



**What's Your Trigger?**  
(from *Stop Self-Sabotage*)  
**By Dr. Judy Ho**

In this exercise you will uncover the self-sabotage triggers that are leading you to self-sabotage. Self-sabotage triggers (or negative automatic thoughts), are like the termites that have invaded a house. They seem so tiny and inconsequential individually, but when there are many of them, they can ultimately devastate the foundation and mess with the structure of the entire building. In the same way that termites undermine the integrity of a building, negative thoughts can wear away at you over time and because they lurk in the background, you don't see the effects until you are in the midst of a fraught relationship or health crisis, or experiencing job trauma.

You would think that something with so much influence and impact on your life would be glaringly obvious, but these underground, ingrained thoughts are nearly undetectable for a number of reasons that conspire to allow them to fade into the background.

1. They are **automatic** and arise without obvious conscious processing.
2. They are **habitual**, taken for granted, and accepted as normal (and therefore make no demands whatsoever on our attention).

3. They are **rapid and fleeting**, occurring in mere seconds and then disappearing as quickly as they showed up (but they can pop up again and again, and increasingly wreak havoc on your behavior).
4. They are **condensed**, making their debut as cognitive shorthand; they are usually not in complete sentences and sometimes show up as brief images or symbols.

Uncovering these self-sabotage triggers is going to take self-examination. These thoughts have likely lurked beneath the surface for a long time, and because your brain has filed them away categorized as old, familiar information, it hasn't paid them much attention in a while. The process of getting to these self-sabotage triggers is a bit like going to the attic or basement of your house and digging through all the old, dusty boxes. Although you may not have looked inside for a while, the items stored inside can bring up memories you hadn't thought of in years—events that may have had, and continue to have, a profound impact on your life. Looking at your automatic thoughts can reveal some important ideas that were established in your past that continue to trigger your self-sabotaging behavior in the present.

This quiz will help you see which types of automatic thoughts arise for you most often. This will show you where to focus your conscious attention so that you can expose the most destructive automatic thoughts and then develop an action plan to stop their impact on your life.

**Directions:** Read through all of the following scenarios. Write a check mark in the column if you can relate to them. If any scenario in a category sounds like you, then put a check in the “relatable” column.

## WHAT'S YOUR TRIGGER?

|   | <b>Scenario</b>   | <b>Relatable?</b> |
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| A | <p>You were doing great on your diet, and then ate too much at Thanksgiving dinner. You decide you've messed it all up and you'll just enjoy the upcoming holidays and start over in January.</p> <p>You were dating someone for a couple of months, and it had been going pretty well, but things took a turn and you broke up. You feel dejected and resign yourself to being single for the long haul and fear that you will never find a good partner.</p> <p>Your boss offers some critique of your presentation, which you worked hard to prepare. His/her comments put you in a state of panic, and you believe you might be demoted, or worse, fired.</p> |                   |
| B | <p>After a long search, you finally land a great job! You pull several late nights in a row at the office because you feel you should show everyone how dedicated you are, although your supervisor has told you he is quite pleased with your work so far. You're exhausted and cranky, but insist on continuing to work extended hours to "prove" your prowess.</p>   |                   |

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|   | <p>Spin class is super popular at your gym. Although you don't enjoy riding a bike, you feel you should take several classes per week because you want to get in shape and figure this is the best way to do it.</p> <p>You're feeling down and reach out to your best friend to make plans that day. But she is busy and can't get together on short notice. You become upset with her because she should know that a great friend would do whatever it takes to be there for someone when they are struggling.</p>                     |  |
| C | <p>You go out on a blind date, and after twenty minutes, decide you have to get out of there because they are at least twenty pounds overweight and that is just not acceptable to you in a mate.</p> <p>After a few tough tennis matches where you lose, you decide you must be terrible at the sport so you might as well quit.</p> <p>During your review at work, your boss compliments your efforts but also gives you some goals to work toward. You walk out feeling like a failure because you didn't get a "perfect" review.</p> |  |

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| D | <p>A friend you haven't seen in years is thirty minutes late to lunch. You seethe over the entire meal because you feel it was a sign of disrespect toward you and that obviously she does not care about your time.</p> <p>Your partner asks what you want to do for your birthday. You say, "Oh, nothing," when you really want a celebration. When there isn't a party you become angry and pick a fight with your partner, because they should know what you really want without you having to say it out loud.</p> <p>You see your neighbor at the grocery store and wave. He does not respond, so you assume that he is snubbing you because he doesn't like you or you did something to make him upset.</p> |  |
| E | <p>You take a chance on a stock of an up-and-coming company that you have read about and researched extensively. When you make significant gains on the stock, you are momentarily pleased but then think it was probably luck, discounting the time and effort you put into building your portfolio.</p> <p>You complete your first marathon and when someone compliments you on the achievement you balk, saying it was</p>  |  |

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|   | <p>nothing because you didn't run it very fast, clocking in at a twelve-minute mile on average.</p> <p>At work, you land a new client but get uncomfortable when your coworkers make a big deal out of it because you think it was only a fluky break. When your colleagues congratulate you, you tell them that you didn't do anything remarkable and instead begin complimenting them on their achievements.</p>   |  |
| F | <p>Following a very stressful week at the office, your partner is in a cranky mood and has been irritable and short with you all day. You think it must be your fault somewhat, and bend over backward trying to find out what it is that you did that made them upset with you.</p> <p>The server at the restaurant gives you a dirty glass. You find yourself thinking that they are messing with you on purpose because they don't like you.</p> <p>Your child burns his hand on the stove while at home with the babysitter. You blame yourself for this accident, thinking, <i>If I didn't leave him with the babysitter to go out with my friends then he would not have hurt himself.</i></p> |  |

Now look at the letters associated with the scenarios you made a check mark next to, and compare it to the list below. These are common triggers for your self-sabotaging behaviors.

- A. Overgeneralizing/Catastrophizing
- B. “Shoulds”
- C. Black-and-White Thinking
- D. Mind Reading
- E. Discounting the Positive
- F. Personalization

For details on what each of these triggers are, how they lead to self-sabotage, and what you can do about it, please check out my book [Stop Self-Sabotage](#).