

A LINE ON LIFE

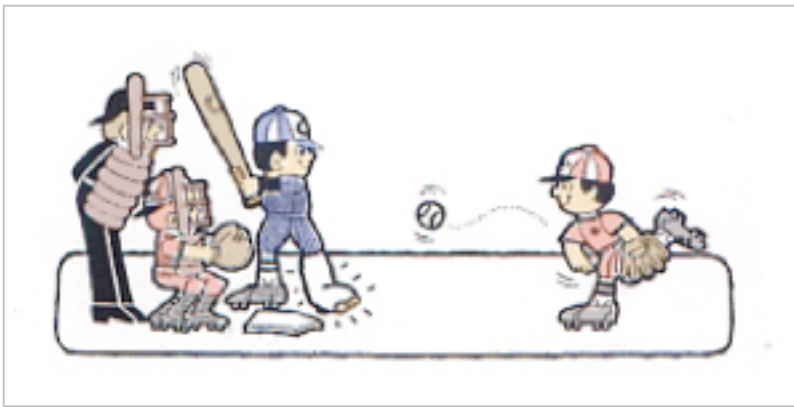
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Self-Handicapping Your Resolutions *

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At the beginning of each New Year, many of us make resolutions. However, relatively few of us keep them. One of the reasons that people do not reach their goals – whether they are New Year's resolutions or not – is that they handicap themselves. How and why do they do this?

To maintain **self-esteem**, we consistently try to protect our self-image. However, some people protect their self-esteem by insuring failure. This method is called **self-handicapping**.



In self-handicapping, the goal of self-doubters is to minimize their ability – or lack of it – as a plausible explanation for poor performance. When a great deal of what we do is evaluated – both by others and ourselves – we want to look good. We want to demonstrate that we are **competent** in whatever tasks we undertake – athletic, intellectual, artistic or social. If we fail in any area, this reduces our feeling of competence and

negatively affects our self-esteem. However, what if the person who failed had some sort of handicap – defective equipment, the flu, a sleepless night or inefficient help? Then failure can't be taken as a reflection of one's "self," can it? The self-handicapper uses this logic to advantage, placing a barrier to successful performance on the road to completion of that task.

The original experiment on self-handicapping took place in 1978. Subjects – who had previously succeeded in a task – were offered the choice of either a performance-hindering drug or a performance-helping drug. (Both were presumably under study by the psychologists.) Those who did not expect that success on the task would occur again took the opportunity to protect themselves – literally their "self-esteem" – by taking the performance-hindering drug. By taking the drug, the subjects manipulated the situation. If failure did occur, it could be blamed on the performance-hindering drug. In this way, subjects could maintain the illusion that the first performance – which was successful – was a reflection of their true abilities. On the other hand, they could avoid the frightening possibility that their upcoming performance would completely undermine their self-esteem.

Not all subjects engaged in self-handicapping. Those who self-handicapped had self-doubt about their successes. In the experiment, the "successes" had been rigged. Half of the subjects had taken an initial test with 16 solvable and 4 unsolvable problems. The other half had taken a test made up of 4 solvable and 16 unsolvable problems. Under both conditions, the experimenter told each subject:

"You have done extremely well, in fact, better than nearly all the participants who have taken this test so far."

Those with the 16 unsolvable problems – problems they later reported as seeming almost impossible – were confronted with a success that they couldn't imagine that they had achieved. At least, they could not imagine *how* they had achieved it! (Actually, of course, they had not succeeded.) To protect their fragile

sense of competence and self-esteem – they self-handicap themselves. The performance-hindering drug both protected them from failure and protected their belief that their first success had been their own.

In short, self-handicapping is a response to an anticipated loss of self-esteem. The self-handicapping individual has a precarious and fragile self-image. However, this is not a person whose self-image is entirely negative. The very basis of the self-handicapping strategy is that the person has some self-esteem to protect.

As an example, let's take students who resolve to do better in school. There are many ways for students to engage in self-handicapping. For one, they can take courses that require prerequisites without taking the prerequisites. If they fail, it is only because they lacked the prerequisites. Second, they may not do various practice exercises (homework) assigned by the teacher. Here failure is blamed on the lack of practice. Third, they may **procrastinate** – wait until the last minute to do various assignments. If anything goes wrong, it can be blamed on the "*lack of time*." Another is to repeatedly antagonize or criticize the teacher in class. Then, if failure occurs, it is because the teacher "*had it in for me*."

Self-handicappers never realize their true capabilities.

Whatever strategy the students choose, they are keeping themselves from doing their best. They believe it is better to never know what they are really capable of doing. It seems as if they prefer ambiguity rather than clarity about their abilities – especially when the clarity may be unflattering. The self-handicapper's biggest worry seems to be:

"What if I try my hardest and do the best I can – and I still do not succeed?"

Self-handicappers will probably never know what they are capable of doing. Because of their self-handicapping habit, they will not reach many of the goals they really want. However – if your self-esteem is not quite as fragile – you may be able to take the risk of doing your absolute best to reach your goals. True, you may fail. However, if you do give your best attempt, just think how nice it will be when you succeed!

* Adapted from Philip Zimbardo's *Psychology and Life*, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1985, pages 448-449.