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Self-handicapping is a strategy whereby people intentionally undermine their own performance. For example, a self-handicapping student might drink heavily the night before an exam.

So what benefits are there for these self-defeating behaviors? Social psychologists suggest that people self-handicap to avoid responsibility for failure. Imagine a tennis player who claims to be sick. If the player loses the match, the tennis player can blame the loss on her sickness rather than her own ability. But here is the flipside of self-handicapping. What if the player wins the match? In this case, her opponent will assume that the sick player is very good indeed.

In a classic study, Princeton University students took what appeared to be an intelligence test. The test was so hard that students had to guess the answers. However, after they completed the test, all the students were told they scored very well. So, the students who took the test knew they did well, but they were not sure why they did well nor were they certain that they could repeat a good performance.

Next, all students were informed that they would be taking a follow-up test. They were then given the opportunity to choose one of two new experimental drugs before they took the second test. One drug would help performance, or the other drug would hinder performance. The researchers found that participants were much more likely to take the performance hindering drug. The drug served as a handicap and gave the students a perfectly good excuse for poor performance if they failed the follow-up test.

Self-handicaps can take many forms including chronic pain complaints, procrastination, drug abuse, and even over scheduling oneself. So the next time you wonder why someone might choose to sabotage their own performance, think about the benefits of self-handicapping.

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