

## Tame Your Critic, a.k.a., Saboteurs or inner Minions

**Saboteurs (Sabs):** These are reactive, triggered parts of you. They either push you into or resist change, and often show up when old wounds get activated. When Sabs bully you into action, outcomes are often hard to sustain, of compromised quality, and inspire ambivalence or negativity. Resistant Sabs maintain the *status quo* and rail against shifts they believe are dangerous or risky, including those you want. Sabs are also “comparison machines;” they judge you based on how well or poorly you do in relation to others. They appear auditorily, behaviorally, or emotionally, including sometimes in ways visible to others, and sometimes in ways only apparent to you. Here are their most common practices:

- 1) Self-directed insults, name-calling, other forms of negative self-talk, *and* a negative communication style with others.
- 2) Internally and outer-directed critical, dismissive, sarcastic, agitated, or otherwise unpleasant *tone* of voice.
- 3) Rigid cause-effect, either/or thinking (if this then that) and absolutes (always, never, impossible) in self-talk or communication with others: “I’m the worst;” “You’re perfect!”
- 4) Internally or outer-directed commands, e.g., you or I should, shouldn’t, have to, need to<sup>1</sup> in contrast to I want to, or I choose to.
- 5) Persistent procrastination and time-management challenges.
- 6) Mild distraction.
- 7) Foginess, lethargy, or sudden onset of fatigue.
- 8) Mild anxiety or temporary episodes of withdrawal.
- 9) Righteous or defensive anger.
- 10) Unhealthy habits.
- 11) Distancing, isolating, armoring, resistant, numbing behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

Saboteurs take many forms including *Judge, Victim, Pleaser, Restless, Hyper-Vigilant, Hyper-Achiever, Hyper-Rational, Controller, Avoider, Stickler*<sup>3</sup>—better known as *Perfectionist—Procrastinator, Catastrophizer, Impostor, Rebel, Self-Righteous, Competitor, Know-It-All, and Peacekeeper*. Most of you have two or more Sabs, though one might be most prominent.

**Competent Self:** By contrast, your Competent Self (CS)—the grounded, centered, wise part of you—is calm, discerning, curious, and accountable. Your CS expresses compassion for you and others, even when challenged.

**When & Why?** Most Sabs developed when you were young to protect you from real or imagined threats. They thrive in Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Fawn<sup>4</sup> mode. They are like internal toddlers, teens, or minions from that eponymous movie: They’re devoted to you—the person who serves as their boss—and to your wellbeing, yet often unintentionally hurt you and damage your relationships. They are well-meaning, yet unskilled, ineffective defense mechanisms that over time deliver more harm than benefit.



**The Dilemma:** While your CS evolves and grows, Sabs stay static, especially if you remain unaware of them or let them make your decisions or communicate on your behalf. Sometimes your Sabs talk to other Sabs (e.g., spouses, colleagues), which creates negative conflict. Sabs can be the rock *and* hard place: “You deserve respect!” “Why would anyone respect you?!?”

**Good news:** You can shift the balance of power from Sabs to your Competent Self. The better you know your Sabs, and the more capably you center your CS, the more you can resist, respond to, and limit their interference in your life.

**What Now?** Get to know your Sabs. Which ones do you sense most often? What triggers them? What do they say or do? If you could draw them, what would they look like? Because they’re often auto-pilot, familiar parts of you, please be patient as you get to know them and how they show up in your life, including your inner life.

**Protections:** Once you have a sense of your primary Sabs, including how and when they show up, ask them:

***What are you trying to protect me from? What risks, dangers, downsides, or challenges would I face if I did or said the opposite of what you want, or if I did or said the opposite of how you’re showing up?***

Come up with *at least* two protections. Then, consider whether—at this stage in your life, and for that issue—you want those protections, even if only to a lesser degree. If so, what are more productive ways to protect yourself?

<sup>1</sup> While human needs exist—e.g., for air, water, safety—Sabs often disguise “shoulds” or wants as needs: “I need you to...” “I need privacy.”

<sup>2</sup> Some of these issues— e.g., sudden onset of lethargy, mild distraction, mild anxiety, episodes of withdrawal, numbing behaviors, unhealthy habits—differ in important ways from chronic issues and clinical mental health challenges, e.g., sleep deprivation, narcolepsy, ADHD, anxiety disorder, clinical depression, addictions, severe dissociation, and self-harm. Plus, some of these concepts—like righteous anger—occur for more reasons than explained by a Saboteur. They can be important and empowering responses to discrimination, abuse, and other life experiences.

<sup>3</sup> The term “Saboteur” was coined by the Co-Active Training Institute. Shirzad Chamine describes the first ten Saboteurs in his book, *Positive Intelligence*.

<sup>4</sup> While fawning—a.k.a., people-pleasing or appeasing—is not among the brain’s commonly noted reactions to fear, some therapists add it to fight/flight/freeze as a trauma response. Cultural expectations and discrimination also reinforce “fawning” as a Sab protective measure.