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Masochism Explained: The Self-Sabotaging Personality

Psychodynamic conceptualizations of masochism explain why people self-sabotage.

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Why do some people self-sabotage?

Psychodynamics can offer an answer.

Some individuals may unwittingly set themselves up for repeated failures in work and love relationships because of an unconscious (or implicit) need to punish oneself. For example, an individual may get themselves very close to a promotion at work but then blow it in a way that looked inevitable and seemingly planned.

The implicit need to punish oneself satisfies pervasive, extreme, oppressive feelings of guilt.

Guilt is the predominant feeling among what traditional psychoanalysis labeled “moral masochism” (as opposed to sexual masochism, the fetish). Another way of describing the pattern of unconsciously arranging to get close to success but ultimately not to make it is to say one is engaging in “self-sabotage.”

The self-sabotaging character has been labeled “masochistic” in psychoanalytic theory. Prior to describing the psychodynamic conceptualization of masochism further, it is necessary to point out that psychodynamic theory posits the existence of unconscious processing which can include motivation and emotions that we are unaware of.

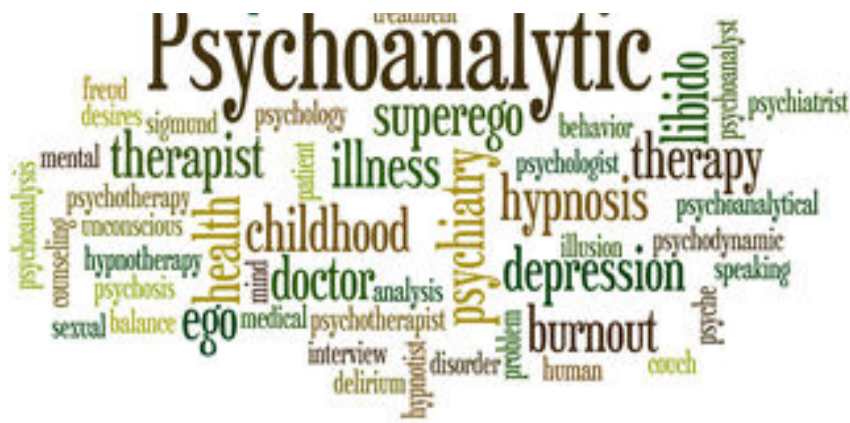
The Freudian construct of moral masochism evolved into a conceptualization of a masochistic personality disorder (and its sub-clinical variant, masochistic personality style). The DSM-I and DSM-II included a diagnostic category for the masochistic personality. The DSM-III and DSM-III-R relabeled masochistic personality and included it as a personality disorder under the label “self-defeating personality disorder.”

However, from the DSM-IV to present, it has been omitted—putatively lost to the dustbin of psychiatric nosology, clinical psychology, and psychoanalytic theory. In an effort to save the construct of masochistic psychopathology, a systematic psychodynamic conceptualization is warranted.

A psychodynamic classification model of personality includes the following dimensions: predominant affect, motivation, interpersonal style, behavioral pattern, defense mechanism, and cognitive style.

Interpersonal Masochism: Submissiveness

A masochistic individual often stays in relationships that are “obviously destructive” possibly because of specific psychological dynamics. Specifically, the masochistic individual in an emotionally abusive relationship behaves submissively. Masochistic submissiveness, however, is a defense mechanism; specifically, it is a reaction



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The goal of inducing guilt in their romantic partner (often hypothesized to lack the capacity for guilt) motivates masochistic submissiveness. In other words, masochistic individuals behave submissively, often to a humiliating degree, in the hopes of inducing guilt in the other individual. At a more general level of description, masochistic individuals are typically described as having difficulty expressing anger in relationships. Often, their hostility manifests in cutting the other person off completely, ending the relationship—i.e., ghosting the other person.

Masochistic individuals have been described as “nice guys” and display pathological levels of what R.F. Bornstein coined “interpersonal dependency” (i.e. “destructive overdependence”), including indecisiveness, passivity, and an excessive need for approval. Countertransference to individuals with masochism is intense. Often a therapist or significant other or caregiver may deny the presence of the hostility underlying overt masochism because they are threatened by their own sadism (Asch, 1988).



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Masochistic Self-Functioning

The masochistic individual has extremely high internal standards of success, is perfectionistic, and constantly falls short. Their pattern of underachievement in most significant areas results in severe, constant self-criticism, guilt, and general self-loathing. According to Asch (1988, pp. 100), “it is pride in self-abnegation, in taking the ‘harder’ way, in diminishing material gain that is the hallmark of the moral masochist [...] overt submission masks the hostile wish to control as well as the desire to engender guilt.”

Psychodynamic Classification of Masochism

- **Behavioral Pattern:** Underachiever; fails to live up to intellectual potential; unconsciously sets self up for failure.
- **Interpersonal Style:** Submissive, passive, needy, indecisive, dependent.

representation of a relationship or significant other person).

- **Defense Mechanism:** Reaction formation (submissiveness).
- **Cognition:** Self-criticism; self-attack.

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References

Asch, S. (1988) The analytic concepts of masochism: a reevaluation, in Masochism: Current Psychoanalytic Perspectives, edited by R. Glick and D. Meyers.



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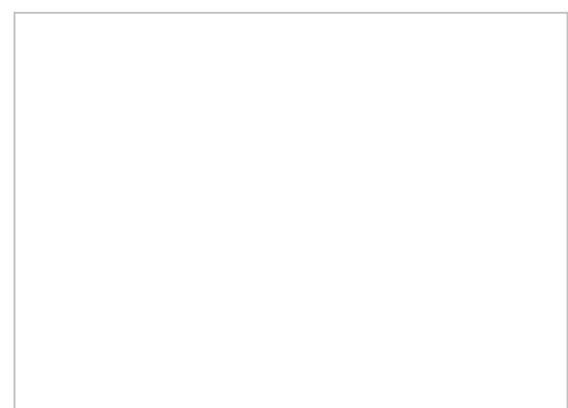
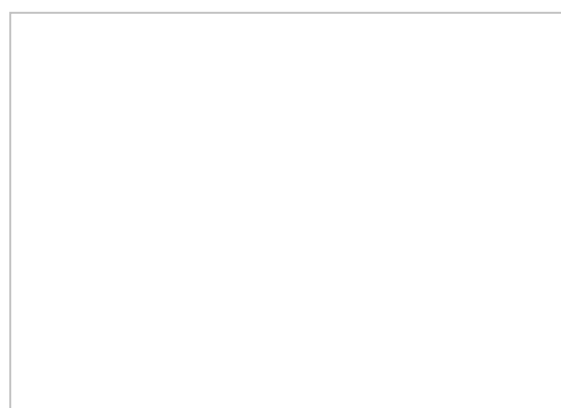
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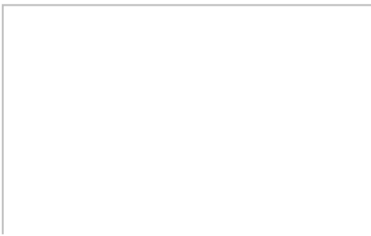


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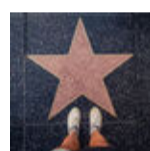


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