

WHY WE HOLD ON TO WHAT HURTS —
AND HOW TO LET GO

Hugging Cacti

A man in a dark jacket and pants stands in a vast, flat, orange landscape, hugging a large, spiny cactus. The cactus is positioned between the man and the large letter 'C' of the title. A long, dark shadow of the cactus and the man is cast across the ground towards the bottom right corner of the image.

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Free Chapters: Introduction + Chapters 1

Introduction

Most people who sabotage themselves are not reckless; they are, instead, simply loyal.

They are faithful to patterns that once protected them; to relationships that once felt necessary; to ways of being that once made emotional survival possible. What looks like self-destruction from the outside is often the continued use of an old strategy—one that worked early in life but lost its utility long ago.

In my work as a psychologist, particularly with individuals struggling with entrenched personality patterns, I have watched this dynamic unfold again and again. People come into treatment frustrated, ashamed, and exhausted by the repetition in their lives. They know *what* they are doing—choosing the wrong partners, stalling at critical moments, undermining their own success, turning against themselves internally—but they cannot understand *why* they keep doing it. To them, it feels impossible to change the pattern. Many are intelligent, psychologically minded, and deeply self-aware, yet insight alone has not freed them.

That confusion is not a failure of willpower; it is a misunderstanding of what self-sabotage is and how its psychological mechanisms run deep.

We tend to think of self-sabotage as a flaw—something irrational, immature, or self-defeating that needs to be eliminated. From that perspective, the solution seems obvious: identify the behavior, challenge the thinking, replace it with something healthier. And while insight and awareness are important, they rarely reach the deeper forces that keep these patterns alive.

Self-sabotage is not primarily a bad habit. It is a loyalty to a way of being that once brought us comfort and psychological safety, and helped make meaning in our lives. Therefore, we keep hugging what hurts because, at some point, it kept us safe.

Imagine hugging a cactus. The pain is immediate and obvious. Anyone watching would tell you to let go. Yet, you don't. Not because you enjoy the pain, but because letting go feels more dangerous. The cactus is familiar. Its thorns are predictable. Somewhere in your nervous system, the pain makes sense.

Self-sabotage works the same way.

What now injures you may once have preserved attachment, protected identity, or helped you endure an environment that offered little room for your needs. Over time, these adaptations hardened into patterns. They became automatic, unquestioned, and deeply entwined with how

you understand yourself and your place in the world. Letting go of them does not feel like improvement; it feels like loss. Sometimes, it can even feel like death.

This is why people can articulate their problems clearly and still repeat them. This is why growth can provoke anxiety rather than relief. This is why success can feel destabilizing, and intimacy can feel dangerous. And this is why shame—so often turned inward as self-attack—becomes one of the most powerful forces keeping self-sabotage intact.

Several psychological theories help us understand these dynamics, but one in particular has proven especially useful in my clinical work: the object relations theory of W.R.D. Fairbairn. Fairbairn understood that when early relationships involve rejection, neglect, or emotional inconsistency, the mind does not simply move on. Instead, it internalizes those experiences. Parts of the self become organized around preserving attachment to what was once necessary, even when it was painful. From this, an internal force develops—one whose job is not to help us flourish, but to prevent us from reaching for what has previously led to disappointment or loss.

In other words, the internal saboteur is not cruel; it is protective.

This book is not an argument against responsibility or change. It is not an invitation to resign yourself to suffering. Rather, it is an attempt to fundamentally reframe how self-sabotage is understood, so that real change becomes possible.

When self-sabotaging patterns go unexamined, they do more than block specific goals. Over time, they can erode clarity about what one even wants. People often arrive in therapy unable to articulate their desires, their ambitions, or their values—not because they lack them, but because those parts of the self have been buried under years of adaptation, compromise, and self-protection. The work, then, is not simply to “stop sabotaging,” but to recover contact with the parts of the self that learned it was safer not to want too much.

As these patterns begin to loosen, something important happens. Goals become clearer. Relationships feel less compulsory and more chosen. Internal attacks soften. A different kind of resilience emerges: not the brittle resilience of endurance, but the grounded resilience of authenticity.

This book will help you recognize how self-sabotage operates in your life, the forms it takes, and the emotional logic that sustains it. It will explore how early relationships shape internal loyalties, how shame organizes behavior, and why letting go of familiar pain can feel profoundly threatening. It will also offer ways of challenging these patterns that go beyond insight alone—approaches that emphasize containment, compassion, and the slow development of new forms of internal loyalty.

However, this is not a book about fixing yourself. Instead, it is a book about understanding why you learned to survive the way you did—and how to stop organizing your life around old injuries that no longer need to be endured.

You have been hugging the cactus for a reason.

The work now is not to punish yourself for that loyalty, but to decide—carefully, compassionately, and honestly—whether it is still serving you.

Chapter One:

The Cactus Effect

Why Intelligent, Capable People Repeatedly Choose What Hurts

Self-sabotage is rarely chaotic.

It is patterned.

People imagine self-sabotage as dramatic or reckless—blowing up relationships, making impulsive decisions, destroying something valuable in a moment of panic. But in practice, it is far more orderly than that. It shows up as repetition. The same kinds of relationships. The same moments of retreat just before success. The same internal voice that undercuts confidence at precisely the wrong time. The same promises to “do it differently next time,” followed by a quiet return to familiar ground.

What makes this especially confusing is that self-sabotage so often occurs in people who are intelligent, reflective, and capable. Many of the individuals I work with are psychologically minded. They can describe their patterns clearly. They can identify their childhood histories, name their attachment styles, and articulate their fears. And yet, despite this awareness, the patterns persist.

This creates a particular kind of shame.

When you understand what you are doing and still cannot stop, it is easy to conclude that something must be deeply wrong with you—that you are weak, defective, or secretly committed to your own suffering. But this conclusion misses something essential. The persistence of self-sabotage is not evidence of failure. It is evidence of loyalty.

To understand this, we need to look more closely at what self-sabotage actually does.

At its core, self-sabotage involves behaviors or internal processes that undermine one's stated goals, values, or well-being. It can take many forms: procrastination that derails important opportunities; perfectionism that prevents completion; chronic self-criticism that erodes confidence; relationships that recreate familiar disappointment; coping strategies that numb pain but create new problems. Sometimes these behaviors are conscious. Often they are not.

What unites them is not recklessness, but function.

Self-sabotage solves a problem.

That problem is rarely obvious in the present. In fact, from an adult perspective, the behavior often makes no sense at all. Why choose partners who cannot show up emotionally? Why stall just before success? Why turn against yourself when things are going well? Why remain stuck in situations that generate frustration, resentment, or despair?

The answer is not that you enjoy pain.

The answer is that pain, when familiar, can feel safer than the unknown.

This is the cactus effect.

It is why, despite the unmistakable pain of hugging the cactus, you don't let go. The pain feels predictable—you know where the thorns are, you know what to expect. Letting go introduces uncertainty. What happens next? What replaces the pain? What if the alternative is worse?

Self-sabotage functions like that cactus. It hurts, but it also stabilizes. It organizes experience and keeps certain fears at bay. It prevents exposure to risks that once felt intolerable—rejection, abandonment, humiliation, loss of control, or emotional collapse. Over time, the nervous system learns that familiar pain is preferable to unfamiliar possibility.

This is why people often sabotage themselves not in moments of distress, but in moments of potential change. Growth destabilizes identity. Success introduces new expectations. Intimacy requires vulnerability. Calm can feel eerily empty. These states may look desirable on the surface, but can internally activate old fears that have nothing to do with the present moment.

From this perspective, self-sabotage is not an enemy attacking from within. It is a guardian standing watch over old injuries.

Consider the person who repeatedly enters relationships with emotionally unavailable partners. On the surface, this looks like poor judgment or low self-esteem. But underneath, there is often a deeper logic at work. Emotional unavailability may feel familiar. It may replicate early experiences in which love was inconsistent, conditional, or withheld. As painful as that dynamic is, it offers the comfort of what is known. A partner who is emotionally present, responsive, and

reliable may evoke a different kind of anxiety—fear of dependency, fear of being seen, fear of eventual loss.

Consider “Anna” (name changed), a successful attorney in her late thirties who came to treatment exhausted by what she called her “terrible taste in men.”

On paper, her life was stable. She was competent, admired at work, and financially secure. Her romantic life, however, followed a precise pattern. She was drawn to men who were emotionally distant, intellectually impressive, and slightly unavailable. At first, the distance felt like intrigue. She told herself she preferred independence. She didn’t want someone clingy. She valued space.

As the relationship progressed, something familiar emerged. She began waiting for messages that didn’t come. Interpreting delays. Analyzing tone. Minimizing her needs so as not to appear “too much.”

She could describe the pattern clearly. She even joked about it with friends. “I always go for the emotionally constipated ones,” she would say. She understood attachment theory and knew the language of avoidant partners and anxious responses.

When a man showed up differently—texted consistently, expressed interest openly, made room for her feelings—she felt uneasy. She described him as “nice but boring.” There was no charge. No intensity. No pull.

What she felt instead was a subtle panic.

“If he really sees me,” she once said in session, “what happens then?”

What Anna was not consciously aware of was that emotional unpredictability felt like home. Her father had been intermittently affectionate and withdrawn. Love had always required calibration: watching for cues, anticipating shifts, trying not to ask for too much.

The anxiety she felt with available partners was not about them. It was about unfamiliar safety and the loss of a structure she knew how to navigate.

The cactus was painful, but it was known.

Anna’s pattern was not a failure of intelligence. It was a loyalty to a structure that once organized love.

Or consider the person who consistently undermines their own success. They work hard, show promise, and then retreat at the moment when recognition or advancement becomes possible. This pattern is often described as fear of failure. But just as often, it is fear of success—fear of

separation from one's past, fear of envy, fear of no longer knowing who one is when struggle is removed. Staying just short of success preserves a familiar identity.

Even the harsh inner critic—the voice that attacks, shames, and undermines—serves a purpose. As brutal as it feels, it often functions as an internal regulator. It keeps expectations low and prevents disappointment. It preemptively delivers the criticism one fears from others. Over time, self-attack can feel safer than self-compassion. Self-compassion opens the door to hope—and hope carries the risk of loss.

Seen this way, self-sabotage is not irrational. It is adaptive—at least initially.

The problem is that adaptations do not automatically update themselves.

What once helped you survive can later prevent you from living fully. Strategies developed in childhood or adolescence may continue to operate long after the environment that required them has changed. The cactus that once provided structure and protection now draws blood. The nervous system does not solely respond to logic—it responds to familiarity, repetition, and emotional memory.

This is why insight alone so often fails. Understanding a pattern does not automatically dissolve it. Knowing that a behavior is self-defeating does not mean the system that relies on it is ready to let go. In fact, insight can sometimes intensify shame - *I know this isn't good for me, so why can't I stop?* - without addressing the deeper attachment to the pattern itself.

The goal of this book is not to convince you to drop the cactus immediately. That would be both unrealistic and unkind. The goal is to understand why you learned to hold on in the first place, what the cactus has been protecting, and what fears are activated when you consider letting go.

Nothing changes until self-sabotage is understood not as a flaw to be eliminated, but as a loyalty to something that once mattered deeply.

As we move forward, we will explore how these loyalties are formed, how they shape identity and relationships, and why they can feel so difficult—sometimes terrifying—to relinquish. Only then can we begin to consider what it means to put the cactus down, not through force or self-attack, but through understanding, containment, and choice.

For now, it is enough to recognize this:

If you keep hurting yourself in familiar ways, it is not because you are broken.
It is because some part of you learned that this was how to survive.

The question is not *what is wrong with you*, but *what has this pain been protecting*.