

# Signs of Self-Sabotage in Relationships

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Self-sabotage in relationships refers to behaviors and thought patterns that undermine the success and stability of intimate connections. These actions often stem from deep-seated fears, past experiences, and unconscious processes. Recognizing these behaviors is crucial for helping individuals build healthier relationships and improve their overall well-being. This handout outlines common signs of self-sabotage and provides examples to help identify these patterns in clients.

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## Partner attack

Partner attack involves a range of aggressive behaviors aimed at criticizing, blaming, or undermining one's partner. These actions often stem from deep-seated insecurities and a fear of vulnerability.

These could include behaviors such as:

- Constant criticism of the partner's appearance, actions, or decisions
- Frequent accusations and blame-shifting
- Intentionally creating conflicts or arguments
- Yelling or raising one's voice during disagreements
- Complaining excessively about the partner or relationship
- Making judgmental comments or disrespecting the partner
- Engaging in name-calling or other forms of verbal aggression
- Acting on revenge or payback motives

**Example:** A client consistently finds fault with their partner's efforts, whether it's cooking dinner, choosing an outfit, or making plans with friends. This constant criticism creates an atmosphere of tension and resentment, slowly eroding the relationship's foundation.

## Partner pursuit

Partner pursuit refers to behaviors that involve excessive clinginess, demands for attention, and constant checking on the partner. These actions typically stem from a fear of abandonment and low self-esteem.

Manifestations include:

- Frequent calls, texts, or messages throughout the day
- Becoming anxious or upset when the partner doesn't respond immediately
- Constantly seeking reassurance about the relationship
- Difficulty spending time apart or engaging in independent activities
- Demanding to know the partner's whereabouts at all times

**Example:** A client becomes visibly distressed when their partner mentions plans with friends. They insist on constant updates throughout the evening and struggle to engage in their own activities while their partner is out.

## Partner withdrawal

Partner withdrawal involves emotionally or physically distancing oneself from the relationship. This behavior can be a defense mechanism to avoid vulnerability or conflict.

This includes the following behaviors:

- Stonewalling or refusing to engage in discussions
- Avoiding conflict at all costs
- Emotionally shutting down during disagreements
- Physical distancing, such as spending more time away from home
- Focusing excessively on work, children, or other responsibilities to avoid intimacy
- Ignoring the partner or their attempts at connection
- Refusing to discuss relationship issues or future plans

**Example:** During an argument, a client completely shuts down, refusing to engage in any discussion or problem-solving. They may leave the room or house or simply sit in silence, leaving their partner feeling frustrated and unheard.

## Defensiveness

Defensive behavior involves deflecting blame, playing the victim, and refusing to take responsibility for one's actions in the relationship. This pattern can severely hinder effective communication and problem-solving.

This commonly involves:

- Immediately countering any criticism with an attack
- Consistently making excuses for one's behavior
- Shifting blame onto the partner or external circumstances
- Refusing to acknowledge one's role in relationship problems
- Responding to concerns with "Yes, but..." statements
- Minimizing or dismissing the partner's feelings
- Portraying oneself as the victim in most situations

**Example:** When a client's partner expresses concern about the client's frequent late nights at work, the client immediately responds by listing all the ways their partner has disappointed them recently, never addressing the actual concern raised.

## Difficulties trusting and jealousy

Trust issues and jealousy can manifest as constant suspicion, invasive checking behaviors, and unfounded accusations of infidelity. These behaviors can create a toxic atmosphere of mistrust in the relationship.

This often includes:

- Regularly accusing the partner of cheating without evidence
- Constantly checking the partner's phone, email, or social media accounts
- Feeling threatened by the partner's friendships or work relationships

- Requiring constant reassurance about the partner's fidelity
- Interpreting innocent interactions as flirtatious or threatening
- Attempting to control the partner's social interactions
- Experiencing intense anxiety when the partner is not immediately reachable

**Example:** A client becomes irrationally upset when their partner mentions a new coworker, immediately assuming there must be a romantic connection. They may demand to see all communications between their partner and this coworker, creating tension and eroding trust in the relationship.

## Destructive behaviors

Destructive behaviors are actions that are harmful to oneself, the partner, or the relationship as a whole. These behaviors often serve as coping mechanisms or ways to avoid dealing with underlying relationship issues.

These behaviors involve the following:

- Excessive alcohol consumption or substance use
- Engaging in emotional or physical affairs
- Overspending or gambling
- Engaging in risky or self-destructive behaviors
- Using work or other commitments to avoid time with the partner
- Withholding affection or intimacy as punishment
- Threatening to end the relationship during arguments

**Example:** A client turns to online shopping sprees whenever they feel disconnected from their partner, racking up credit card debt and creating additional stress in the relationship rather than addressing the root causes of their feelings.

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## Why people self-sabotage in relationships

- **Fear of intimacy:** Some individuals sabotage relationships to avoid getting too close and potentially getting hurt.
- **Low self-esteem:** People who don't feel worthy of love may unconsciously push their partners away.
- **Past trauma:** Unresolved issues from childhood or previous relationships can lead to self-protective behaviors that harm current relationships.
- **Insecure attachment styles:** Individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment may engage in behaviors that push partners away or create constant conflict.
- **Unrealistic expectations:** Some people may have idealized views of relationships, leading to disappointment and self-sabotaging behaviors when reality doesn't match their expectations.
- **Fear of commitment:** The prospect of long-term commitment can trigger self-sabotaging behaviors in some individuals.
- **Difficulty coping with relationship challenges:** Some people may lack the skills to navigate normal relationship difficulties, leading to destructive patterns.

Understanding these signs of self-sabotage and their underlying causes can help in identifying and addressing these patterns in their clients, fostering healthier relationships and overall well-being.

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