

When Shame Pulls The Strings

Understanding and Healing the
Hidden Cause of Self-Sabotage

NOT ENOUGH
NEVER GOOD
ALWAYS
FALLING SHORT
NOT WORTHY
DON'T BELONG
FAILURE
BE PERFECT



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Introduction

Most people do not consciously decide to sabotage their happiness, relationships, health, or success. They do not wake up intending to procrastinate, abandon their goals, reject healthy opportunities, remain in harmful situations, or repeat behaviours that continually create disappointment. Yet many people find themselves doing exactly that. They know what they want, understand what they should do, and may even create a detailed plan for moving forward - only to retreat when progress begins to feel possible.

*This is the painful contradiction of self-sabotage:
consciously, we want to move forward, but emotionally,
something keeps pulling us back.*

Self-sabotaging behaviour is often misunderstood as laziness, weakness, poor discipline, or a lack of motivation. However, beneath many of these behaviours is something far more complex. Self-sabotage can be an unconscious form of protection. The behaviour may be harmful in the present, but it may have originated as an attempt to avoid rejection, criticism, disappointment, abandonment, exposure, or emotional pain.

At the centre of many self-sabotaging patterns is shame.

Guilt says, "I did something wrong." Shame says, "There is something wrong with me." Guilt focuses on an action that can be acknowledged, corrected, or forgiven. Shame attaches the action - or someone else's treatment of us - to our identity. It convinces us that we are defective, unworthy, unwanted, incapable, or undeserving of love and success.

Shame often begins before we have the emotional maturity to understand what is happening around us. A child who is criticized, neglected, rejected, compared, controlled, humiliated, abused, or

made responsible for the emotions of others cannot easily recognize that the adults or circumstances around them may be unhealthy. Instead, the child may conclude, "This is happening because of me. I must be the problem."

These conclusions can become emotional beliefs that follow us into adulthood. Even when our circumstances change, the shame may remain. It can influence what we expect from others, what we believe we deserve, and how much happiness or success we allow ourselves to experience.

When an opportunity challenges a shame-based belief, the nervous system may interpret that opportunity as unfamiliar or unsafe. A person who secretly believes they are incapable may procrastinate when given an opportunity to succeed. Someone who feels unworthy of love may withdraw from a healthy relationship or repeatedly choose emotionally unavailable partners. A person who learned that mistakes lead to humiliation may become so perfectionistic that they never finish what they start.

*In each case, self-sabotage protects the familiar identity,
even when that identity is painful.*

This does not mean that every harmful choice is caused by shame, nor does it remove personal responsibility. Understanding the origin of a behaviour is not the same as excusing it. Awareness allows us to take responsibility without continuing to punish ourselves. We cannot change what we refuse to acknowledge, but we also cannot heal what we continually condemn.

Breaking the cycle requires more than positive thinking or willpower. It requires us to become curious about the feelings beneath our behaviour. Instead of asking, "What is wrong with me?" we can begin asking, "What am I protecting myself from?" "What do I believe might happen if I succeed?" "Whose voice am I hearing when I criticize myself?" "What shame am I carrying that may never have belonged to me?"

Healing begins when shame is brought into the light. It grows through self-compassion, emotional awareness, safe relationships, honest reflection, healthy boundaries, and repeated experiences that challenge the old belief that we are unworthy. When necessary, therapy or trauma-informed support can provide a safe environment in which deeply rooted shame can be understood and released.

As shame begins to heal, self-sabotage becomes less necessary. We no longer need procrastination to protect us from being judged, perfectionism to earn acceptance, people-pleasing to prevent rejection, or isolation to avoid being hurt. We can begin making decisions based on who we are becoming rather than what we once endured.

The purpose of this book is not to blame the past or shame you for the ways you learned to survive it. It is to help you understand why certain patterns developed, recognize how they continue to affect your life, and replace them with behaviours grounded in self-worth rather than fear.

You are not your shame. You are not your mistakes, missed opportunities, abandoned goals, or painful patterns. Self-sabotage may be something you learned, but it is not who you are. What was learned for protection can be understood, challenged, healed, and eventually replaced.

The moment you stop treating yourself as the enemy is the moment you can begin becoming your own ally.
