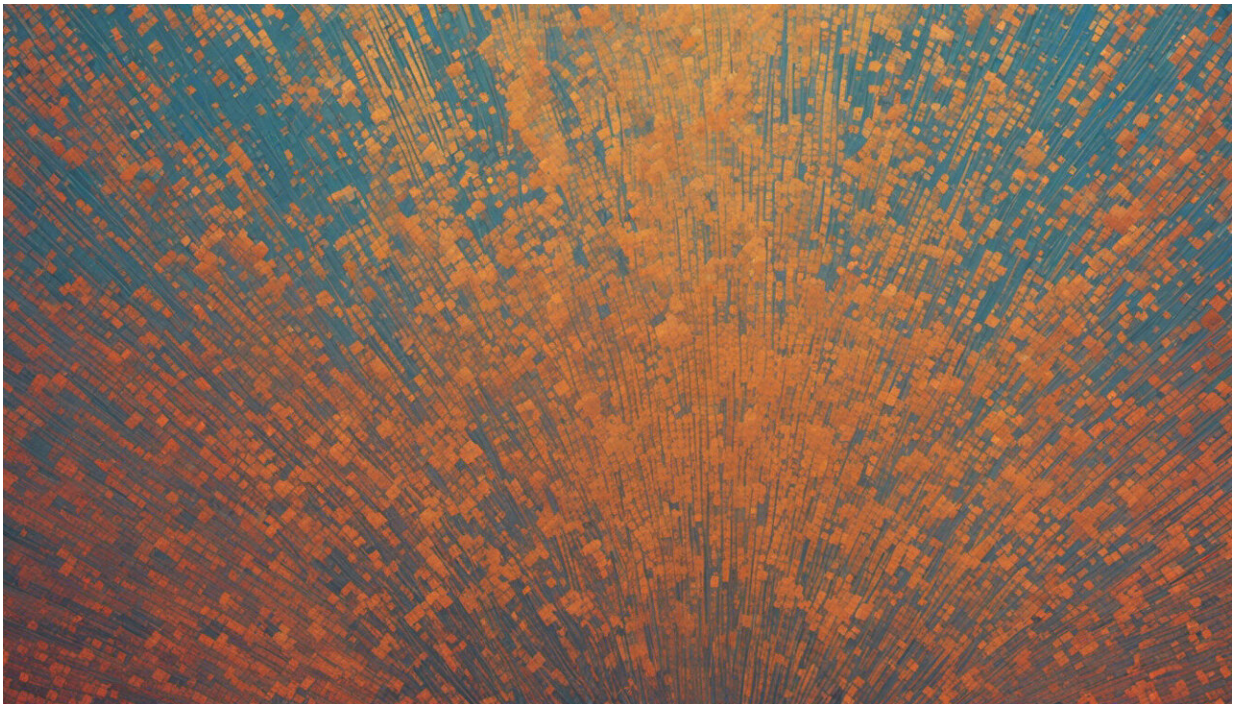


Three ways we sabotage relationships, and three ways to kick the habit

November 1 2021, by Raquel Peel



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Popular culture has plenty of examples of people sabotaging their romantic relationships.

In the movie "[10 Things I Hate About You](#)," Kat says she has no interest in romantic engagements. Then Patrick [asks](#) about her dating style: "You

disappoint them from the start and then you're covered, right?"

But as the plot develops, we learn this is Kat's way of protecting herself, to cope with the trauma of a previous relationship.

Other people move through relationships searching for "the one," making quick assessments of their romantic partners.

In the TV series "[The Mindy Project](#)," Mindy is a successful obstetrician and gynecologist with poor relationship skills. She has a trail of relationship failures, and partners who did not measure up. She is looking for the "perfect" love story with unrealistic expectations.

Another example is Jacob in the movie "[Crazy, Stupid, Love](#)." He quickly moves through sexual partners night after night to avoid a serious commitment.

In the same movie, we meet Cal and Emily, who stayed in a marriage long term but had become complacent. This caused them to split, but once they started to work on themselves, they found a way to reconnect.

What is relationship sabotage?

My team and I [define](#) relationship sabotage as self-defeating attitudes and behaviors in (and out of) relationships. These stop relationships succeeding, or lead people to give up on them, justifying why these relationships fail.

Most importantly, relationship sabotage is a self-protection strategy for a win-win outcome.

For example, you might feel you win if the relationship survives despite your defensive strategies. Alternatively, if the relationship fails, your

beliefs and choice to protect yourself are validated.

Why do we do this?

We [found](#) people sabotage their relationships mainly because of fear. This is despite wanting an intimate relationship.

As Sam Smith says in his song [Too Good at Goodbyes](#): "I'm never gonna let you close to me / Even though you mean the most to me / Cause every time I open up, it hurts."

However, fear responses are not always visible or easy to identify. This is because our [emotions are layered](#) to protect us. Fear is a vulnerable (and core) emotion, which is commonly hidden beneath surface (or secondary) emotions, such as defensiveness.

Recognize any of these patterns?

Relationship sabotage is not a "one-off" moment in a relationship. It happens when fear triggers patterns of responses from one relationship to the next. My research highlights [three main patterns](#) of attitudes and behaviors to look out for.

Defensiveness

Defensiveness, such as being angry or aggressive, is a counter-attack to a perceived threat. People who are defensive are motivated by wanting to validate themselves; they are looking to prove themselves right and protect their self-esteem.

Threats that trigger defensiveness are a previous relationship trauma, difficulty with self-esteem, loss of hope, the possibility of getting hurt

again, and fear of failure, rejection, abandonment and commitment. However, defensiveness is an instinctive response that sometimes makes sense.

People can believe relationships often end up in "heartbreak." One [research participant](#) was tired of being criticized and having their feelings misunderstood: "I protect myself from getting hurt in a romantic relationship by putting up all of my walls and not letting go of my guard."

Trust difficulty

Having difficulty trusting others involves struggling to believe romantic partners and perhaps feeling jealous of their attention to others. People who feel this way might not feel safe and avoid feeling vulnerable in relationships.

This is often a result of past experiences of having trust betrayed, or expecting to be betrayed. Betrayals could be as a result of small deceptions (a white lie) or bigger deceptions (infidelity).

People explained choosing not to trust, or being unable to trust, was a way of avoiding being hurt again. One [research participant](#) said: "I no longer trust my romantic partners 100%. I will always be thinking about what I would do if they left or cheated, so I never get fully invested."

Lack of relationship skills

This is when someone has limited insight or awareness into destructive tendencies in relationships. This may be a result of poor relationship role models, or negative interactions and outcomes from previous relationships.

One [research participant](#) said: "What used to hold me back was lack of experience, poor relationship examples (from my parents), and my own immaturity. "

But relationship skills can be learned. Healthy relationships can help foster relationship skills and in turn lessen the effects of defensiveness and trust difficulty.

The cost of relationship sabotage

Relationship sabotage does not necessarily end relationships. This depends on whether these patterns are long term.

For singles, relationship sabotage might prevent you from starting a relationship in the first place. For people in relationships, a long-term effect of repeatedly using self-defensive strategies might be to see your fears turn into reality, like a [self-fulfilling prophecy](#).

Difficulties in intimate relationships are among the [top](#) main reasons for seeking counseling. Such difficulties are also [significant contributors](#) to anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts.

So, what we can you do about it?

I have seen [countless testimonials](#) from people who sabotaged their relationships and felt helpless and hopeless. But here are three ways to [do something about it](#):

- **insight:** we need to know who we are first, and the "baggage" we bring to relationships. Be honest with yourself and your partner about your fears and what you might be struggling with
- **expectations:** we need to manage our expectations of romantic

engagements. Understand what you can realistically expect of yourself and your partners

- **collaboration:** you need to collaborate with your partner to implement strategies to maintain a healthy [relationship](#). This means learning how to communicate better (across all topics, while being honest) and showing flexibility and understanding, especially when dealing with conflict.

Above all, believe you can have healthy relationships and deserve to be loved.

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