

Do Not Tell Yourself You Have Negative Traits

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Many years ago, I decided that I was not that good at math. This happened with seemingly good reason. I got an F in algebra in the ninth grade. However, I did not get an F because I was not capable of doing the work. I got an F because I never once did homework for the class—and was too distracted by other stuff during class to follow what was going on. I was a misbehaving, distracted, and lazy kid. I could get good grades in just about every other class without doing homework, but in math this was impossible. So I decided I was bad at math.

As a consequence of deciding I was bad in math, I never did that well in math classes even when I forced myself to start doing homework in tenth grade after receiving dire warnings from my parents and the school about my future if I did not shape up. Despite an identity that I was bad at math, for some strange reason I always did much better on the math portion of standardized tests than other sections. To my astonishment when I took a standardized test for graduate school admissions I got a near perfect, 99th percentile on the math portion of the test. I had done something similar (but not as extraordinary) on the math portion of the SATs for college. I also took three semesters of calculus in college and during my last semester of the class, I started getting As on all my tests. It did not make any sense that I was good at something I had been telling myself I was bad at for most of my life.

Forgetting how much I hated math, I decided to apply to and then attend Stanford Business School to get a master's degree in business. On the second day of orientation, I received a few textbooks dealing with various numbers and spreadsheets. I opened the books and they looked positively puzzling. The first lecture I went to was a three-hour lecture about spreadsheets and numbers. I had no idea whatsoever what the professor was talking about and sat there confused as other students took notes. Then the Dean of the business school got up and made a speech to all the new students about how Stanford Business School was all about "quantitative skills" and "numbers."

There's no freaking way I am going to fit in with this stuff, I thought to myself as he was speaking. *What the heck have I gotten myself into?*

I figured there was no way I was ever going to understand this business math stuff. Partially due to my profound belief that I did not speak either "spreadsheet" or "math," I dropped out of the school a few days later to the astonishment of the administrators.

In reality, I am not bad at math. The reason I told myself I was bad at math for so long is actually a pretty simple one: *I've always hated doing math-related homework.* For me, it requires sitting down for long stretches of time with a pencil and paper and going over and over problems. I do not have the patience for doing this for hours on end. In fact, I despise doing math-related homework. When I was younger, an easy way to spend my evenings enjoying television shows and video games was to declare I am "bad at math," so I did not have to do the homework. Being "bad at math" allowed me to be much more comfortable. When I went to business school, deciding I was "bad at math" made it so easy I did not have to go back to school and, instead, could enjoy myself working in my company.

I am much more comfortable with an identity of being "bad at math" than I would be telling myself I'm "good at math." Instead of being disappointed in myself for not liking math—or doing math homework--long ago I developed the identity that I am bad at math.

What's so stupid about this identity is that it is not true at all. I am actually not bad at math; however, rather than confront a part of myself that is lazy, does not enjoy the tedium of doing math homework, and adopted an identity of being bad at something long ago—I have, instead, accepted this identity that I am bad at something in order to be comfortable and not change my ways.

How many things are you good at that you tell yourself you are bad at in order to be comfortable?

My belief is that you probably tell yourself you are not good at many things because it is easier for you to tell yourself you are bad at something than it is for you to deal with the stress associated with what it takes to be very good at something. It is much easier to be average and mediocre at something than it is to be good at something.

If you truly want to be good at something, you are surely going to experience more stress and uncertainty than you would by being good at something. For many people, a negative identity is more comfortable than a positive identity. You may be more comfortable in the short run telling yourself you are bad at something. In the long run, though, you will never reach your full potential in anything by reassuring yourself that you are bad at something.

Most people assign one or more of the following sorts of personality traits to themselves:

- Undependable vs. Dependable
- Incompetent vs. Competent
- Cautious vs. Risk Taker
- Underachiever vs. Overachiever
- Introverted vs. Extroverted
- Messy vs. Clean
- Impatient vs. Patient
- Unkind vs. Kind
- Unforgiving vs. Forgiving
- Insensitive vs. Sensitive
- Moody vs. Level

- Picky vs. Mellow
- Selfish vs. Giving
- Unrealistic vs. Realistic
- Calculating vs. Fair
- Cold vs. Warm
- Neurotic vs. Laid-back

Some of these personality characteristics could be accurate—others may not be. If you have assigned some negative characteristics to yourself, it is likely you are doing this because it is easier for you being the negative characteristic than the positive opposite.

- For example, I do not believe it is fair for anyone to call themselves “messy.” Someone who is “messy” is more likely to be “lazy” when it comes to cleaning stuff up and to be more comfortable not cleaning up than cleaning.
- Similarly, someone who calls themselves “unrealistic” probably enjoys thinking “big thoughts” rather than the pain confronting reality would cause. No one needs to be unrealistic—they are unrealistic because it is easier and more comfortable than being realistic.

Adopting negative characteristics for ourselves makes us more comfortable than the positive ones.

The problem with adopting negative characteristics for ourselves is that doing this stops us from growing in a certain direction we could otherwise grow in. A common characteristic people assign to themselves and others is being introverted. People are social animals and while people can be legitimately introverted, most people deep down would prefer to be close to others and associating with others. The problem with associating with others, though, is that when you do this, you are going to have moments that are painful. Conflicts with other people are always going to occur. These conflicts are part of life and are also part of what makes us grow. It is more comfortable for many people to avoid conflict and to do this, they simply avoid people.

When it comes right down to it, there are probably numerous things you could be exceptional at if you did not give yourself a negative identity associated with them. In business, for example, many people tell themselves things like they are “bad salespeople” or “poor networkers.” If you tell yourself you’re a bad salesperson, then you will not have to get out and sell people and face rejection. Similarly, if you tell yourself you are a poor networker, you will not have to risk rejection either.

Most people prefer comfort and certainty over uncertainty. If you are always seeking comfort, though, the odds are pretty good that you are going to be left far behind in your **career** and life. You need to set yourself up for constant and never-ending improvement--and the only way to do this is to throw off any negative identities you have for yourself that you may have adopted because they make you comfortable. A negative identity is almost always something you are using as a safety mechanism to keep yourself comfortable and to give you more certainty in your life.

People almost always adopt negative personality traits because they are seeking some sort of comfort and avoiding the pain that would be associated with adopting a more positive personality trait. When you have total and complete certainty, though, you lose your edge—and you stop growing. You also tend to get bored. When we are bored, we generally become unhappy.

To become happy, adopt positive personality traits and not negative ones.

THE LESSON

Do not convince yourself of your own negative traits. We often adopt negative characteristics rather than positive ones to excuse ourselves from things we find unpleasant. If you are always seeking comfort, though, you will most likely be left behind in your life and career. You must identify and abandon the negative traits you have adopted for the sake of comfort, and don't shy away from the pain that may be associated with adopting a more positive personality trait.