

Stop Self-Sabotage



How to Get Out of Your Own Way
and Avoid Self-Sabotage
When Initiating Habit Change

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One morning several decades ago I got up too early, skipped breakfast, and stumbled to my car to get to work on time.

I stepped on the brakes, turned the key in the ignition, put the car in reverse, and eased off the brakes. Like I had done ten thousand times before.

But this time, I slammed to a halt after moving about three and a half feet. I was thrown back into my seat. I heard crunching. My heart was pounding.

Jolted into wakefulness, I twisted around to see what had happened.

I had driven into my other car, which had been parked right behind the one I was driving in my single-lane driveway.

I'm sure the insurance company reps had many laughs that day as I explained how both of my cars had experienced collision damage on the same day.

I haven't engaged in that level of automotive cluelessness since that morning. But in other areas of my life, I sure seem to be an expert in getting in my own way.

And I've noticed that my clients and students often create predictable obstacles as they ramp up their own journeys to wellness.

In this report, I want to share three of the most common "second cars in the driveway" - mindset mistakes - and give some tips on navigating lifestyle and diet change so you don't crash before you even get moving.

Mistake No 1: Insistence on Perfection

An old joke:

Tom is sitting on the porch next to his dog, Jake, who's howling like crazy. Edna comes by and asks what's the matter.

Tom: "Oh, Jake's sittin' on a rusty nail."

Edna: "Why don't he just get up?"

Tom: "'Cause it don't hurt enough yet."

Most of us have a lot of issues in our lives that simply "don't hurt enough yet." We may be annoyed at the broken bathroom fan, the extra 15 (or 115) pounds of fat on our frames, our tendency to get seriously annoyed at slow cashiers and unhelpful call center reps — and we

may complain and ruminate about them with regularity — but we generally live with these problems rather than spending energy and other resources trying to solve them.

The problems rise to the level of “enough is enough” only when they tip past a threshold (like 300 pounds) or when an event (a house guest with really bad diarrhea) or outcome (not getting that \$30 taken off your monthly cable bill) makes it clear that the status quo is completely unacceptable.

In other words, we delay taking action until it suddenly “hurts enough.” And by then, we feel the urgency. And we want to solve the problem now, and completely, and forever.

In other words, we want to go from sucky to perfection in a hot second.

In and of itself, aiming for perfection isn't a problem. In fact, it's usually admirable. Who wants to go to the free throw line with the attitude, “It's OK if I get anywhere near the basket”?

The problem comes when we make immediate perfection the only acceptable standard. When it comes to lifestyle and diet choices, we've been conditioned for years or decades to behave in certain ways.

And all those factors are still very much in force when we muster the will to change:

- Our tastes and preferences
- Our biological hardwiring to seek out hyper-palatable foods and avoid strenuous exertion
- Our immediate environments
- Our default systems for shopping, cooking, relaxing after work, and so on
- Our social networks
- Our capitalist, advertising-driven culture
- And many more...

Thinking that we can overcome all these obstacles to change in a single moment of intense motivation is an invitation to fail bigly.

We'll try to bite off more than we can chew. We'll split our focus on too many behavioral fronts, rather than getting traction on one area and then using it as a beachhead to attack some other domain.

We'll exhaust ourselves and stress ourselves out, which then leads to a cycle of returning to the unwanted behaviors to self-soothe or self-medicate or simply because we're spent and they're our defaults.

So what are the ways to combat the initial impulse toward perfection?

1. Recognize the tendency

As I said, wanting to achieve perfection isn't the problem. It's when getting caught up in perfectionism causes us to overcommit and burn out that we are in trouble. So the first thing to do is to notice the tendency within yourself.

Does it sound familiar? In the past, have you gone "all-in" and then found your commitment wavering after a week or a month?

Have you bought all the gear and the clothes and rearranged your living room for the stationary bike or treadmill, put in an hour a day for a couple of weeks, and found yourself with an expensive towel rack two months later?

Have you thrown out all your junk food and filled your fridge with enough produce and herbal tonics to keep Gwyneth Paltrow in smoothies for a year, and then shamefacedly tossed the rotting veggies into the trash because you didn't know how to prepare them?

Simply acknowledging that you have the tendency toward perfectionism is the first step. Realize that it comes from a good place. And remind yourself to cool your jets, and approach the lifestyle change so that you can succeed sustainably this time.

2. Set mini-goals

Perfectionism thrives on a binary state of affairs: things are crap now, and they have to be marvelous. There's no in-between, no on-ramp, no pathway to success. It's "Beam me up, Scotty" or nothing.

Real life works differently. We make progress toward our goals in steps. The progress may be glacial or tectonic — small, almost imperceptible improvements or bigger shifts — but that's the way the world operates.

So take advantage of reality by accommodating and planning for milestones along the way.

If your goal is to exercise hard an hour a day, six days a week, and right now your fiercest exertion is operating the manual height adjustment on your minivan, then plan out a bunch of goals along the way.

Maybe 20 minutes of walking three times a week.

Maybe finding a local yoga class and aiming to stay active for the entire hour-long workout by increasing the number of minutes by five each week.

Maybe adding 2% to your daily steps each day until you reach your goal number.

You get the idea. Break your ultimate goals into small steps (really, the smaller the better), and hold yourself accountable for achieving the possible rather than the unrealistically heroic.

3. Celebrate small wins

In addition to setting mini-goals, it's crucial to reward your brain by celebrating your progress.

The nice thing about these mini-goals is that you can get a hit of "Perfection Juice" each time you reach one. (In fact, you can get that hit simply from making progress toward it by doing a little better this week than last.)

Think like a casino operator: you get people addicted to the slots not just by promising the extremely improbable gargantuan payout, but by dripping little random wins along the way.

Our brains have evolved to respond very powerfully to pretty much any degree of positive reinforcement — that's how courtship can lead to procreation, and a single bite of chocolate cake can lead to a lifelong obsession with the "food of the gods."

Instead of having your perfection-craving mind sabotage you by urging you to leap across a too-wide behavioral chasm, you can give it constant "we're on the right track" feedback and it becomes an ally to your transformation.

Mistake N^o2: Misinterpreting Failures

I would love to tell you that once you set your mind to a path of lifestyle improvement, you can simply stick to the plan and improve continually. That there won't be any backsliding, any doubts, any moments of weakness. That once you've sworn off certain foods and behaviors, you'll never look back.

But it just ain't so.

If you're human (and it's only 2017, so we're still a few years away from the possibility that you are AI or in any way connected with the Singularity), then you will make mistakes.

The problem is not that you will make mistakes. The problem is not that you will experience failures along the way.

These are perfectly natural, and to be expected, and frankly, the engines of your long-term success (I'll explain in a minute).

What will cause you to flame out is interpreting those mistakes and failures as signs that the whole project is doomed.

Let's say you decide to eliminate refined sugar from your diet. You've been perfect for a whole month, and then you're in a deadly dull all-day sales meeting, complete with

PowerPoint presentations, line graphs, and pie charts, and you're seriously considering getting the insides of your eyelids tattooed with images of Wonder Woman — when someone arrives with a box of Krispy Kreme assorted.

Your willpower shot, you succumb to peer pressure and have just one bite of a cruller, which soon leads to a cinnamon dusted and a raspberry filled chocolate glazed.

And that night, you think back on the carnage and decide that you simply don't have what it takes to give up sugar.

Here are three antidotes to the despair that comes from giving too much power to the inevitable failures.

1. Reinterpret failures as fight-thrus



In *Organize Tomorrow Today*, Jason Selk and Tom Bartow describe the three stages of successful habit change:

1. Honeymoon: you're just starting, you're totally psyched and motivated and energized, and everything seems easy and hunky-dory.
2. Fight-thru: you're stressed, you're facing a challenging situation, you're exhausted and emotionally strung out, and you are sorely tempted to fall back on your old default patterns rather than put extra energy into maintaining your new habit.
3. Second nature: you can maintain your new habit no matter what life throws at you.

The second phase, which Selk and Bartow call “fight-thru,” is the key to success on this journey. The trick is to choose a habit or behavior that you achieve roughly four times out of five.

That's right: your goal here is to earn a perfect B minus.

If you lose every single fight-thru, then you set your sights too high. You fell into the perfectionist trap, and ended up making zero (or perhaps even negative) progress.

If you win every single fight-thru, you're probably not making real progress either. You're in a holding pattern, not challenging yourself to achieve the meaningful changes that require more effort.

If you win four out of five fight-thrus, then you're in the sweet spot. You know that you've chosen a worthy goal, because it stretches your ability, and you get positive reinforcement every time you succeed.

And — and here's the kicker — you want to interpret that one-out-of-five failure as the event that moves you forward.

Instead of dreading and avoiding situations where you might fail, now you look forward to them. Failing and picking yourself up isn't a detour on the road to success; it is the road.

If you know how to prepare for and learn from those failures. Which brings me to the other two antidotes.

2. Anticipate fight-thrus

It's one thing to fail from time to time. It's another to be constantly surprised by that failure, to the point where you keep falling into the same trap time after time.

Remember, you're not *trying* to fail one time out of five. It just happens when you've picked an appropriately challenging goal. As you approach each situation, you don't just whistle a happy tune and hope for the best.

Instead, anticipate and plan for those situations where you're mostly likely to lose a fight-thru. Picture it in your mind. Play out the scenario and give it two endings: defeat and victory.

Start with defeat by performing what decision scientist Gary Klein [calls a "pre-mortem."](#) Imagine yourself failing spectacularly. And then play the movie in your head. Notice the moves you make (and fail to make).

Pay attention to how you set yourself up for failure by saying to yourself, "I wonder if I'll be strong enough to resist those donuts."

Notice how your tension dissolves once you give in and take the first bite. And then notice how you think to yourself, "Oh, what the hell, I might as well finish it."

Then observe how shame drives you to eat a second, and then a third donut.

Next, replay the scene and give it a happy ending. What has to happen differently for that happy ending to feel realistic?

Do you counter that initial doubt with a strong reminder?

"I don't eat that stuff. It's not food for me. There's no need to wonder if I can resist, because it's simply not in the realm of possibility."

When the box gets passed in front of you, do you have a response ready that makes your decision clear without causing conflict or unpleasantness?

"No thanks, my doctor wants me to stay away from desserts for a while."

And if you do end up taking a bite, what's your damage control strategy?

“Whoops, I lost focus for a second there. Now I’m going to count to 20, remind myself of big goals and why they’re important to me, and quietly put that donut in the trash can. I don’t have to lose control and go into a full-on binge just because I made one tiny mistake.”

By engaging in “prospective hindsight,” you can use those high-risk-of-failure situations to increase your skills and get closer and closer to the behaviors and habits you aspire to.

3. Learn from failures

The other side of anticipating fight-thrus is to debrief them — especially the ones where you didn’t succeed in sticking to your desired behaviors.

Here I recommend Peter Bregman’s FAST methodology, in which you ask and answer the following questions:

- What did I **Feel**?
- How did I **Act**?
- What did I **Say**?
- What did I **Think**?

The data you glean from an honest, non-hysterical post-mortem will help you succeed next time in a similar or even more challenging situation.

Knowing how you reacted in these four domains will allow you to prepare better for your next fight-thru. This information is the fodder for accurate and relevant pre-mortems.

Mistake N^o3: Misinterpreting Successes

To recap: aiming too high can lead to catastrophic failure, and how getting emotionally flattened by inevitable failures can lead to giving up. The third way we sabotage our success is by getting overconfident when we do have some early successes.

As we discovered in *Organize Tomorrow Today*, the first phase of habit change is usually the honeymoon. Everything goes great at first. So we can get lulled into a false sense of security and let our guard down.

It’s helpful to understand why behavior change can be so easy at the beginning. Let’s use BJ Fogg’s [Behavior Model](#) to figure this out.

In this model, we can predict behavior almost algebraically:

$$\text{Behavior} = \text{Motivation} + \text{Ability} + \text{Trigger}$$

Let’s forget about the trigger for now and just focus on motivation and ability. Basically, we will do a behavior if we want to do it (motivation) and we can do it (ability).

That's pretty obvious.

What's less obvious is the existence of a tradeoff between the two. In other words, the more motivated we are, the more likely it is that we'll do difficult things.

An extreme example is lifting a car to save your child. But there are plenty of everyday examples as well — like when you find out that you are prediabetic and so you manage to cut your intake of animal foods and highly processed foods because you're scared of developing the full-blown disease.

The problem is, that initial flood of motivation tends not to last. Once we get over that honeymoon period, motivation is extremely fickle. We can't will ourselves to be motivated. We can't decide what our motivation level will be at any given moment.

I might be very motivated to get up tomorrow and go to the gym, but I can't bottle that motivation and drink it at 5:30am when all I want to do is clutch my pillow and keep my eyes closed.

So we have to accept that motivation will wane. That initial success is absolutely no guarantee of sustainable success. We can be optimistic, but not complacent when the first days or weeks turn out really well.

Here are three tactics for interpreting early success in the most empowering way.

1. Be Happy

The good news is, you've achieved initial success. This means that you've chosen something that's actually possible.

To use a ridiculous example, if your desired behavior was flight (a la Superman, not Chuck Yeager), then you probably wouldn't succeed even once, even with infinite motivation.

So early success means that you've chosen a behavior that you have the ability to perform, even if you won't be able to do it every single time in every single circumstance.

2. Be Wary

Don't get complacent. Celebrate your successes while simultaneously recognizing that your desired behaviors will seem harder as your motivation wanes and other life stressors and shocks assert themselves.

Keep looking forward to challenging moments. Keep scanning the horizon for potential fight-thrus. And keep pre-morteming by imagining how it will feel when the initial flush of motivation has worn off.

3. Be Opportunistic

Here's the ninja move regarding early successes: use them to render future motivation unnecessary.

Remember BJ Fogg's formula:

$$\text{Behavior} = \text{Motivation} + \text{Ability} + \text{Trigger}$$

Because motivation and ability can predict behavior in a see-saw fashion, when motivation is high, then our ability can be low (not zero, but low) and we'll still do it.

The same is true in the other direction: when our ability is high (i.e. the behavior is easy), we require very little (but not zero) motivation.

For example, I'm quite good at brushing my teeth. I always have a toothbrush and tube of toothpaste in the bathroom, and I know exactly how to perform the act. So even when I'm tired and just want to fall into bed (low motivation), I still brush my teeth every single night.

So one way to be opportunistic about success is to use it to increase our ability. For example, if you're motivated to eat right because of a health scare or invitation to a beach party or summer wedding, spend some of that motivation increasing your long-term ability to eat right.

For example, you might take a healthy cooking class, or watch some videos and emulate the recipes, or ask a wellness coach to give you a whole food, plant-based tour of your local supermarket.

Or you might spend some of that motivation on upgrading your kitchen, increasing your ability to cook healthy meals by eliminating unhealthy options and giving you enjoyable tools that encourage your desired behaviors.

The third variable on the right side of the Fogg equation, Trigger, can also be optimized during this opportunistic early success phase.

A trigger is just a reminder or cue that exists in your environment that you respond to in a predictable way.

Most of us are familiar with the negative triggers in our lives — the clock striking three that sends us to the vending machines, the Little Debby's endcap display at the Piggly Wiggly, the dessert menu at Cheesecake Factory.

You can intentionally engineer positive triggers as well. I floss every single time I brush my teeth because I keep the floss next to the toothbrush. So the act of brushing triggers the impulse to floss.

You can use some of our energy during the honeymoon phase to set up new triggers, and increase the visibility and intensity of existing ones.

For example, you can stock your fridge with baby carrots and celery and cherry tomatoes and oil-free humus, so you have a new go-to snack when you get the munchies.

You can put the wedding invitation on your fridge door so you remind yourself of your reason why every time you open it.

You can buy a fitness tracker or glass water bottle, to serve as a visual cue to walk or hydrate.

So when motivation inevitably wanes, you'll still be more likely to continue on a path of progress because you've enhanced Ability and strengthened Triggers.

Summary

We've identified the three most common "second cars in the driveway" that sabotage our success: predictable and systematic mindset errors that get in our way when we try to make progress.

1. Insistence on Perfection
2. Misinterpreting Failures
3. Misinterpreting Successes

My wish is that, armed with awareness, you can avoid these mindset obstacles entirely, or at least recover from them quickly, without too much damage.

It's like being awake enough to swerve and avoid that second car.

Or, even better, getting in the right car and pulling straight out onto the road to success.

Did you find this report helpful?

I hope so; I deliberately kept it basic and actionable.

Plus, I'm wondering if those body shop expenses are tax-deductible now that I've written about them ;)

The Next Step: The Stop Self-Sabotage System

If you found this free report helpful, your next step — if you'd like more support — is to upgrade to the full Stop Self-Sabotage System. It includes three audio sessions that go into the concepts in this report in great detail, and includes a comprehensive mind map.

The audio sessions also guide you with interactive exercises so you can get these concepts into your life, and not just read about them and move on.

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Be healthy on purpose.

Be well.

And send me a postcard of you getting into the right car and zooming to Wellville!

Peace,
Howard