

SELF-WORTH SABOTEURS IN RELATIONSHIPS

INTRODUCTION

Our intimate and family relationships are a significant part of our lives. Ideally, these are the people with whom we can be most “at home”, who nurture and support our sense of self.

Therefore, it’s hardly surprising that when problems arise in this terrain, your relationship with yourself is often impacted, too. As you have hopefully learned in the chapter on Relationships in “The Self-Worth Safari”, the key insight here is to detach — as much as possible — your love life from your happiness with yourself. Of course, there will always be some impact. But with some practice, you will soon learn that even if self-esteem is impacted (perhaps by the way you are dealing with a conflict), then your self-worth does not have to be dragged down by that.

COMMON SABOTEURS

Nevertheless, even when we think we have mastered this distinction and Teflon-coated our sense of self-worth; life has a habit of making some scratches on the coating! As a result, we get to see self-worth from some fresh angles.... sometimes rather sharp ones, too!

We start with some of the more common self-worth saboteurs:

1. I have to be right. If I own up to being wrong about something, my self-confidence will collapse. *Of course, it won't, though your self-esteem might take a knock sometimes. So, what? Your self-worth is intact, even if you've made a mistake about something.*
2. I need to know what the other person is doing at all times. *Why? What are you afraid of? Losing control? Being cheated? Being made a fool of? Even if other people hurt you, this does not have to impact your self-worth.*
3. If the other person is unhappy, or their life is unmanageable, this is a reflection on me. *This is an enormous burden, which many people carry. The challenge is how to detach with love, and so to discover a clear boundary between “My Stuff” and “Their Stuff” (see Pages 83-84). Sometimes, this needs expert support. But your self-worth need never depend on whether another human-being is happy or not. That's not love: it's self-centred dependence.*
4. I feel ashamed of the person I am with. *This is a hard one, and definitely impacts self-esteem. Many people will probably tell you that you have to fix that situation in order to get your self-esteem back. Maybe. But self-worth makes no such demand: see “Distinguishing Self from State” on Page 89 of “The Self-Worth Safari”. No matter what the situation, your capacity to resolve it (if a resolution is possible) will be enhanced if you can be a loyal friend to yourself.*
5. I feel guilty for my past actions. *As in the story of Ted (Page 88ff), guilt can undermine your relationship with yourself and hence your relationship with others. For example, guilt for your own past actions (or inaction) may cause you to feel that others cannot be trusted. Regaining a sense of self-worth (as happened with Ted) allows us to make amends and move on.*

SUBTLE SABOTEURS

Some of the self-worth saboteurs in relationships can be subtle ones. Even when romance is in full swing, subtle saboteurs can lurk in the shadows of the rose garden in high summer. Here are some:

6. This is what love should be like - we will never have a bad day. *Many of us have fallen for that one, and usually we felt bad about ourselves when that wintry day arrived. Sometimes, we might even have called into question whether the summer days were ever real or not. Again, love and happiness are independent domains. Your friendship with yourself (self-worth) does not depend on how the game of love is going. Weather is changeable: it's important to stay loyal to you.*
7. Because I am loved by this person, I have self-worth. *Because the associated feeling is so intoxicating, the danger behind this proposition is hard to see. While no kind person wants to darken your day with any painful "what if" projections of loss, there are two confusions here. First, at best what you are experiencing is self-esteem, not self-worth (see Pages 18-22). Second, you are confusing your Self and your State (see Page 89). I recommend you go back over the exercises so far in this book and try to find your roots in yourself, not in any relationship.*
8. What matters is our (happy) relationship, not self-worth. (Or, I live for my family). *While the previous saboteur (No. 7) hides "My Stuff" by bundling it into "Your Stuff", this does something similar... this time by bundling self-worth into "Our Stuff" (See Page 83-84.) Again, I recommend you go back over the exercises so far in this book and try to find your roots in yourself, not in any relationship. Your family life will be happier as a result.*

TRUST-RELATED SABOTEURS

There are a number of other ways in which saboteurs can sneak in, which I'm grouping together here under the general heading of "Trust-related saboteurs". In most cases, notice how mistrust of self creates mistrust of others and visa-versa.

9. It's vital that we are interested in the same things. *Why? Is it not possible to have different interests, such as leisure activities, and still enjoy a great relationship? Or are you really saying that you don't want to let her/him out on their own? Or that their personal interest somehow represents a threat to your identity?*
10. I'm terrified of growing old / being dumped. *Isn't everyone, at some level? The danger is that this fear can undermine self-worth and with it, the relationship. How about reframing your life so that your ultimate friendship (and reliance) is with/on you, no matter what happens? In this way, you are free to enjoy today without the terrors of tomorrow. In other words, you can live as an expression of self-worth rather than a condition of self-esteem (Shift Two, p 65)*
11. I look for signs that he/she loves me. *Well, we all do. No matter what any book says. When we do so, let's at least acknowledge to ourselves that we are seeking validation from them, and perhaps a bit of reassurance for self-esteem too. We would hardly be human if we didn't. But let's not confuse this with self-worth, which is entirely our own responsibility.*

12. There must be something wrong with me, because x keeps happening. Why am I attracting this into my life? etc. *I hope you keep reading "The Self-Worth Safari" and doing the exercises. Each day that I hear of someone freeing themselves from the so-called "Law" of Attraction, I celebrate. One of the joys of discovering an unconditional relationship with yourself is the total certainty that there is nothing wrong with you. Sure, life is life, and sometimes life is hard and unfair. Sure, we may repeat certain patterns of thought or behaviour, which pre-dispose us to meet certain people who perhaps are not so good for us. But there is no weird magnet inside you, attracting these in your direction! By become your own loyal friend, first and foremost, you can make whatever changes are necessary.*

See "Love after Love" by Derek Walcott on Page 103.