

# L.I.F.E Happens

Why do we sometimes overestimate threat and allow it to stop us from continuing on our path toward our goal?

The answer is L.I.F.E. happens. In my research and through my experience in working with clients, I've found time and again that there are four elements that fuel the conflict between going for what you want and being held back by perceived threats that actually won't harm you

## What is L.I.F.E?

**Low or Shaky Self-Concept**

**Internalized Beliefs**

**Fear of Change or the Unknown**

**Excessive Need for Control**

You can think of these aspects like an operating system that runs in the background and drives your beliefs and behavior. We typically acquire these L.I.F.E. elements when we are younger, and because they are with us over time, they tend to be outside of our awareness. It is very helpful to focus on them so you can more easily see how they inform your decisions, your ideas about yourself, and particularly how they can be a driver of self-sabotage.

With warmth and best wishes,

*Dr. Judy*

**TAKE THE QUIZ TO DISCOVER HOW L.I.F.E. MAY BE BEHIND YOUR SELF-SABOTAGING BEHAVIORS.**

**Which of the following are sometimes or mostly true for you?  
Be honest—no one else has to read your answers! Put a check mark  
in the rightmost column for all those statements that apply to you.**

<b>A</b>	The way you feel about yourself on a given day depends largely on situational factors (e.g., what others say to you, how others respond to you, or what your weight is on the scale).	
<b>A</b>	Your self-worth is primarily dictated by your accomplishments or the services that you are providing to others.	
<b>A</b>	Quick! List 5 things you love about yourself. Mark True if this a tough exercise for you, and/ or if you have trouble doing this in less than thirty seconds	
<b>A</b>	There are times in your adult life when you questioned your identity, who you are, or what you stand for.	
<b>A</b>	When you hear the awesome things that other people achieve, you secretly wonder if you have what it takes to do the same.	
<b>B</b>	When you were a child, you were told or shown that the world is a scary place and that it is dangerous to take risks.	
<b>B</b>	When you were a child, an important adult in your life (e.g., a parent, a teacher) seemed to be overly nervous or anxious about different things (e.g., job, home life, natural disasters)	
<b>B</b>	When you were a child, more often than not an important adult in your life seemed to have struggles meeting their own goals and/or appeared discouraged about their own progress.	
<b>B</b>	When you were a child, an important adult in your life was overcritical of you and/or held you to extremely high standards.	
<b>B</b>	Looking back on your life, you can honestly say that you did not have at least one role model for the major accomplishments of your life. You had to find your own way.	

<b>C</b>	You highly prefer structure and familiarity, and become irate at people or situations that throw you off your usual routine.	
<b>C</b>	When recounting periods of significant change in your life (e.g., moving, getting married, starting a new job, attending a new school), you remember more of the nervousness and discomfort rather than the excitement.	
<b>C</b>	You feel very nervous when you don't know what to expect in a situation.	
<b>C</b>	Once you decide on an important goal for yourself, one of the primary concerns you have is, "What if I fail?"	
<b>C</b>	You have had at least one experience in taking a chance on something new that blew up in your face and led you to feel much more nervous about trying new things later.	
<b>D</b>	Someone in your life has called you a "control freak" at some point.	
<b>D</b>	You often try to have the last word or win an argument.	
<b>D</b>	You find that you are often a harsh critic of not only yourself, but also others.	
<b>D</b>	You have a tendency to correct others when they are wrong, even if it is about somewhat inconsequential things.	
<b>D</b>	Be honest! You have a very tough time admitting you are wrong.	

# Scoring & Interpreting Your Quiz

Count up the number of check marks that are associated with each letter  
(A, B, C, D).

Mostly As = Low/Shaky Self-Concept: \_\_\_\_\_

Mostly Bs = Internalized Beliefs: \_\_\_\_\_

Mostly Cs = Fear of Change/Unknown: \_\_\_\_\_

Mostly Ds = Excessive Need for Control \_\_\_\_\_

The category for which you have the most check marks is your primary L.I.F.E. obstacle. If you have a tie, this would suggest that you have more than one dominant L.I.F.E. obstacle and each one might be contributing somewhat equally to self-sabotage.

If you have one letter that has the least check marks, that's great! This shows a strength in your L.I.F.E. profile—one you can lean on as you work on skills to overcome the other obstacles. If you have an area of identified strength, you can rest easy knowing that this element isn't causing self-sabotage—it is a factor that does not cause you to overestimate threat.

After tallying up your results, go to the next page for an in-depth description of each of the L.I.F.E. obstacles.



take care  
of your mind

## **Low or Shaky Self-Concept**

Self-concept is your image of who you are and how you define yourself. Social psychologist Roy Baumeister describes it as “the individual’s belief about himself or herself, including the person’s attributes and who and what the self is.”

This idea includes the sense that you are separate and different from others around you and also that you have certain characteristics that are uniquely yours. Some of these characteristics relate to how much value you place on yourself (i.e., your self-esteem or self-worth), the view you have of yourself (self-image), and what you wish you were like (ideal self). We don’t only have one sense of self, we have many facets of our identity to which we attribute different levels of confidence. Your self-concept is made up of many different components that are usually associated with social roles, and each of these roles plays a part in your overall self-concept based on the importance you place on each of them and how well you feel you are fulfilling each role.

For example, your self-concept may comprise several roles including entrepreneur, parent, friend, partner, athlete, mentor, and home cook. You may prioritize these roles based on how much they contribute to who you are and what you stand for, and each of these functions are associated with different levels of self-esteem (for example, you might feel very confident in your parenting skills, but feel less confident in your ability to be an elite athlete). Depending on how satisfied you are with how things are going in each of these domains of life, you may feel closer to or further from your ideal self, and this affects how you see yourself overall. Your ideal self is what you believe is the best version of you; stems from what you have learned from life experiences, cultural influences, and what you admire in others; and is usually something you are working toward by building on various aspects of your self-concept. The closer you get to your ideal self, the better you tend to feel about your life.

## **Low or Shaky Self-Concept Continued**

When we have a solid self-concept, we tend to have a positive view of ourselves. We believe that, on most days, we are closer to our ideal self (or at least that the ideal self is probably attainable). We tend to have confidence in our ability to achieve goals, be more optimistic about potential outcomes in work, life, and relationships, and worry less than the average person about what others might think of us because we feel solid about who we are. On the other hand, when we have Low or Shaky Self-Concept, we tend to believe that our ideal self is nothing more than a pipe dream. We lack confidence in our own ability to achieve goals, doubt that good things will ever happen to us, and look to external circumstances and events (like whether our boss immediately compliments us on our work) for how we should feel about ourselves on any given day. Low or Shaky Self-Concept makes us somewhat insecure about who we are, our place in the world, and our ability to bring about positive change. We may even believe that we aren't deserving of good things.

Self-sabotage can rear its ugly head when we have low self-concept overall or specifically in a particular role that is aligned with your goal. If you have great self-concept in most areas but don't see yourself as an athlete, you may have greater difficulty exercising five times a week or running a marathon, even if you use your organizational and planning skills that make you successful in other aspects of life. Or, if you have a shaky self-concept overall and not just in one area of life, you might find self-sabotage seeping into multiple places, from your work to your relationships and even your ability to make healthy choices. If self-sabotage impacts different areas in your life simultaneously, it can make it all the more frustrating and harder to manage. And the more you self-sabotage, the more you reinforce a lower or shaky self-concept, and it may feel increasingly like you can't dig yourself out of the problems you created. Low or Shaky Self-Concept can contribute to self-sabotage and reinforce a vicious cycle.

## **Internalized Beliefs**

Learning Theory, which explains how humans gain knowledge, has shown that behaviors are heavily dependent on vicarious conditioning. This means learning through observing the consequences of others' behavior. When we come into the world as babies, we're blank slates! We don't know what the world is about, and each time an event occurs, it presents an opportunity to internalize information we can apply to a similar situation later. It is through this gradual learning process that we mature cognitively and socially, and understand how to behave each and every day.

When we are young, the adults who take care of us make especially powerful impressions on us. We tend to adopt their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors more readily than those of people who don't oversee our care. So, if you witnessed your mother being a bit of a nervous Nelly or she constantly warned you about the dangers of the world ("Be careful crossing the street!" or "Don't play basketball, you could really injure yourself!"), it is more likely that you will adopt the belief that the world is inherently dangerous and that you should be vigilant for threat all around you. That's not to say that this belief doesn't serve a purpose--being careful ultimately ensures your survival! However, if you embrace this belief to excess, your attention to potentially threatening situations or your drive to avoiding threat will likely be stronger than your attention or motivation for achieving rewards, all thanks to your earlier learning experiences.

Let's consider an example. As a child you may have wanted to make friends by joining in with others on the playground, but were held back because your mom was overly cautious and didn't want you to hurt yourself on the equipment or get hit by the ball. You also saw your mom acting nervously in a number of situations that weren't particularly scary to you at the time and worry over the potential consequences of many decisions. As you grew up, you gradually started to see the world as your mom does, as a place where you must always look carefully before you leap—if you leap at all.

## **Internalized Beliefs Continued**

As an adult, your friends excitedly plan a ski trip, but all you can think about is what might go wrong on the slopes. What if you break your legs, make a fool of yourself, or get hypothermia? Ultimately, you decide to pass on the opportunity, telling your friends you are too busy with work to get away, or you go but sit in the lodge while you watch your friends racing down the mountain, wishing you were brave enough to take part. There are all sorts of beliefs we might internalize, not only through vicarious learning but also by being told by others what to fear. Sometimes we call this learning through negative verbal information. For example, a belief that you might not have what it takes to accomplish a goal might develop if you had a very judgmental parent, teacher, or other influential adult during your childhood. Although their intentions may have been good (“This is not good enough, and I just want you to be your best!”), hearing negative messages about your performance or being judged for your efforts constantly, especially when you feel you did try your best, makes you start to question whether anything you do will be good enough. In time, that critical adult’s voice morphs into your own voice, and even without them at your side disapproving your every action, you begin to disparage your own.

This negative internal voice contributes to self-sabotage, because when you doubt what you are capable of, you are likely to either never start pursuing your goal or quit halfway. Negative self-talk that arises from internalized beliefs is a major driver of self-sabotage. If you don’t believe you will be rewarded for your efforts (because you have come to believe you don’t have what it takes) you may never make an effort at all. For example, you may want a new job and see a posting that is appealing but because you aren’t confident in your interviewing abilities you let the opportunity pass without even filing an application. Your lack of self-esteem makes the idea of the interview (and your possible failure during the process) too uncomfortable to deal with, so you don’t even attempt trying for the job. Or your shaky self-concept may derail you in the middle of the process.

## **Internalized Beliefs Continued**

Perhaps you get through the interview but when asked for follow-up information you delay sending what's needed because you worry what you've put together isn't good enough. The negative mental chatter convinces you that it's better to back up than go forward. Even the potential reward isn't enough to get you through—in that moment it seems like a better idea to avoid the perceived threat about the situation.

## **Fear of Change or the Unknown**

Humans are creatures of habit. Routines and familiarity comfort our minds, which love repetition as a way to instill calm and manage stress. Our mind can be described as a cognitive miser, a term first coined by psychologists Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor, PhDs, to explain the mind's preference to think and solve problems as simply and with as little effort as possible. Not unlike the physical body, the brain tires and fatigues. Load up the brain with too much information, and it will become scattered and impulsive or simply too overwhelmed to do anything productive. For this reason, the mind is always looking for shortcuts—like routines—so that if a big conflict or problem comes along, you'll have the bandwidth to tackle it. When something new is introduced, the mind can interpret it as a type of stressor. Instead of being able to function on autopilot like we do when brushing our teeth or commuting to work, new situations and projects jolt us into deliberate and conscious problem solving.

Big, sudden changes or too many changes all at once are especially confusing to our brains, and when feeling pushed beyond the comfort of usual levels of familiarity, you may respond to a new challenge by choosing to remain in the same place and continuing to do the thing you always did. Even if the familiar option (staying in an unsatisfying job) is clearly undesirable when compared to the unfamiliar challenge (going back out on the job market in search of a better career), you may not act, because the familiar feels safer than the alternative. I mean, better the devil you know, right?

## **Fear of Change or the Unknown Continued**

When the brain is overly taxed and flooded with new (read: threatening) information, it can work in nonsensical ways. In a mistaken attempt to protect you, your mind holds you back from a potentially positive change, rationalizing that at least you've learned over time how to deal with the current problems. You're alive, so why rock the boat? The psychological threat that is often paired with Fear of Change or the Unknown can lead to self-sabotage if we aren't careful. It takes some effort to realize this might be the culprit in your self-sabotage, because it usually involves doing nothing different, rather than something active to mess up your progress toward a goal. So in some ways, this may be one of the tougher elements to catch at first, but once you see it for what it is, you'll be able to challenge yourself to move past it and improve your life.

## **Excessive Need for Control**

Belief in your ability to exert control over your environment and to produce desired results is essential to your well-being. Researchers have long believed that the perception of control is a psychological and biological necessity. This need is not, for the most part, something we acquire through learning, but is innate and biologically motivated. From an evolutionary standpoint, if we are in control of our environment, then we have a much better chance of survival. If we can predict what is going to happen, then we can be assured that all will be well or if there is impending danger, we can plan ahead and develop strategies to avoid that danger. Look, we can't control every aspect of our lives and we'd make ourselves crazy trying to do so. However, it is human nature to want to *feel* in control of what is going on around us. So the key is *believing* that we are masters of our environments, because this gives us a sense of relief (and belief) that we have some power over the good things that happen to us as well as the ability to prevent potentially bad things that can befall us.

## **Excessive Need for Control Continued**

Like many things in life, moderation is great, but when taken overboard, a good thing gets turned on its head. If you let it get the best of you, this adaptive mechanism of wanting control can get in the way of reaching your goals. If you feel that you must always be able to see the finish line and every single step along the way as clear as day before you even take your first step, that need will likely stop you from ever starting. It may also lead you to quit in the middle of the journey because your need for control of the situation is so strong and causes so much tension that any unknowns along the way are simply too much for your conscious mind to deal with. The only way to relieve stress is to stop what you are doing and revert back to something you perceive having total control over. So instead of going on that blind date your good friend set up for you (talk about a lack of control!), you decide to stay home and engage in a task that you can do at any time (read: not on the specific night of your blind date) like catalogue the books on your bookshelf. This need for control can contribute to self-sabotage because it can prevent you from taking advantage of new opportunities where you may not have a ton of control but could lead to wonderful outcomes.

If you're having trouble self-identifying as a person who has Excessive Need for Control, ask yourself these simple questions. Does your need for control get in the way of your relationships? Do you snap too quickly at something that seems minor because you felt like you were losing control? Do you find yourself in unnecessary conflicts at work because of your need for control? Does your love of control make it harder for you to enjoy activities and events when you don't know what's going to happen? If you answered yes to any of the above questions, you may want to pay special attention to this element of L.I.F.E.