



## Coffee with Caroline - Scrutinising self-sabotage

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### Abstract

For Issue 5, Dr Caroline Topham, Lecturer in Biomedical Science at the University of Salford, was in conversation with Laiba Usman, where they discussed the theme of “self-sabotage”. Dr Topham has previously hosted ‘Coffee with Caroline’ drop-in sessions for students to discuss their wellbeing. In this article, Caroline answers some of your submitted queries presented by Laiba. Do you have more? Email [c.h.topham@salford.ac.uk](mailto:c.h.topham@salford.ac.uk).

### How to deal with a person who ruins the relationship by self-sabotaging without realising?

Sometimes we notice patterns of behaviour in the people close to us that seem to be unhelpful, or even harmful. This can include how someone is behaving in relationship to us, or to themselves. If it feels important to confront someone about this, I believe it’s vital to keep in mind that nothing you can say or do is going to change someone’s behaviour, they have to do that themselves and they have to WANT to do it! However, what we can do is bring things into their awareness that they may not consciously know, so they have more information about themselves and their impact on others. This may be enough to inspire a change in behaviour, but it may not.

My top tip for talking to people about behaviours that we are finding hurtful is to keep the focus on yourself by using ‘I’ statements instead of ‘you’ statements. This can help to reduce a defensive reaction in the other person. It can also be helpful to request the behaviours you would like to experience from them instead of the ones you are currently experiencing e.g. ‘I feel like you don’t care about me when you are late to meet me, please can you be on time instead?’ is more likely to start a constructive conversation than ‘You’re always late to meet me’.

### What stops us from trying to stop our self-sabotage?

There are a few steps in the process of changing our self-sabotaging behaviours, and sometimes just knowing that we are doing it isn’t enough for us to change. If you’ve noticed a pattern of behaviour in yourself that you are finding hard to change, be curious about the emotions that come up in that situation, some examples include fear of failure, anxiety about your performance, or anger. Your challenge then is to examine the beliefs you hold that underlie those fears; are they valid or can you let go of them? You might be able to do this by having honest conversations with friends and family members you trust, or you might need the support of a counsellor or psychotherapist. For more practical advice on over-coming self-sabotage see this helpful [resource](#).

### How do you recognise signs of self-sabotage in your own behaviour?

My advice would be to notice patterns of behaviour in yourself that you find frustrating, or which often cause you stress. For example, do you usually start assessments a day or two before the deadline, resulting in a very stressful couple of days and possibly sleepless nights? Does this prevent you from doing your best work and getting high grades and so feeds your false belief that you're not really smart enough to succeed? This is an example of how we subconsciously reinforce our negative beliefs about ourselves using self-sabotage. Working on improving your self-esteem around your intelligence and your capacity to succeed could be the way to end this self-sabotaging behaviour.

Another example could be that when you become anxious about something, you hide your feelings and pretend that you are fine, which leads to you feeling isolated and more anxious. Perhaps subconsciously you believe that your feelings are not important, and no-one has time to listen to you, so you must hide them. In fact, it's very likely that you have people in your life who want to support you, and that sharing with them your feelings of anxiety may help to relieve them, instead of making them worse by hiding them. Questioning this belief may help you to realise that you are sabotaging yourself by hiding these feelings.

### **How do external factors contribute to or mitigate self-sabotage tendencies?**

This is a great question! We don't exist in isolation as human beings, we are constantly influenced by our external environments which includes the events happening in our personal lives as well as what is happening in our wider society, and the world in general. Systemic structures of oppression and discrimination also influence our beliefs about ourselves and our cultures. Having curiosity about yourself and the beliefs you hold about yourself is a great skill to cultivate and can lead to some really interesting, and sometimes challenging, conversations with friends and family.

What negative self-talk do you have that may be based on false beliefs about yourself? What have you been told about yourself that actually doesn't actually apply to you, and that you can let go? For example, perhaps in your family the narrative is that your sibling is the clever one and you are the sporty one, and so you have low expectations for yourself around your academic performance. Ask yourself, is this really true for you? What does 'clever' mean in this context? Can you not be both 'clever' and sporty at the same time? Questioning these ideas can be a great way to get to know yourself better.

### **In what ways can individuals create an environment that minimizes the likelihood of self-sabotage in their personal and professional lives?**

Again, a really great question. We are more likely to move into self-sabotaging behaviours when we are not aware of them, so the best way to create an environment to minimize these behaviours is to get to know yourself. Really get to know yourself, warts and all! In the therapy world this is often called 'Shadow Work' and involves getting to know the parts of yourself that you repress or would prefer not to acknowledge. Ask people you trust what they notice about your patterns of behaviour that you may not notice yourself. We all have a 'shadow self' and it can be uncomfortable work but ultimately the more knowledge you have about yourself, the better equipped you are to make good decisions for yourself.