

# ARE YOU OUT OF CONTROL?



**BALANCE'S Resident Psychotherapist, Stacey Millichamp, sheds light on what causes us to press the 'self-destruct' button and explores how we can begin a dialogue with our inner saboteurs.**

See [www.northlondonpsychotherapist.com](http://www.northlondonpsychotherapist.com) to contact Stacey or for more information.

## When life crowds in on you, how do you respond?

Whether you are currently being challenged by the positive thing happening for you, or the painful things, the way in which you handle your stress, fear and frustration is the key to protecting your health, wellbeing and relationships. When we feel overwhelmed, it is easy to spiral into aggression, anxiety, defensiveness and depression. The shame that follows close behind prevents people from seeking help - this cycle of overwhelm and the dangerous shame/blame game that accompanies it can be devastating.

It is more socially acceptable to ask for support when a loved one's behaviour is spiralling out of control and you are on the receiving end. But what if you are the one who is losing control? Since our culture associates being in control as evidence of strength, it is likely to feel a lot harder to ask for help, which can result in secrecy, guilt and self-hatred. In my experience, many adults and children need help with managing their behaviour when life feels out of control, ranging from passive shut down to extreme outbursts, violence, addiction, over spending, self-harm and obsessive compulsive

tendencies. Self-sabotage is a relentlessly familiar experience for many people, and one of the loneliest concealments kept. So many of the individuals I work with in my practice judge themselves as being particularly flawed, when in actual fact they are simply experiencing part of the human struggle.

We face our internal saboteurs both when we stumble into nightmare situations, and also when our dreams come true. If we land a great job, or enter a wonderful relationship, we may feel terrified by the prospect of failure, and the thought of trusting good things that come our way. Likewise, during bleak periods when nothing seems to be going right, our frustrations and fear, which we usually try to suppress, can feel impossible to take control of. Self-sabotage also thrives on boredom and lifestyle cul-de-sacs when we chug along wondering if this is all there really is to life. In other words, our saboteur is with us most of the time, either as background wallpaper or foreground bullying. And learning to deal with it is one of the most useful things we can do to find peace.

## Why are human beings such complex creatures?

Psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy and analysis have argued for many decades over the origins or our inherent self-destructive tendencies. With advances in neuroscience and brain scans, we now have much clearer information as to how our brain systems and chemistry affect our moment to moment experiences. Our brains are made up of three major sections - either they behave in a coordinated way, or one part dominates over the other two, causing dysregulation. Broadly speaking, the 'oldest' part of our brain is the lower, reptilian system, which triggers primitive impulses of defence and attack. The second part of the brain that evolved is the mammalian brain; the emotional limbic system, which has almost the same chemical make up as other mammals. This part of the brain both helps to control the primitive fight and flight impulses of the reptilian system and enables us to relate to others and belong. It can also trigger strong emotions that need to be managed by the third part of our brain to

evolve; the rational brain, or in other words, the higher brain or frontal lobes. This is the newest part of the human brain amounting to about 85% of the total brain mass and enveloping the older reptilian and mammalian parts. Note that 90% of the brain develops in the first five years of life when billions of neurological connections are formed, directly influenced by a child's experiences.

As children and adults, our relationships and life experiences can support us to feel at ease with heightened emotions, such as excitement and passion, enabling a steady waterfall of oxytocin and other opioids, supported by neural pathways dug between our rational frontal lobes and our more archaic survival. If as children we weren't helped to deal with our intense feelings, we may create an overactive stress response system leading to pathological states of depression, anxiety, passivity, or encounter hyper extremes of anger and craving for over-stimulation. Too much survival response and emotional reaction without rational thought leads to acting out, and too much rational thought without access to a survival instinct and emotional nuances leads to an arid inability to relate in a meaningful way. And so, whatever our upbringing, we must continue to create connections between these three major parts of our brain, digging roads of communication between them to create physical, financial and emotional consistency in our lives.

## How can my mind start to work in harmony?

Self-acceptance, compassion and self-soothing are three of the hardest but most rewarding disciplines to cultivate. I use the word 'discipline' intentionally, as it takes practice to cultivate these qualities, despite the cacophony of sabotaging voices within us saying we should give up, that we're not worth loving and that nothing good lasts, whilst bad things last forever.

These responses must be developed alongside the cynical saboteur, not in an attempt to drown it out, but to balance it out, providing a supportive perspective alongside the fearful touchstones we can't let go of. This is not the same as thinking

positively or trying to replace the dark thoughts that haunt us. Developing compassion for ourselves means cultivating acceptance of our complex extremes. It is soothing to accept that we are hard-wired for both light and dark thoughts and feelings, and that in any given moment we are likely to have a fair mixture of both. Reducing feelings of shame and guilt around simply being human, through compassionate acceptance is one of the single most effective things we can do to increase wellbeing in our lives.

Any method of self-reflection that supports us to observe what we feel, think and experience from a neutral perspective is effective in building neurological pathways between the survival, reptilian part of the brain, the emotional mammalian brain and the rational frontal lobes.

## My Top Tips for Self-reflection:

- Keep a diary and ruminate
- Do physical exercise
- Creative expressions of all kinds
- Practice mindfulness and meditation
- Be in nature
- Engage in supportive dialogue with others
- Therapy can help us to accept the complex parts of ourselves by exploring more fully and having compassionate witnessing modelled for us. If you seek therapy, find a therapist who you feel relates to you. Figuring out who you are and how to be in the world is a tussle, and you want someone beside you, who lets you know that they are there.

## Books to read around this subject:

'What every parent needs to know' by Margot Sutherland. Great for understanding brain development in children.

'Anger Kills' by Redford Williams and Virginia Williams, which explores strategies for controlling the hostility that can harm your health.

'Care of the Soul' by Thomas Moore. Understand how to add depth and meaning to your life.

To find a counsellor look up 'find a therapist' on the BACP on [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

To find a psychotherapist look up 'find a therapist' the UKCP on [www.psychotherapy.org.uk](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk)