

# ***Why We Sabotage Our Lives***

**Jon Burras**

**It is commonly believed that we all want to be successful. The dream we are expected to enroll in is to be healthy, happy, wealthy and in love for our entire lives. Some call it the "American Dream" while others call it the "Golden Age of Opportunity." We are presented with a vast assortment of choices and opportunities at our fingertips, from where to live, who to be in relationship with and what career to follow. One would think that with so much potential and opportunity to choose from that everyone would surely end up with outrageous amounts of success and well-being.**

**That is not always the case. Many people rise to the top only to fall from grace, find themselves rocked by scandal and besieged by self-inflicted problems. This could range from drug and alcohol addiction to relationship struggles or financial failures. We often scorn these people as "blowing their opportunity." Others might never seem to get off the ground and remain in the perpetual cycle of failure and loathing. These people seem to have been cursed with a dark disease and society offers them little hope of ever achieving success.**

**The reality is that you are in charge of your destiny. That destiny might lead you to great success or could lead you into failure and darkness. Many people remain bewildered by the events that transpire for friends and loved ones. We often wish to blame "bad luck," defective genes or poor parenting on most of our misfortunes and ill-fated circumstances. Yet we have seen many people rise from the ashes of the worst family situations and the direst of poverty. Why don't we all share that same ambition?**

**Sabotage:** This is not a word we enjoy speaking of. Shame and disgrace are often associated with sabotage. We often think of sabotage in terms of breaking someone else's spirit, property or movement. How often do we think of sabotage as undermining our own life experience? The reality is that we all have an investment in sabotage. Some investments are larger than others.

**The good news is that the more you come to understand how you might sabotage your life the more you will be able to change it. You will become a master of your existence when you come out of blame and enter into the world of self-responsibility. Until then, you will live in a world of shadows, enrolled in the blame game and unable to move forward.**

**The following article lists several ways in which we all sabotage our lives.**

### **1. Success Guilt**

**Have you ever been in a position where you have had so much success land in your lap that you found a way to sabotage it? This is more common than one might think. Success often grows more success. Success can also lead one to fall from grace and leave success far behind.**

**Example: If you are the pretty and thin girl in your family you might find yourself putting on weight because your sister is on the heavy side. You perceive her frustration with her looks and decide that if you put on weight yourself you could avoid all the public attention and your sister would not feel so bad about herself.**

**Another example happens in grade school. The prettiest and smartest girl is loathed every time the test grades are read aloud. Once again she has triumphed to the top of the grade reports and has altered the curve for everyone else. She sinks into her chair when her name is read as she recognizes that the rest of the class disdains her for her achievements.**

**Soon she begins to wear heavy makeup, hang out with the wrong crowd and her grades begin to slump. She has learned that it is not popular to be successful and if she wants to fit in she must sabotage her life. Soon this way of thinking takes over as a predominant lifestyle and becomes a permanent part of her. She goes on in life to underachieve, hang out with the wrong crowds and not take care of herself. Everyone always wonders, "What happened to her?"**

### **2. It Feels Good to Be Bad**

**Imagine what it is like to be raised in a family that was always perfect and you were expected to "tow the line" and be perfect as well. You were encouraged to work hard, achieve good grades in school, avoid drugs and alcohol and wait to have sex until after you were married. While this might seem like the ideal family, in reality this family dynamic tends to create an enormous amount of pressure to maintain. Children often rebel and create split off secret (or not so secret) rebellious behavior. In essence, it feels good to be bad.**

**When one is engaging in a behavior that is contrary to the perfect family upbringing, he actually gets "high" from this bad behavior. He is rebelling against the pressure of having to stay in control at all times by losing control. This loss of control behavior tends to give him a sense of relief from his internalized pressure. These loss-of-control activities then can be seen as a way to sabotage his idealized world, especially if they gain momentum and become more than just a fleeting hobby.**

**For instance, a young man was raised in one of these "perfect" households. When he goes off to college he quickly discovers that alcohol relieves the pressure of striving for high grades and the constant attempt to do well and make his parents proud. His alcohol consumption escalates and eventually becomes a dominant part of his personality. His grades begin to slip, his near perfect legal record begins to be challenged through multiple DUI (Driving Under the Influence) convictions and he stops taking care of his physical body. What began as a way to ease the pressure of needing to be perfect becomes a rebellious way of trying to feel bad and out of control. This individual feels good being bad.**

### **3. Self-punishment**

**We all do things in life that we wish we could take back. This could be a minor incident like cheating on a test in school or a significant life-changing event like killing someone while you were driving drunk. While these events in and of themselves do not cause us to sabotage our lives, what we do afterwards might be the catalyst for sabotage.**

**For instance, if you did something that hurt or killed another person you might still be holding yourself to blame and cannot forgive yourself for your bad deed. This unwillingness to forgive and move on might create self-destructive behaviors that you see as punishing yourself for your past actions.**

**The act of self-punishment for past actions can significantly harm your life. No matter how wealthy or educated you might be, these self-inflicted persecutions could be destroying you. You might drink alcohol to excess to punish yourself. You might emotionally flog yourself by remaining in a state of depression or despair. You cannot seem to let go and forgive yourself and your actions are a way of punishing yourself for what you believe you need.**

### **4. Punishment of Others**

**Imagine being raised in a household where you were besieged by rules and regulations. There might have been very little freedom to explore the world on your own. Every moment was controlled and you had to account for all of your actions.**

**It is common for someone who was raised in this environment to want to get back at or punish someone who held a tight leash on his world. Sabotage might occur when this person decides to begin deliberately failing in life's endeavors. For instance, this individual soon realizes that the sense of identity for his parents is derived from how good and high-achieving their children might be. The child deliberately will stop trying in school or just gives up when his grades are concerned, thus symbolically hurting his parents.**

**Sometimes major abuse issues by a parent or relative might cause a child to look for revenge and punishment down the road.**

**However, sabotage and punishment of another does not have to derive from major life events. What might seem like a minor and insignificant scolding or punishment by the parent could be the catalyst for a deep-rooted resentment by the child.**

**For instance, a parent might deny his ten year old play time with friends on a Friday night when things are busy and hectic. The child might stew in his bedroom feeling punished and victimized. In his mind he concocts an elaborate life theme about how he is going to “get back at” his parents for the pain they have inflicted upon him. Over time he continues to enact this sabotage behavior as retribution for past “sins” of the parents. This behavior might be failing in school, having issues with authority or under-age drinking.**

**As this pattern begins to grow, the only way the child knows how to hurt or distance himself from the over-controlling parent is to fail and make the parent look bad in the eyes of society. This is the child's attempt to harm the adult as much as the child feels he or she is being harmed by the excessive control. As the pattern grows, the child now is seen as a "loser" in school and in life as he fails to achieve the high levels of success that were expected of him.**

### **5. Negative Attention**

**Look no further than the animal world to realize how we are affected by the type of attention we receive. If you were to take the world of dogs for instance, you would see this formula in action. When you continually praise a dog for its good behavior you reinforce positive traits you wish the dog to repeat. You will see your constant attention pay off as the dog becomes trained to act according to your wishes.**

**If you neglect enough of this positive attention you might begin to notice your animals acting out in a negative manner. A dog might relieve himself on the living room carpet because he feels neglected and does not feel seen or heard. Your dog might tear up your couch pillows when you are out of the house because he knows this will upset you. Your dog has learned that if he is not getting the positive attention he desires he will provide some negative attention to satisfy his needs.**

**We are no different than our animals. If a child is feeling neglected in the family or has been labeled as the "black sheep," he will act out in a negative way to feel heard. This is especially true if he were raised in a family with one of the children being the "favorite" or the hero in the family. He has no chance of gaining “most favorite” status so he engages in negative behavior to get his parent's attention.**

**This negative attention pattern might go on to become a lifestyle and now it looks like he is sabotaging his life. He might engage in sabotage behavior like hanging out with the wrong crowds, over-spending money or entering into the world of drug and alcohol abuse. If he were raised in a family that promoted healthy eating and**

**exercise he might be the one family member who has turned to smoking cigarettes and who does not watch his diet. Without consciously remembering when or how this behavior began, he is still acting out in a negative manner and creating sabotage in his life. He still believes that this is the only way for him to get his attention needs met. Drama and chaos often become his normal reference point as this behavior pattern continues.**

### **6. Stuck in Physical Trauma**

**Long-standing physical pain is also a reason why we sabotage our lives. Take for instance the life of a former football player. After he retires from competitive sports he is still hobbled by many old injuries and repeated surgeries. Concussions and head trauma still plague him daily. He lives in near-constant pain and has a steady supply of pain killers to help him ease his way through the day. These pain killers continue to escalate as the more he takes the less effective they become, thus increasing his need for more. In addition, the pain killers fog his brain and prevent him from having a normal life. There are many stories of former athletes whose lives were turned upside down when their medication use reached epic levels. Nobody could understand how much pain they were in that would cause them to engage in such behavior.**

**Unfortunately you do not have to be a retired football player to experience this level of sabotage in your life. A car accident many years ago might have left you with a whiplash that has never gone away. You continue to medicate yourself to excess just to manage your life. The side-effects from the drugs continue to create other health issues. People often ask why you are still taking pain killers. Little do they realize though is that you are in some kind of pain or discomfort every day.**

**Migraine headaches, back pain or other physical maladies might cause you to sabotage your life as you are looking for a way to mask your physical pain. Prescription drugs, street drugs, smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol often seem like the logical choices. People most frequently engage in alcohol and drug addicted behavior because of pain they are desperately attempting to eliminate. However, as the drug or alcohol use escalates your world often falls apart beneath you. We often try to demonize the drug being used as a mask without attempting to understand the underlying pain one is experiencing.**

### **7. Stuck in Emotional Trauma**

**Our emotional reality can often be equated to a computer. Imagine all the software programs that might be running in the background of a computer, ultimately slowing its speed down. We are like that. Every emotional experience that has not completed itself in**

**your life might still be engaged and turned on, ultimately draining your “life force.”**

**For instance, you might have been divorced for over fifteen years but you have never gotten over your anger and bitterness. This emotional repression has kept you in a state of frozenness. Hence, you might engage in behavior that appears to be sabotage behavior, all to mask the emotional pain that you have yet to move through. You might drink to excess or over eat all in an attempt to cover up your emotional pain. You might become a chain smoker to medicate yourself from the flashbacks of war.**

**A common expression often heard is "PTSD" (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). You do not have to have experienced war to suffer from PTSD. Any event, from a car crash to an ugly divorce, might have left you in a state of shock and repression. As you continue to hold your emotions inside you begin to create behaviors to cover up these emotions. These behaviors are the sabotage in your life because you have been unwilling or unable to face your emotional reality.**

**Any unfinished emotional experience can cause a reaction in us to cover up or repress those emotions. This act of repression might be the root of your sabotage. As the sabotage behavior grows and becomes more and more normal, you might have even forgotten where or how it began. You are now stuck in a behavior without understanding its origin.**

### **8. Frustration**

**We all have dreams, desires and goals. What often happens is that we take a risk and reach for a goal only to be thwarted or pushed back. Our dream is never realized and we often find ourselves in a state of frustration as if we were banging our heads against a wall.**

**There is a big difference between a rat and a human being. Imagine if you put a rat in a maze and let it try to find its way to the end where the cheese ball was placed. The rat would bump into the wall many times. However, this would not deter it from its goals. Eventually the rat would find its way to the cheese. Human beings often bump into roadblocks along their dream journeys and give up quickly, only to find someone or something to blame (book: *Who Moved My Cheese*).**

**When you are in a state of frustration you might look for ways to sabotage your life. You tell yourself that things just did not work out. You took risks and failed and it is time to drink away your sorrows or drown yourself in self-pity. When someone is stuck in frustration they often give up trying to improve things. Lack of will or motivation often persists.**

**A person who remains in a state of frustration will often live a life of sabotage. Perhaps a teenager becomes frustrated with trying to learn math in school. He does not seem to easily comprehend it while all of his classmates seem to have an easy time with the subject. He**

feels lost as if he is falling behind and will never catch up. He might begin smoking marijuana to medicate himself from the frustration that seems like a dark hole. This behavior continues until he flunks out of school, completely sabotaging his education.

### **9. Curiosity**

Some people are just born curious about the many aspects of life. This could include the most positive and socially acceptable endeavors like how to paint like a master or how to write like a professional. This curiosity could also lead you down the road of shadow lives.

For instance, Joe grew up in a well-to-do family. He attended college, got a good degree and followed all of the rules of society. However, he felt like something was missing for him in his life. Joe felt controlled and contained by a puritanical and repressive culture. Joe wanted more out of life. He wanted to understand his dark side and his shadow personality.

Following this course he first bought a motorcycle and joined a motorcycle club of professionals whom he would ride with during the weekends. This was breaking his family patterns of a neat and clean persona. He then engaged in some of the club's regular activities, like drinking and gambling. The group would have long party weekends where lots of alcohol was served and continuous card games were played with lots of money changing hands.

Joe was aware of the choices he was making. His curiosity about the world of motorcycle clubs, alcohol and gambling kept him excited and engaged. Soon however, he was in over his head. Joe began to lose money in the card games and became indebted. He was now draining his savings account to pay off his debts. His drinking and card playing had reached a level where he was no longer curious about this alternative lifestyle. He was now in a place where he was sabotaging his good name and reputation.

While curiosity and excitement propelled him into the game he was now out of control and sabotaging his life. It was difficult for him to get out because he had forgotten how he began this journey in the first place. While curiosity about a shadow life was his starting point, he quickly forgot about why he made the choices he had made and his new lifestyle patterns took over.

Many people often explore their shadows or socially taboo fetishes out of curiosity. When you enter into the darker side of life you often do so out of curiosity but it sometimes takes on a life of its own and ends up in full blown sabotage.

### **10. Shame: I don't deserve to be successful**

Shame is a very strong belief. This belief is often instilled in us from an early age. Essentially shame teaches us that we are not important and do not deserve to be successful or put ourselves first.

**Shame is an internalized belief that there is something inherently wrong with us and that we do not belong here.**

**Once shame has taken hold of one's personality it is often very difficult to strive for success and stay out of sabotage. It is believed that success is for those others and not for us. Our lot in life is to suffer and just get by. We do not strive for greatness or have any high ambitions.**

**With shame at the helm one does not even begin the journey of taking risks or moving outside of one's comfort zone. You are always holding back from success by not even trying. One expects to fail at any risk-taking and if success were to happen it would be by accident. You are in a constant state of sabotage because you believe that you do not deserve to be successful.**

**Shame becomes the ball and chain wrapped around your ankle as it constantly weighs you down. A person who is mired in shame will always find a way to fail. Failure is normal and easy for him. By failing in his life he is fulfilling the belief that he does not deserve to succeed. He is unlikely to even be aware of why he is making the choices that he is making to create a life of sabotage.**

### ***11. Reward for Our Suffering***

**Sometimes our lives are filled with duties. You might have a long list of the responsibilities that you have undertaken in your life that seem like they will never end. You might be taking care of a sick parent, rescuing stray animals and are politically active in your community. As your sense of duty fills your life you might need an outlet for relief. This outlet might then become the sabotage in your life.**

**For instance, you now become a shopping addict. You are so burdened by all your responsibilities and inability to say "no" that you use shopping as an escape from the enormous amount of mental pressure that you are under. You shop on the internet constantly. You visit every garage sale you can find. You shop on television shopping channels. There is no end in sight. You buy things that you do not even need just for the pleasure of shopping. As this behavior continues you begin to sabotage your finances as the economic hit has taken its toll.**

**You might have to borrow money to pay off your debts and to keep your shopping addiction going. You have sabotaged your good credit as your credit rating has plummeted. As this behavior continues you are now in full blown sabotage. Your inner dialog continues to inform you though that you are just rewarding yourself for all the suffering that you are experiencing by rescuing others.**

**Diets often are sabotaged in the same manner. One believes that he has been a "saint" during the day with all his good behavior and strict obedience to following all of society's rules. At night he allows himself to become a "sinner" and break the rules while indulging in**

sweets or other “naughty” behavior. Over-controlled behavior on one hand often leads to out of control behavior on the other hand.

### **12. Role Models**

Our lives are often influenced by the surroundings that shape us. These influences might be parents, siblings, teachers, friends or others. We witness the behavior of others and this often becomes a normal investment in our future.

Sometimes our role models offer us positive inspiration. We might observe how an older brother has excelled in sports and we decide that we want to be like him. Your mother might have been a great musician and this led you to fancy the world of music.

Your role models might also create images of sabotage that you grab onto and embrace for your own life. If your parents both smoked cigarettes then you might embrace this behavior and take it on for yourself. Your health begins to fail after many years of smoking. You just accept this as a normal family trait.

An uncle might be a car thief and this sounds like something exciting to you. You hear about his adventures in the underworld of stealing cars and you decide that this is a behavior you wish to emulate. Soon you are in and out of jail as you sabotage your life because you embraced a negative role model in your life.

Role models can set the stage for a positive and rewarding life. Role models can also cause us to sabotage our lives for a life of danger, crime or ill-health.

### **13. A Way Out**

If we do not know how to resolve a conflict we often create a sabotage situation to resolve the situation. For example, if you were eight-years old and the school bully had threatened to beat you up then you might develop a stomach ache or other illness so you will not have to attend school. The stomach ache is real and is a body/mind response to looking for a solution to your dilemma.

Any internal or external conflict may cause you to look for sabotage as a solution. How often do you see a professional athlete who is struggling come down with an injury to sideline him? Isn't the timing just a little coincidental? Now we cannot blame him for his poor performance but must see him as hobbled by an injury and it is not his fault. Is this a coincidence or not?

Athletes often use sabotage as a method for resolving conflict. For instance, if a player is unhappy with his salary or other team issues his performance might suffer. Secretly he wants to be traded or have his salary enhanced for his performance. While not actively saying so verbally his performance on the field has said enough. A player on a team might also sabotage his performance by not being in congruence with his higher good. For instance, if this player were moved to a new position or order that he is not comfortable with he

might find himself coming down with an injury to sideline him. While the injury might be real, the cause is his mind sabotaging him.

An old adage says that athletes need to leave their personal issues off the court or field and the playing atmosphere is all that matters. There could be nothing farther than the truth here. Most commonly, athletes of all levels are still besieged by their personal issues on and off the field of play. If they have not resolved the conflict before they engage in the athletic competition sabotage will often take over and one's athletic performance most certainly will suffer.

Sabotage is often a significant strategy in our lives to resolve conflicts. If we cannot resolve the conflict head-on then we often find a remedy in sabotage.

#### **14. The Perfectionist Personality: Why Even Start?**

There are some people who have developed a perfectionist personality where they believe that they must be good at everything they undertake or they are somehow a failure. They are often very driven and achievement addicted people. They have long resumes, lots of credentials, a multitude of certificates adorning their walls and a room full of trophies. In essence, they cannot stop achieving even if they wanted to.

The down side to this personality is that if this individual does not believe that they can be the best at something in their original assessment of it then they will not even try. They will give up without any effort to climb the ladder of success. This pattern of giving up before even making an attempt will show up as sabotage.

A perfectionist will demonstrate sabotage when invited to begin a new project or skill but will quickly abandon it if they do not feel that success will happen quickly. The pressure to be good at something is so intense that often sabotage will occur at the very beginning.

#### **Conclusion**

While some wish to blame our sabotaged lives on our biology, DNA or lowered serotonin levels in our brains, this is seldom the case. Sabotage occurs rather frequently for all of us. Sabotage is a normal part of our lives as we can witness from the well-regarded professional to the down-and-out homeless person.

Why isn't more being done to reduce sabotage in our lives? Why do we not teach our children to think positively and hopefully in classrooms and at home instead of the endless tasks of memorizing and regurgitating empty material? Why are there not thought specialists in prisons helping the prisoners to understand their sabotage behavior and learn to correct it? Why are we not actively engaged in helping sick people restore their health by teaching them to eliminate the negative thought choices that often lead to illness? Why don't all athletic teams from the youngest to the most

**professional employ a mind coach to help players perform at peak levels and stay out of sabotage? Based on our current trends, we do not really want sick people to get well, children to grow up empowered, athletes to have peak performances or prisoners to be rehabilitated.**

**However, once you can discover the roots of your sabotage you have a better chance of changing your beliefs and your behavior. You get more of what you think about. If you spend your life looking for ways to fail you will get more of that. You are now resistant to success. If you spend your life looking for ways to be successful you will get more of that. However, not being aware of why you are making the choices you are making will only compound the problem. Sabotage is real, it is normal but it does not have to be forever.**

## **Resources**

***Who Moved My Cheese?*, Spencer Johnson, M.D.**

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