationships, cheat on their spouse, drive too fast, drink themselves to death, overeat, don't exercise, push people away, or don't go to the doctor when they get sick.

Perhaps they may not consciously want to destroy themselves or die. But unconsciously, somewhere inside them, there is a death wish. Freud said that everyone has a death wish, a desire to die, a love of death, thanatos. But I believe some people are more prone to self-sabotage than others.

As a child, everyone wants to be loved and accepted. Some children receive unconditional love from their parents, and are told, "We love you. We want you. We are proud of you. We will nurture you." Other children are unwanted, a nuisance, and unloved. They are told either verbally or nonverbally, "We don't want you. We wish you weren't here. You are a bother, a burden. We wish you would disappear." Some

groups in society, such as gays, Blacks, and the poor are also told by those in power, "We don't accept you. We wish you would just disappear, go away, die. We will pretend you don't exist. We hate you. We will ostracize, and deny you any rights."

Some parents encourage self-sabotage by telling their children, "We will not protect you." These parents don't teach their kids coping skills, so their kids don't learn how to survive in a sometimes hostile and frightening world. By not teaching these skills to their children, the parents are communicating that they don't care whether or not their children can cope. Other children are brought up with an unrealistically excessive idea of their own power. They believe they are capable of the impossible and that the world revolves around them. Still other children grow up feeling totally powerless over situations that occur around them. Having either a sense of too much power or no power can cause a child to misjudge situations and hurt themselves in the process.

Internalization of invisibility messages is what happens to children. They believe that if their parents don't want them around, or if the society wants them to die or disappear, that they are worthless and should do just that. This internalization process results in people not valuing their own existence. Self-sabotaging behavior is the result of an internalized death wish. We can see it statistically in the younger death

rates for African-American and Native American males, and the higher suicide rates for gay adolescents. When children lack skills, they don't learn how to cope with strangers, complicated situations, disappointments, abuses or violations of their boundaries. If they lack assertiveness and discernment, they are more prone to "accidentally" die or put themselves in dangerous situations.

Self-sabotage is the result of an internalized death wish or an inability to take care of oneself in the world. Some marginalized people destroy themselves out of despair. Some Blacks die in gang wars. Some Native Americans drink themselves to death. Being abused reinforces the death wish since the abuser uses the victim, and does not see the victim as a person in their own right. Abused people begin to believe that the abuse is "their fault," and they punish themselves through self-sabotaging behavior.

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People who feel worthless are often shamed by their parents and others. They are told they are not good enough. These people may continue to engage in self-sabotaging behaviors to maintain their shame. This validates that they actual are worthless. Maintaining shame perpetuates the death wish. Shame is almost always related to addictive behavior, suicide, and other forms of self-sabotage.

Self-sabotaging people need to be re-parented by people who will love, nurture, and validate them for who they are. They also need to realize that if someone in their lives wanted them to die, they don't have to internalize that death wish. In other words, those who hurt them were wrong, and they are not worthless. Healing from shame involves knowing that one is loved spiritually and emotionally, and realizing that all children are worthy and children of the universe.

This healing process can be done in support groups, in therapy, through journaling and letter writing. It often takes a long time to heal the internalization of shame and the death wish. People need to learn coping skills, and develop the will to live and thrive.

Frequently, self-sabotaging people vent anger inappropriately. They are angry at those who abused or limited them. They are angry about not being loved. They become angry at others who are loved. They may express anger toward those who try to love them. Anger is part of self-sabotaging behavior. It may be hidden as depression, or come out in violent behavior. But the self-hatred of self-sabotage usually manifests itself in some forms of inappropriate anger.

Movies such as “Ordinary People” and “Good Will Hunting” deal with self-sabotage, the internalization of shame, self-hatred, and acting out in anger. They can be useful tools in the healing process.

Probably twenty percent of the population engage in self-sabotaging behaviors regularly. At least that percent of people vent their anger inappropriately at themselves or others. We understand how to heal this pain, and help people reclaim their wholeness, and their desire to live and do well in the world.

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