

step 2

‘I did it again last week,’ says Kate (single, 37, successful advertising account director). ‘I got really motivated and decided to go to a dance class to have some fun and meet new people. Wednesday came and I found myself stuck in front of the mirror trying on endless outfits. I felt ugly in everything. By 8.30pm I’d missed the class and ended up staying in. Why? Why do I do this? It’s as if a part of me doesn’t believe I should be happy.’

‘What Kate’s struggling with is a recurrent case of self-sabotage,’ explains Tim Laurence, director of the Hoffman Process in the UK. ‘The word sabotage comes from the French industrial revolution. Frustrated by the way the world was changing, the peasants literally clogged up the new machinery by throwing in their “sabots” or wooden shoes. And that’s how we can feel when we sabotage our best-laid plans: clogged up.’

So where do our sabotaging messages come from? Laurence says they are messages we learned in childhood. John, 50, describes a persistent destructive message he’s struggled with all his life: ‘I’ve ended up in a job that makes me feel stifled. Trouble is, I’ve been doing this for nearly 30 years. As a teenager I wanted to work in music, maybe even set up a recording studio of my own. But it all feels pointless now. Every time I think about changing, I just hear this little voice “what if you fail?” Of course, the result is exactly what I fear – I have failed, failed to have a life.’

John joined the Hoffman Process eight-day therapeutic programme, and spent part of the week examining his childhood. ‘As a kid it felt

as though nothing I did was ever good enough for my father. After a while, I gave up trying. I was still carrying this bunch of negative messages inside me like some nasty echo. Now that I can recognise it, I can see it for what it is.’

‘In a sense, the saboteur traps us in the past,’ Laurence concludes. ‘Most of the conditioning and pain we live out is passed from grandfather to father, father to son. With the best of intentions, parents pass on what they inherited. However, once we have emotional understanding about where the negative messages came from, then we can begin to break the cycle.’

One theory suggests we may have an inbuilt element of self-sabotage. It’s not just that we aren’t happy and positive all the time, it’s that some part of us seems to be actively kicking against it. Adam Phillips, psychoanalyst and author of *Going Sane* (£14.99, Hamish Hamilton) says: ‘Freudian psychoanalysis suggests there are parts of ourselves that don’t want to live, that hate our children, that want us to fail.’

For some people, certainly, failure is far easier to handle than

Your fear of success may be:

- **A FEAR** that you will be able to accomplish all you set out to do, but that you still won’t be satisfied.
- **A BELIEF** that you are deserving of neither reward nor recognition.
- **A FEAR** that you won’t be able to sustain your progress.
- **A BELIEF** that no matter how much you accomplish, it is never going to be enough.

How can you overcome this type of self-sabotage?

- Honestly appraise your level of achievement, your successes and your accomplishments.
- Invite and learn to deal well with honest feedback.
- Don’t be afraid to accept compliments and recognition from others.

Overcome self-sabotage

What’s stopping you from doing what you want? Take a look in the mirror, says Nina McAdam – too often it’s ourselves



CLOTHES: BLUE JUMPER, AGNES B; CREAM TROUSERS, MODELS' OWN

success. Psychiatrist Christophe Fauré says: ‘We have to take on board our guilt with regard to loved ones who haven’t done quite as well. Some of us would prefer to sabotage ourselves by failing than experience that guilt. We might also dread the loneliness or exclusion that goes with success, especially if others are jealous or resentful.’

The particular mechanism that you use to keep yourself stuck in this detrimental cycle will depend

on your personality. Psychoanalyst Jacques Arènes has identified three of the most common traps that lead us to self-sabotage:

● **Brooding:** ‘Some people tend to wallow in misery. They may have suffered as children, and now expect suffering to be their lot.’

‘One of my patients, Marie, said to me, “My mother didn’t love me, and I feel I’ll never be able to find the love I missed out on as a child.” I told her she’d have to live with the

Restrictive fears can mean you never fully venture out to explore the endless possibilities the world has to offer

fact that she didn’t have a happy childhood, because there was no way of getting it back; the important thing is not to let regret define your life. Focus on the parts of life where you are able to flourish.’

● **Blaming yourself:** ‘There are some people who blame themselves for everything. I see it mostly with parents: as soon as there’s a problem with the child, they immediately think it’s all their fault.’

‘If you’re hyper-anxious, you get annoyed with yourself over anything that goes wrong. It can help to get some perspective. Try asking your loved ones to tell you what they think. They will give you another viewpoint and you’ll eventually start to realise that there are more positive ways of seeing life.’

● **Defensiveness:** ‘My client, Evan, was very successful, and from the outside his life looked great, but on the inside, he wasn’t happy. He was incapable of taking any emotional risks. He would set impossibly high standards for women, and when a new girlfriend inevitably fell short of the ideal, he would start to back away and eventually leave.’

‘It turned out that his parents had been very ill when he was a child, and he had to manage by himself. He had done very well professionally, but emotionally he would always push people away so he wouldn’t get hurt again. If you’re defensive, you need to learn to live in the moment – if you sit back and wait for everything to be perfect, life will pass you by.’

Once we recognise the cause of our self-sabotage, we can begin to address what is keeping us stuck. But it’s clear that in order to make progress, rather than focusing on your block, you need to concentrate on how to overcome it.