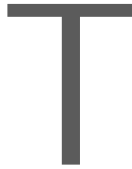


Self-sabotaging Coping Mechanisms



...our life crises tell us that we need to break free of beliefs that no longer serve our personal development.

These points at which we must choose to change or to stagnate are our greatest challenges.

Every new crossroads means we enter into a new cycle of change - whether it be adopting a new health regimen or a new spiritual practice.

And change inevitably means letting go of familiar people and places and moving on to another stage of life.

-Caroline Myss

If it's true that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing twice yet expecting a different outcome the second time around, then self-sabotaging coping mechanisms are what gives birth to one's insanity. For self-sabotaging coping mechanisms are methods of coping with day-to-day stressors that tend to be inflexibly applied, maladaptive, and self-defeating that brings us the same unwanted outcome time after time after time. It's likely that you've relied on many self-defeating coping mechanisms to cope with your day-to-day stressors. However, self-sabotaging coping mechanisms are toxic to your long-term abstinence because they tend to do one of or any combination of the following:

- 1) Minimize or deny altogether the potential threat of a stressor to your Recovery-based lifestyle.
- 2) Minimize or deny altogether the presence of an activated stressor.
- 3) Circumvent rather than eliminate the presence of an activated stressor.
- 4) Medicate rather than do away with the effect of an activated stressor.
- 5) Worsen the effect of an activated stressor.
- 6) Perpetuate the presence and effect of an activated stressor.
- 7) Serve as a catalyst for the activation of other stressors.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Self-sabotaging coping mechanisms

- 1) Act-out feelings
- 2) Avoidance

- 3) Compartmentalize your life
- 4) Compulsive behaviors
- 5) Consume alcohol and other drugs
- 6) Denial
- 7) Impulsiveness
- 8) Isolation
- 9) Make Excuses
- 10) Stuff feelings
- 11) Willfulness

The first self-sabotaging coping mechanism that we'll discuss is *acting-out feelings*. Often times, people express their feelings in indirect rather than direct ways. The direct way to express your feelings is to be aware of what you're feeling and express those feelings. The indirect way to express your feelings is to merely act-out your feelings, whether or not you're conscious of or unconscious of what you're feeling.

Why might you act-out rather than directly express your feelings?

- 1) You may not be aware of what you're feeling.
- 2) You may not be skilled at expressing what you're feeling.
- 3) You may not be comfortable expressing what you're feeling.
- 4) You may not experience the person who has provoked what you're feeling as being safe to express those feelings to.
- 5) You may not experience the person who has provoked what you're feeling as being responsive to you and your feelings.
- 6) You may enjoy pissing somebody off by acting-out

rather than expressing what you're feeling.

- 7) You may enjoy making somebody feel helpless by acting-out rather than expressing what you're feeling.

Common ways to act-out your feelings are:

- 1) *Drink at* your life partner because this is your way of expressing how angry you feel when they attempt to control your behavior.
- 2) *Use at* your parents because this is your way of rebelling against their authority.
- 3) *Lie at* your friend because this is your way of expressing how much you resent them.
- 4) *Steal at* your parents because this is how you communicate to them that you want them to notice you.
- 5) *Manipulate at* your loved one because it scares you to express what you need from them more directly.
- 6) *Create chaos at* your boss because that's how you stand up to your boss.
- 7) *Act helpless at* your parents because that's your way of telling them that you need their love and attention.
- 8) *Need to be rescued at* your life partner because that's your way of expressing that you need them.
- 9) *Be sick at* your family because that's your way of expressing how angry you are at the lousy job they've done of loving you.
- 10) *Control at* your friends because that's your way of expressing how inadequate you feel in their presence.

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Write about or discuss the difficulty you have with directly expressing your feelings.
- 2) Write about or discuss how effective it is for you to act-out rather than express your feelings.
- 3) Write about or discuss how acting-out rather than expressing your feelings sabotages your emotional and spiritual well-being.
- 4) Ask somebody in your Recovery-based support system to help you learn how to express rather than act-out your feelings.

The second self-sabotaging coping mechanism is *avoidance*. Avoidance is a coping mechanism that enables you to slip through the cracks, sneak around the corner, live life on the fringe, remain unaccountable for your actions and inactions, seldom experience momentary discomfort, impose your will on other people or circumstances, and foist responsibility for your well-being on to those who care for you and about you. There are three themes of avoidance that I want to address here: 1) avoidance of interpersonal conflict, 2) avoidance of taking responsibility for your emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being, and 3) avoidance of taking responsibility for your actions and inactions.

Let's first address *avoidance of interpersonal conflict*. Interpersonal conflict is never easy. It can be scary, uncomfortable, and often times emotionally damaging. There's any number of reasons why you might want to avoid conflict with another person. Perhaps you're uncomfortable with your angry feelings. Or maybe you're

uncomfortable being the recipient of another person's angry feelings. It could be that you just like to have your way and so you work around potential problem spots until things work out the way you would like them to. Whatever the reason(s), it's likely that you've developed different devices to avoid conflict such as people-pleasing skills, shading the truth, lying, secrecy, compartmentalizing your life, not talking about your feelings, and/or not allowing others to express their feelings to you. All the while, problems never get acknowledged, issues never ever get resolved, and forgiveness never finds it way into your relationships.

A second thing that you've likely been avoiding is *taking responsibility for your well-being*. It's likely that you've used different circumstances in your life as a way of getting others rather than yourself to take responsibility for your well-being. Now don't dismiss me just yet. Think about this. Who bails you out when you have money problems? Who bails you out when you've been bingeing for days and your life around you has fallen apart? Who bails you out when you have to be hospitalized? Who bails you out whenever you get caught up in any of your drama? Who's taking responsibility for your well-being—you or the people in your life? Staying sick, relying on helplessness and passiveness, remaining enmeshed in chaos, are all avoidance tactics—avoidance tactics designed to shift the responsibility from you to others for taking care of your emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. The only problem with getting your needs taken care of in such a fashion is you have to remain sick or helpless or passive in order to be taken care of by others.

A third object of avoidance is avoiding *taking respon-*

sibility for your actions. Your actions and inactions have had an adverse effect not only on yourself but the people in your life as well. Yet, in most instances, it's likely that you've seldom taken ownership of the impact that your actions and inactions have had on others. Perhaps you developed a knack for convincing other people to doubt their own feelings and perceptions. Or perhaps you became a master of rationalizing and justifying your actions as being harmless or misguided but never ill-intended. Perhaps your ability to remain in denial about your actions and the consequences of your actions has blinded you to the truth. But all in all, not taking responsibility for your actions, no matter how you do so, enables you to remain active in your disease, all the while ignorant or uncaring of what it does to yourself and the people who care about you.

All in all, avoidance is a self-defeating coping mechanism that always puts off until tomorrow what needs to be addressed today. And in so doing, you alienate yourself from the people in your life. You set yourself up to be taken care of by others, thereby, creating a trap in which you must remain sick in order to be taken care of. And so you continue to do harm to yourself and the people in your life by never changing how you approach the circumstances in your life.

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Identify the fears you have with engaging in interpersonal conflict.
- 2) Identify the fear(s) you have with taking responsibility for your emotional and spiritual well-being.

- 3) Identify the fears you have with taking responsibility for your actions.
- 4) Identify the ways you avoid engaging in interpersonal conflict.
- 5) Identify the ways you avoid taking responsibility for your emotional and spiritual well-being.
- 6) Identify the ways you avoid taking responsibility for your actions.
- 7) Identify the impact that avoiding interpersonal conflict has on your emotional and spiritual well-being.
- 8) Identify the impact that avoiding taking responsibility for your emotional and spiritual well-being has on your emotional and spiritual well-being.
- 9) Identify the impact that avoiding taking responsibility for your actions has on your emotional and spiritual well-being.

The third self-sabotaging coping mechanism is *compartmentalizing your life*. What this means in layman's terms is that the left hand never knows what the right hand is doing. You get it? You've become adept at managing information, concealing information, implementing diversionary tactics whereby people take their eye off the ball and focus their attention on what you want them to see rather than what you don't want them to see.

In many regards, your life has become one misdirection play after another. Forever throwing people off your scent, your life has become a group of fragmented parallel dramas that never intersect, never come together, bits and pieces that never form a greater whole. You expend an enormous amount of energy keeping twelve balls in

the air. The fear of any one ball falling to the ground combined with the ever-growing paranoia that accompanies leading a double life merely fuels rather than ends the cycle of deceit and deception. And so you go through life, lost in a web of secrecy and half-truths, losing sight of who you are and who you have the potential to become.

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Identify the fears that you have about people knowing about you what you don't want them to know about you.
- 2) Identify the ways in which you keep people from knowing about you what you don't want them to know about you.
- 3) Identify the impact that maintaining your secrets has on your emotional and spiritual well-being.

Compulsive behavior is another self-sabotaging coping mechanism. We discussed the subject of compulsive behaviors in chapter 1, *How to Maintain Your Physical Well-being*. Now, let's just focus on compulsive behaviors as a self-defeating coping mechanism. Consuming alcohol and other drugs is a layer of your emotional and spiritual dis-ease. As a result, it's not uncommon to have a relationship with certain behaviors such as sexing, eating, gambling, exercising, working, excessive risk-taking, and codependency that mirror your relationship with alcohol and other drugs—so far nothing new.

But how might your relationship with any one of the above-mentioned behaviors act as a self-defeating coping mechanism? How might your involvement with a com-

pulsive behavior insulate you from becoming too close to other people? How might your involvement with a compulsive behavior keep you emotionally shut-down? How might your involvement with compulsive behaviors medicate emotional states such as depression, loneliness, anxiety, and fear? How might your involvement with compulsive behaviors keep you from confronting your fragility as a human being? How might your involvement with compulsive behaviors keep you from accepting the limits that come with being human? How might your involvement with compulsive behaviors keep you from surrendering your willfulness to a power greater than yourself?

The answers to these questions are what keep you enmeshed in compulsive behaviors. The answer to these questions are layers of the addiction process that you need to confront in order to most effectively preserve and protect your Recovery-based lifestyle.

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Identify those compulsive behaviors that you participate in.
- 2) Identify the stressors in your life that your compulsive behavior helps you cope with.
- 3) Identify how those compulsive behaviors help you better cope with the stressors that you identified in step #2 of this exercise.
- 4) Identify how the use of a compulsive behavior as a coping mechanism sabotages your emotional and spiritual well-being.

The consumption of alcohol and other drugs is the fifth self-sabotaging coping mechanism. Just refer to the questions in the above section about compulsive behaviors in order to understand how your consumption of alcohol and other drugs, although a disease in which you lost control of your consumption, also insulated you from feeling and experiencing many of the same issues that I referred to in the compulsive behaviors section.

Beyond those questions posed in the section on compulsive behaviors, your consumption of alcohol and other drugs likely served as a coping mechanism to help you medicate and/or regulate what you did and did not feel. Your consumption of alcohol and other drugs provided you with a constancy, dependability, and predictability that may have been otherwise lacking in your life. Your consumption of alcohol and other drugs may have served to numb-out chronic physical and/or emotional pain, and provided you with a sense of control over your life that you did not otherwise experience. Your consumption of alcohol and other drugs may have enabled you to experience a level of comfort to function in your interpersonal world that you otherwise did not experience. Of course, the question for you to answer as it is with any of these self-sabotaging coping mechanisms is as follows. Not how well did any one of these coping mechanisms work, but, at what cost to your emotional and spiritual well-being did you rely on alcohol and other drugs to cope with the demands of life? I trust if you're reading this far into this book, you've concluded that the price that you've paid for consuming alcohol and other drugs is not worth what perceived benefits you derived from consuming alcohol and other drugs.

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Identify three circumstances in your life today that you might use alcohol and other drugs rather than a Recovery-based coping mechanism to eliminate and/or alleviate the stressor.
- 2) Identify three situations with a person(s) in your life today in which you might use alcohol and other drugs rather than a Recovery-based coping mechanism to eliminate and/or alleviate the stressor.
- 3) Write about or discuss how using alcohol and other drugs rather than a Recovery-based coping mechanism is an effective way to cope with the stressors identified in step #1.
- 4) Write about or discuss how using alcohol and other drugs rather than a Recovery-based coping mechanism is an effective way to cope with the stressors identified in step #2.
- 5) Write about or discuss how using alcohol and other drugs rather than a Recovery-based coping mechanism is a self-sabotaging strategy for coping with the stressors identified in step #1.
- 6) Write about or discuss how using alcohol and other drugs rather than a Recovery-based coping mechanism is a self-sabotaging strategy for coping with the stressors identified in step #2.
- 7) Write about or discuss with your Recovery-based support system how to cope with the stressors identified in step #1 in a way that isn't self-destructive.
- 8) Write about or discuss with your Recovery-based support system how to cope with the stressors identified

tified in step #2 in a way that isn't self-destructive.

The sixth self-sabotaging coping mechanism is *denial*. Denial is to chemical dependency what gasoline is to a raging out of control fire. It's difficult to act in as self-destructive manner as you have without the aid of denial. Denial enables you to look reality right smack in the eyes and simply smile right back and say, "That ain't so!" Denial enables you to be confronted with irrefutable evidence of your various crimes and misdemeanors and coolly reply, "Yea but..." Denial enables you to take the biggest tallest mountain and carve it up into the teeniest little molehill you've ever come across.

The interesting thing about denial is that it comes in various shapes and color. There's rationalization, blame, projection, minimization, intellectualization, and discounting. Take your pick but the outcome is always the same—much like the three monkeys who *hear no evil, see no evil, and speak no evil!* You must know the words to the song better than I. *You didn't do it! You didn't feel it. You didn't experience it. It doesn't bother you.*

It's understandable how denial is an effective way of not dealing with the hurt and pain that you've been trying to avoid, but again at what cost? It's like that saying from that old auto brake commercial, "*You can pay me now or pay me later.*" Whenever you use denial, there will always be a bill in your future that you'll still need to pay.

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Identify three circumstances in your life where you're still using denial as a way of coping with the

circumstance.

- 2) Identify what type of denial you're applying to each of those three circumstances identified in step #1 of this exercise (blame, projection, rationalization, minimization, intellectualization, discount).
- 3) Identify what impact your use of denial in those situations identified in step #1 of this exercise has on the outcome of each circumstance.
- 4) Identify what you're fearful of admitting to if you applied rigorous honesty rather than denial to each circumstance identified in step #1 of this exercise.

The seventh self-sabotaging coping mechanism is *impulsiveness*. Impulsiveness protects you from feeling frustrated. Impulsiveness protects you from feeling the disappointment of not having what you want when you want it. Impulsiveness protects you from feeling the sense of powerlessness that you experience when your will has been thwarted.

Can you see that when impulsiveness takes over your thoughts and actions, no longer must you feel helpless about your fate being held in the hands of an impersonal Universe that doesn't fully appreciate how you must have or do what you want on your terms rather than anyone else's terms? In short, impulsiveness is a wonderful tonic for the ills associated with feeling frustrated, disappointed, powerless, helpless, and out of control.

Impulsiveness empowers you at those times when looking before you leap just isn't going to get it for you. Impulsiveness imbues you with a sense of entitlement that your life should unfold as you deserve it to rather than as the Universe has so designed. Is there anything more

ennobling than the self-righteousness with which you claim your right to what you want as soon as you want it? That's what impulsiveness can do for you—propel you on a holly crusade, your crusade, in your time and in your own way.

But to act impulsively means that you must subject yourself to a simple law of quantum human suffering—a check is always served at the end of the final course, a bill is always presented for immediate payment, actions beget reactions, and houses eventually fall right on top of the person who originally launched the house into mid-air.

So as you duck frustration with an impulsive act, you invite guilt into your emotional world. As you sidestep disappointment with an impulsive act, you immediately awaken feelings of shame. Dancing around the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness with acts of impulsiveness only expose a deeper experience of vulnerability once all the pigeons come home to roost. So as you attempt to scratch that itch with an impulsive act that just won't otherwise go away, take a moment and think through all that you are about to unleash as you leap before you look.

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Identify impulsive behaviors that you use when you're feeling impatient, out of control, frustrated, helpless, powerless, and/or disappointed.
- 2) Identify how applying impulsive behaviors to those circumstances when you're feeling one of the feelings identified in step #1 works for you.
- 3) Identify how applying impulsive behaviors to those circumstances when you're feeling one of the feel-

ings identified in step #1 of this exercise sabotages your emotional and spiritual well-being.

- 4) Identify Recovery-based coping mechanisms that you can replace compulsive behaviors as a way of coping with feeling frustrated, disappointed, powerless, helpless, out of control and/or impatient.

The eighth self-sabotaging coping mechanism is *isolation*. Isolating protects you from the pain and suffering that's the price one pays for being alive. Isolation keeps prying eyes out. Isolation prevents people from seeing who you are and knowing what you're up to. When you cut yourself off from the world at large, you and only you, are captain of your ship, master of your domain. When you're all by yourself, you call the shots, you run the show, you're in charge, there are no co-pilots sitting at the control panel.

Isolation insulates you from the intrusions that life would otherwise bring. Isolation protects you from the inevitable insults that life dishes out. No one or no thing can get at you, do you harm, upset your carefully constructed eco-system. That's what isolation does for you.

But at what cost? What does it cost you to go through life untouched by disappointment and joy? What does it cost you to go through life untouched by abandonment and love? What does it cost you to go through life never angered but never overwhelmed by somebody else's generosity? What does it cost you to go through life never disappointed but never surprised?

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Identify the ways you cut yourself off from the human race.
- 2) Identify the ways you shut people out of your life.
- 3) Identify the reasons that you hold the people in your life at arms length.
- 4) Identify the fears you have about letting people into your life.
- 5) Identify the fears you have about letting people get to know you.
- 6) Who could you let into your life an inch more than they already are?
- 7) What actions can you take to let that person into your life an inch more than they already are?

The ninth self-sabotaging coping mechanism is *making excuses*. Making excuses is the *blah, blah, blah* you offer as an explanation for why you did or did not do what you did or did not do. Sometimes an excuse is dressed up as blame. Other times it's disguised as a half-baked story that makes sense to you but seldom jives with the facts. Half-truths are nothing more than carefully crafted excuses designed to conceal the truth about where you've been and what you've been up to. Whatever the case, whatever the instance, an excuse is a handy tool to confuse, conceal, disguise, and complicate the truth about a situation. And the underlying truth about most situations is that you did what you did because you were preparing to be or were under the influence or were concealing the fact or were preparing to be one more time under the influence of alcohol and other drugs.

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Identify what impact making excuses for your actions and inactions has on your emotional and spiritual well-being.
- 2) Identify what you fear about taking responsibility for your actions and inactions.
- 3) Identify three circumstances in your life today that you need to acknowledge your responsibility in creating.
- 4) Identify the actions that you need to take in order to take responsibility for your creation of the circumstances identified in step #3.

The tenth self-sabotaging coping mechanism is *stuffing your feelings*. Shutting-down, numbing-out and/or medicating your feelings are ways you've likely coped with your feelings in the past. Hurt, anger, depression, fear, loneliness, and shame are but a few of the many feelings you've devised methods to disconnect from.

It's understandable. Life without all of these self-defeating coping mechanisms can overwhelm even the hardest of us. So you spent much of your life running from rather than confronting what you were feeling. Just another one of those scenarios in which the short-term gain seems to justify the long-term expense. For to avoid what you're feeling only perpetuates a reliance on coping mechanisms that are destructive to your emotional and spiritual well-being. Recovery-based coping mechanisms on the other hand don't help you avoid what you're feeling but they do help you work through what you're feeling.

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Identify three circumstances that provoke strong emotional reactions within you.
- 2) Identify three people in your life that provoke strong emotional reactions within you.
- 3) Identify how you might shut down or run from those feelings that you identified in step #1 and step #2.
- 4) What impact does shutting down or running from those feelings that you identified in step #1 and step #2 have on your emotional and spiritual well-being?

The eleventh self-sabotaging coping mechanism is *willfulness*. Willfulness is the *oomph* in your self-sabotaging mechanisms. It's the fuel that launches any self-sabotaging behavior. Willfulness puts the jazz in how you dance with life—on your terms rather than life's terms.

Willfulness is a simple declaration—it's my way or the highway. Willfulness places your wants and desires at the center of the universe. Willfulness raises your hands to the heavens and declares you to be the heavyweight champion of the world. There's no mistaking an act of willfulness for anything other than what it is—a self-centered act whose sole purpose is to impose your will on life.

Willfulness is what protects you not only from feeling powerless but feeling out of control as well. A willful act ensures that you'll remain in control—at least according to what you believe being in control means. Willfulness perpetuates the myth that might makes right, that powerlessness is for weaklings who need to try just a little hard-

er. You never have to admit to being powerless over anything as long as your willfulness is a viable option for you.

In not having to admit to your essential powerlessness, your willfulness has spared you the indignity of having to acknowledge that there are limits to who you are and what you can do. By not admitting to your essential powerlessness, your willfulness spares you the indignity of acknowledging that a power greater than your self exists. In not admitting to your essential powerlessness, your willfulness spares you the indignity of having to surrender your will to a power greater than your self.

So willfulness keeps you protected. It's a force to be reckoned with. It let's you feel in control of those circumstances in which you feel so out of control. But again the question, begs to be asked, "At what cost?"

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Identify three current circumstances in your life where you have used your willfulness to control the outcome of that circumstance.
- 2) Identify the impact that your willfulness applied in the three circumstances identified in step #1 had on the people involved in each circumstance.
- 3) Identify the impact that your willfulness applied in the three circumstances identified in step #1 had on your emotional and spiritual well-being.
- 4) Identify the fear(s) you have about applying Recovery-based coping mechanisms rather than your willfulness to the circumstances of your life.
- 5) Identify the benefits of applying Recovery-based coping mechanisms rather than your willfulness to

your life circumstances.

There you have it. Those are eleven of the more common self-sabotaging coping mechanisms. It's unlikely that you'll gladly give them up but give them up you must. For no matter how well these self-sabotaging coping mechanisms may serve your ends, the means by which they serve your ends often times harms your emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.

How can you live life without these self-sabotaging coping mechanisms? Adopt Recovery-based coping mechanisms to take their place. The two Pathfinder's Exercises below will enable you to identify how.

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) From the Pathfinder's Checklist at the start of this chapter that lists eleven self-sabotaging coping mechanisms, identify six using self-sabotaging coping mechanisms that you used the most when you were consuming alcohol and other drugs.
- 2) Write about or discuss how the six self-sabotaging coping mechanisms that you identified in #1 of this exercise were so effective when you used them.
- 3) Write about or discuss how the six self-sabotaging coping mechanisms identified in #1 sabotaged your emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being when you used them.
- 4) Identify specific Recovery-based coping mechanisms (see chapter 9, *Recovery-based Coping Mechanisms*) that, today, you can use to replace self-sabotaging coping mechanisms identified in #1.

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Identify six self-sabotaging coping mechanisms that you continue to use even though you're no longer consuming alcohol and other drugs.
- 2) Write about or discuss how well those six self-sabotaging coping mechanisms identified in #1 work for you.
- 3) Write about or discuss how those six self-sabotaging coping mechanisms identified in #1 sabotage your emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.
- 4) Write about or discuss the fear(s) you have about no longer applying each identified self-sabotaging coping mechanism from #1.
- 5) Write about or discuss what Recovery-based coping mechanisms (see chapter 9, *Recovery-based Coping Mechanisms*) you could replace those self-sabotaging coping mechanisms identified in #1.
- 6) Write about or discuss the fear(s) you have about applying Recovery-based rather than the identified self-sabotaging coping mechanisms.
- 7) Talk to people in your Recovery-based support system about how you can overcome your fears of letting go of your self-sabotaging coping mechanisms in order to apply Recovery-based coping mechanisms to your day-to-day stressors.