

5 habits holding you back -- and how to change them

- by FITNESS Magazine, on Mon Jul 25, 2011 8:21am PDT



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I was meeting my friend Linda at our favorite Brooklyn cafe to discuss a project. "Six, sharp. I'll see you then," I promised. And by 6:15 p.m., there sat Linda, with a cool drink in front of her and steam coming out of her ears. I breezed in at 6:30, full of apologies and excuses. But it was no use: I was late -- again -- and she was furious. She tartly informed me that if I kept her waiting once more, I'd be kicked off the project.

Everyone's got bad habits such as lateness or procrastination. But if you consistently act in ways that cause you to lose face, lose friends, or fail when a goal is within reach, your harmless personality quirks may have morphed into serious self-sabotage. "**A bad habit becomes destructive** when your behavior causes more than momentary regret and leaves you feeling disappointed in yourself," says Pauline Wallin, PhD, author of *Taming Your Inner Brat*.

Why do we derail our own happiness? Experts attribute it to a variety of unconscious beliefs: nagging doubt about whether we really deserve what we're striving for; apprehension that we won't be able to handle increased expectations and responsibilities; even fear that our achievement may isolate us from our peers or family members.

To overcome self-sabotage, you must first identify its origin and then take steps to interrupt the cycle. Here are five ways you might be tripping yourself up, and suggestions for **how to (finally) get out of your own way**.



Fatal Flaw #1: You procrastinate.

Tomorrow is soon enough. Besides, you excel under pressure.

The ugly truth: You're secretly afraid your work won't be perfect and you'll be outed as a fraud. "**Procrastinators** tend to be very concerned about what other people think of them," says Joseph Ferrari, PhD, a professor of psychology at DePaul University in Chicago. "If you worry that you will never perform as well as you have in the past, fear of failure may be halting your progress." Putting off work provides **a ready-made excuse:** Instead of admitting failure, you can always blame your busy schedule and overbooked calendar. "That way, you can tell yourself the project would have been successful if only you'd had more time," Ferrari explains.

The fix: Play the worst-case-scenario game. **The next time your grasp on deadlines starts to slip** -- something even the worst procrastinator can recognize -- take a moment to look inward for the source of your foot dragging. Ask yourself what's the absolute worst that could happen. Then spin the consequences out to their most ludicrous degree: Would your family and friends disown you? Would you end up starving and homeless? Would the cat die? Once you've realized things aren't so awful, you can get past the anxiety and focus on the work, says Ferrari.



Fatal Flaw #2: You shop yourself into bankruptcy.

You deserve to have nice things -- but unfortunately treating yourself can lead to lively early-morning chats with bill collectors and a colorful credit report.

The ugly truth: "**Impulse shopping** is another way to mask negative feelings," explains Dana Lightman, PhD, a behavioral psychologist in Philadelphia. So, like emotional eaters who gorge on ice

cream when they're down, chronic spenders try to numb feelings of boredom, depression, or inadequacy by filling up on stuff. With every shiny new purchase, splurge-aholics tell themselves: Well, okay, so I didn't solve that nagging problem today, but at least I cleaned out the shoe department at Nordstrom. Some people find it easier to decorate their lives in an effort to create the appearance, rather than the substance, of success. Mind you, **there's nothing wrong with a little retail therapy**, but if you're sinking into debt, regularly paying your bills late, and not achieving your financial goals, then it's a problem you literally can't afford.

The fix: Know yourself as well as you know what you own. Carol Leslie, an executive coach in Cleveland, suggests you use a trusty dieters' trick to keep track of the things you normally do without thinking -- like polish off a quart of ice cream. Or, in this case, shop. Attach a small, thin notebook around your wallet with a rubber band so that it can serve as a reminder to write down your feelings whenever you're tempted to mindlessly reach for plastic. Pretty soon you'll begin to recognize what sets you off before you click "Buy Now!" -- and learn to find healthy distractions instead. "**Go for a run**, talk to a friend, see a movie, do anything that will get you out of a shopping mode," says Leslie.

Fatal Flaw #3: You binge when your goal weight is within sight.

You've earned some quality just-us girls time with your old pals Little Debbie, Mrs. Fields, and Sara Lee.



The ugly truth: You may not have been prepared for the male attention **your new body brings**, which can make you feel vulnerable. Or maybe your friends seem jealous of your success, and you're uncomfortable with their scrutiny. Getting down to a healthy weight also means maintaining it, which is a tough task unto itself. Plus, **when things don't go your way** -- you get dumped or you don't get the job you went after -- you can't use your "It's because I'm fat" excuse. "Life often feels simpler without these issues, and it's easier to eat a whole bag of potato chips and retreat to your fatter, safer world," explains Connie Tyne, executive director of the Cooper Wellness Program in Dallas.

The fix: See yourself the way others do. It's hard to stop thinking of yourself as overweight even after the pounds are gone. But improving your self-image can help ease the emotional transition into smaller sizes, says Linda Spangle, RN, author of *100 Days of Weight Loss*. "Enroll in a public-speaking class to build self-esteem and increase your comfort level around people." You can also get a boost by making a list of your greatest attributes, which is what most people notice anyway. "Describe **what you're like at your best**," Spangle suggests. "Maybe you're energetic or you smile a

lot or regale your friends with funny stories. Thinking in terms of confidence and strength makes you act in terms of confidence and strength."



Fatal Flaw #4: You're habitually late.

It's never your fault -- your mom called, the dog got sick, traffic was brutal...

The ugly truth: Being late could be your passive-aggressive way of getting back at those who force you to adhere to their timetable. "**Blaming your tardiness on a hectic schedule** is easier than admitting you're resentful about constraints being placed on your time," says Spangle. Your chronic lateness may also be a sign that you're subconsciously trying to undermine the situation, lash out at a friend or, in the case of work, get fired. If you're late for something that is a big taboo, like a job interview, it may show your ambivalence about whether you really want the gig. "Rather than risk a poor showing in the new position, you ensure that the opportunity never arises," says Rebecca Curtis, PhD, professor of psychology at Adelphi University.

The fix: Make up your mind. Be clear about what you want. "If it's a career issue, ask yourself if your interest in your job is waning," says Kathryn Cramer, PhD, author of *Change the Way You See Everything Through Asset-Based Thinking*. "Being late is a way of disconnecting. This can be a warning that **it's time to take stock and either recommit yourself or make a change.**" **Bonus hint:** Be proactive and adjust your actions or attitude rather than wait to get canned. You're always better off controlling events instead of waiting for them to control you.



Fatal Flaw #5: You pick fights with your partner.

"I can't help it. He used to be great but now he's just driving me crazy."

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The ugly truth: Creating unnecessary drama in your relationship is typically a holdover from childhood, explains James Tobin, PhD, clinical instructor of psychology at Harvard Medical School. While you were growing up, a parent unknowingly may have established conditions for love, and you've unconsciously learned that you have to look a certain way, act in a particular manner, or achieve certain goals before you're deemed worthy. The result: "You end up fearing that just as you're ready to make a commitment, your partner will see your true self and find a reason to not love you," says Tobin.

The fix: Don't jump to conclusions. Maybe your analysis of his behavior is just wrong. For instance, if your boyfriend had to cancel your big night out on the town, that doesn't necessarily mean he wants out of the relationship. Maybe he really did have to work late. Remember, even people who love you get caught up in their own lives. The realization that many things have little or nothing to do with you can mitigate the drama, says Tobin. "It's like changing the rearview mirror in your car. If you rotate it just a little bit, you get **a whole new perspective.**"