
Breaking the Cycle of Self-Sabotage: How to Overcome the “Golden Larva Syndrome”



By [Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries](#) , INSEAD

A roadmap for identifying and overcoming the self-defeating habits that hold you back.

Stephen’s career seemed to be on an upward trajectory when he landed a job at an elite financial services firm. However, after some initial victories, he began making poor decisions and jeopardising his own success. Fear of the unknown and negative thought patterns eventually led to a cycle of self-sabotage and underachievement.

People like Stephen exhibit classic "golden larva" traits; they possess the promise of a bright future but ultimately hinder their ability to thrive. A self-sabotaging individual is comparable to a caterpillar that never fulfills its potential and fails to transform into a butterfly.

One of the main reasons people like Stephen get stuck in life is an irrational fear of failure. Such individuals typically avoid taking risks or attempting anything if there is a possibility of falling short. This fear is often rooted in

past failures or experiences of humiliation or shame, and can contribute to various emotional and psychological problems, including anxiety, panic attacks and depression.

Fear of success is a distinct phenomenon, but it is often easily confused with fear of failure. Individuals who fear doing well place obstacles in their path to impede their progress. It is not the success that paralyses, but rather the consequences that come with it. People worry about the social repercussions of being too visible or are anxious that they will not be able to handle the attention. They sometimes have self-limiting beliefs, such as feeling unworthy of success, or may be concerned about outshining others who are equally or more deserving.

Childhood experiences can lay the groundwork for these kinds of fears that endure into adulthood. People fear that they will be held to impossible standards and worry about failing to meet them, or conversely that they will be belittled for their success or that their achievements will go unnoticed. As a result, they safeguard themselves by quitting or engaging in self-destructive behaviour that derails their success.

A fear of both failure and success can be accompanied by imposter syndrome, where individuals doubt their abilities and feel undeserving of their achievements. Those suffering from imposter syndrome tend to downplay their accomplishments and attribute their success to luck or external factors. Perfectionism can further fuel self-doubt and the fear of being exposed as an imposter. A constant search for external validation can result in anxiety, depression and even burnout. This behaviour could originate from an upbringing where excessive emphasis was placed on achievement and self-worth was linked to success.

Another underlying reason why people self-sabotage is a reluctance to grow up and take on adult responsibilities, otherwise known as the Peter Pan syndrome. People who prefer living in “Neverland” avoid the challenges that come with adulthood and exhibit low motivation, fear commitment and show disinterest in their work. When things go wrong, they evade accountability by making excuses or blaming others.

As a result, these individuals are likely to jeopardise their own careers. This may be because growing up, their caregivers allowed them do whatever they wanted without consequences, or they had parents who shielded them from the “dangers” of the outside world. Children brought up by either over-

permissive or overprotective parents may never learn to take responsibility, nor develop the necessary mindset or skills for a successful transition into adulthood.

Seven steps to stop self-sabotaging

Fear of failure, fear of success, imposter syndrome, perfectionism and behaving like Peter Pan can all contribute to the “golden larva syndrome”. However, there are several steps you can take to combat this self-sabotaging behaviour.

1. Acknowledge the presence of dysfunctional behaviour

Take the time to understand what might be holding you back by confronting deeply ingrained beliefs about yourself and working through the underlying issues. Try to determine the root causes of your self-sabotaging tendencies – often they can be traced back to events and incidents in your formative years.

Think about the situations that frighten you and separate concrete facts from feelings that may not reflect reality. Every time success makes you feel uncomfortable, give yourself space to reflect on any discomfort that arises and determine when feelings of self-doubt are inflated or unfounded.

2. Reframe your thoughts

Viewing past “failures” as positive opportunities for growth and learning can open up a new way of looking at future challenges. The way you perceive the world has the power to shape your reality, just as the things you say to yourself can influence the way you see yourself.

Positive self-affirmations can transform negative thoughts into empowering ones and boost your confidence. **Modify your inner voice** and switch to positive self-talk by recognising your strengths, weaknesses and the benefits of past failures, and accepting that setbacks are not catastrophic events.

3. Visualise all potential outcomes

Visualisation can also be a powerful tool to prevent self-destructive behaviour. Before taking action, pause to imagine multiple possible

outcomes. This will encourage you to envision the life you want, and the steps you need to take to make it a reality.

While considering worst-case scenarios can provoke anxiety, it can be useful to recognise that the outcome is unlikely to be as bad as you imagine.

American author and humourist Mark Twain couldn't have put it better when he said: "I've had a lot of worries in my life, most of which never happened."

4. Let go of your inner perfectionist

Set challenging yet realistic and achievable goals and accept that mistakes and missed targets are a part of life and not calamitous events. When you fall short of your own standards, try to be kind to yourself and harness the power of positive self-talk. Adjust your standards for success and focus on progression, not perfection.

5. Stretch your courage muscle

Practice saying "yes" to new opportunities to desensitise yourself to your fears, much like exposure therapy for dealing with phobias. Make a list of ways you might be self-sabotaging your success to better understand your limitations. Instead of fearing the kinds of opportunities that could potentially advance your career, acknowledge that being brave and taking risks is crucial for achieving greatness.

6. Celebrate your successes

Reflect on past achievements, recognise your contribution to your own successes and make a point to reward yourself. Keep a diary of your accomplishments, both professionally and personally, to monitor your internal dialogue and any negative self-talk. Prioritise self-compassion over self-criticism and doubt, and celebrate your wins while forgiving yourself for any mistakes.

7. Don't suffer in silence

While self-discovery is key to understanding what's holding you back, sometimes it's worth seeking the help of trusted individuals or professionals. A coach or psychotherapist can help you unpack the damage caused by self-sabotage and embrace the prospect of success.

Moreover, discussing your fears with the people in your life can help you understand how they experience similar challenges. If you find that some people feed into your fears, have a conversation with them. If they refuse to see how their actions are causing you harm, walk away.

Breaking the cycle of self-sabotage is a difficult but achievable task that begins with the acceptance that being alive means trying to be the best version of yourself. However, the journey towards self-actualisation also entails looking beyond your immediate concerns. Focusing on something greater than you, whether volunteering for a worthy cause, getting involved in community affairs or simply assisting a friend in need, can help you find a sense of purpose and fulfilment that transcends personal achievement.

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<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/breaking-cycle-self-sabotage-how-overcome-golden-larva-syndrome>

About the author(s)

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus.

About the research

[“The Golden Larva Syndrome: Moving from Self-Sabotage to Self-Actualization”](#) is a working paper.