



“Did your partner change into someone you like less, or did you change?”

Steven Stosny, Ph.D.

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Addiction: The Long Slide

"I did all the things I wasn't supposed to do"

By Adi Jaffe, published on September 06, 2011 - last review ed on February 28, 2013

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Self-sabotage is not an act, it's a process, a complex, tragic process that pits people against their own thoughts and impulses. Though we all make mistakes, a true self-saboteur continues to try to fix those mistakes by top-loading them with increasingly bad decisions.

Addicts, for example, present a parade of excuses and delusional thinking while avoiding the painful, decisive action necessary to set their lives right. All too often we hear

stories of talented individuals who, despite much potential, allowed drugs and alcohol to drag them down. For some, this is fodder for celebrity gossip and tabloid junk. For me, it's the story of my life.

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I have spent the last 10 years studying the effects of drug addiction on the brain. But I was a self-saboteur who spent much of his life before this battling drug addiction. My upper-middle-class childhood was hardly rough. I was a well-liked kid who smiled a lot, but inside I had the feeling that I didn't quite fit in. This feeling, along with my innate impulsivity and hyperactivity (which would most likely have been diagnosed today as ADHD), began to manifest itself through class clowning, borderline-dangerous roughhousing, and playing around with knives. I was hoping that by making a lot of noise and getting noticed, I'd end up better-liked.

I was 14 years old and at summer camp when I had my first experience with alcohol. I'd never seen people my age drinking before, but I wanted to fit in. I got completely blitzed, felt amazing, and learned that I could erase my social anxiety with alcohol. Masking my negative feelings with a temporary solution that would lead down a dark path? Hello self-sabotage, my name is Adi.

From age 16 to about 20, I was a daily drinker and marijuana smoker. While they did an adequate job of keeping my social anxiety under control, I didn't realize how I had inadvertently narrowed my social circle to the other "druggie" people who wanted to pursue constant intoxication as much as I did. I continued to quick-fix my life away, compensating for the

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guilt of being too wasted to study or attend school by getting wasted or stoned yet again. By the time I landed on academic probation, self-sabotage was an old friend.

It's all about doing things that are bad for you and telling yourself you're actually improving things—even as the evidence piles up around you. It isn't about making a single mistake but rather a world-perception so inherently skewed that you can't see the destruction of your own choices. For me, that meant clinging to the idea that I needed drugs and alcohol to fit in and feel cool, even as many of the people I started out trying to impress were driven away by my behavior. Ultimately, my perception of my own choices was so warped that it would take me from the relative mundanity of being a stoner burnout to something far darker.

At 18, I was arrested for shoplifting in the upstate New York town where I was attending college. A normal kid without a pattern of self-sabotage might have been forced to admit the incident to his parents. I was unwilling to deal with the castigation I was sure to receive. The thought occurred that as a legal adult, I could hire my own lawyer and hide the incident from my parents. Of course, I didn't have the \$500 for a lawyer—so I started selling marijuana to pay the fee. Yet again, a mistake bigger than the problem it was supposed to solve.

Over the next five years, alcohol and marijuana gave way to ecstasy and meth. Selling dime-bags of marijuana morphed into five- and six-figure drug deals involving shady cartel characters. I moved to Los Angeles, telling myself that I was going to become a musician, but I focused almost exclusively on using and selling drugs. The lifestyle was inherently dangerous, but all I could think about was the money, the parties, the luxuries. I was barely making music, but I was selling drugs throughout the music world, and I was able to tell myself that this was a step in the right direction. Even when an armed SWAT team kicked down my door and dragged me to jail to face 13 felony counts and the possibility of decades in prison, my self-sabotage was such that I wasn't sure exactly what I had done wrong.

What I couldn't have known until spending the better part of a decade studying psychology and neuroscience is just how perfectly I fit the classic profile of a kid with poor impulse control. Most people are naturally equipped to filter the constant electrochemical firing going on throughout their brains. When "normal" people feel the compulsion to do something they're not supposed to do—say, run a red light—their control mechanisms go to work. Actions, comments, and momentary impulses that aren't meant to see the light of day stay secretly locked inside forever. This happens largely on a subconscious level, without the person realizing that their brain has automatically filtered out a dangerous or stupid impulse.

For me, that type of control requires conscious deliberation, exactly the kind of effort lacking in my past because I did not realize, and had not been taught, that I would have to think so hard about those things. In other words, my self-sabotage came not because I didn't do the things I was supposed to do but because I never learned to stop myself from doing the things I wasn't supposed to do.

It took a failed stint in rehab and near-homelessness to get me to realize that what I had been doing wasn't working for me. As I sat on the phone with my father, prepared to lie yet again about why I needed to transfer to another rehab facility, he asked me the ultimate question point-blank: "You keep messing this up; what do you want us to do?"

Finally, it dawned on me: My life was no one else's responsibility. Rebelling against my parents or society was really just a way of making my life one giant reaction to other people. I told my father that I needed to take care of my own mess. It was the first step back to my life today. I soon discovered that just as self-sabotage is a process, so is self-reclamation.

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Killer Comebacks

Sometimes stunning self-defeats are followed, in time, by self-redemption. Here are some notable second acts.

- **Mark Twain**

Despite his literary wit, Twain was far less sharp with money. With earnings from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), he lived extravagantly and poured millions into developing a mechanical typesetter. Unfortunately, it was overtaken by newer technology. Bankruptcy followed. To pay back his creditors, he embarked on a world speaking tour—becoming the earth's first celebrity writer.

- **Winston Churchill**

After winning acclaim as a politician, military leader, and writer in his 20s, Churchill saw World War I coming and readied England. But a 1915 naval battle he orchestrated proved a disaster, and he was stripped of power and personally crushed. Eventually re-elected to Parliament, he was jeered for warning about Germany's rise. But once WWII started, he was made prime minister and is beloved for sustaining Brits with "blood, sweat, and tears" during very dark years.

- **Martha Stewart**

In 2004, Stewart was convicted of securities fraud and obstruction of justice. Predictions about the future of her own media empire, so dependent on her image, were gloomy. Yet, within a year after her 2005 prison release, her company, Omnimedia, was profitable and she resumed her perch as America's domestic goddess.

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