

Are Toxic Relationships a Problem for You?

Objective

To identify if toxic relationships are a problem for you and explore ways to address this pattern.

What to Know

Do you have a pattern of attracting toxic partners or friends? These relationships bring you down because they are filled with instability, criticism, and abuse. No matter how loving and supportive you are, these people never seem happy, and their behavior affects your mental health.

In healthy relationships, there might be occasional disagreements, but generally you are kind and supportive to one another, genuinely enjoy each other's company, and openly discuss any problems.

Depending on the nature of the relationship, signs of toxicity can be subtle or obvious. Check off any of the following that apply to you.

- You feel drained or unhappy after spending time with the person.
- The relationship lacks fun and playfulness.
- You always seem to irritate each other.
- You cannot seem to stop arguing or bickering over minor issues.
- You dread the thought of seeing them.
- There is a lack of support and encouragement.
- Every achievement seems to become a competition.
- You cannot trust them.
- You feel your needs and interests do not matter.
- Most conversations include sarcasm, contempt, outright hostility, or criticism.
- You avoid their phone calls.
- Envy and jealousy exist in the relationship.
- There is suspicion and mistrust.
- The person becomes annoyed or irritated when you do not immediately answer texts, or they text you repeatedly until you respond.
- There is an obvious need for control.
- There is a tendency to hold grudges.

- You do not feel safe speaking up when something bothers you.
- You find yourself lying because you worry how they will react if you tell them the truth.
- There is a pattern of being chronically late, “forgetting” events, and other behaviors that show disrespect for your time.
- The other person consistently disrespects financial agreements or breaks promises.
- You find yourself constantly on edge, even when there is no significant stress from outside sources.
- You frequently feel miserable, mentally and physically exhausted, or generally unwell.
- You go along with the other person’s wishes, even when it goes against your comfort level.
- You have stopped spending time with friends and family to avoid conflict.
- Worrying about your relationship occupies much of your free time.
- You have let go of your usual self-care habits, withdraw from hobbies you once loved, neglect your health, or sacrifice your free time.
- You believe if you just change yourself and your actions, the other person will change, too.
- You worry that by bringing up problems, you will start a fight.
- You tend to be a people-pleaser.
- You are conflict avoidant and keep any problems to yourself.
- Add up your checkmarks.**

If you scored 10 or less, you are at a slight risk of engaging in a toxic relationship.

If you scored between 11-19, you are at moderate risk and may want to identify ways to address the issues in the relationship.

If you scored 20 or more, you are probably in a toxic relationship, and it is time to take steps to address it for your own mental health.

Why do you choose relationships where the other person criticizes, bullies, controls, or puts you down? If you continue to stay in a relationship with a toxic person or have a pattern of toxic relationships, you may be choosing relationships on an unconscious level by recreating patterns from your past.

You learn about relationships in your family of origin. If you formed secure attachments with a caregiver or parents—based on unconditional love and acceptance—you learn you are acceptable, that you deserve respect, and that others should treat you well. You understand you have the right to express your opinions and have your needs met. As you become an adult, you will then invite people into your life who love and respect you—and treat you with compassion and care.

However, if you were raised in a family where your needs were unmet, and your caregivers were distant, unavailable, volatile, critical, or abandoned or abused you, you may choose relationships with people who mimic these dynamics. You tend to be drawn to what confirms what you think about the world—no matter how painful—because you feel comfortable operating within a belief system rooted in your childhood. You unconsciously choose people who confirm your beliefs about yourself by triggering childhood emotions and responses.

What can you do to break this pattern?

1. Identify toxic relationship patterns.

2. Compare the patterns to those of your own parent/caregiver(s) and notice commonalities.

3. Recognize your triggers with potential new friends/partners.

4. Be aware of warning signs (red flags) early on.

5. Recognize there is nothing wrong with you. *You may worry there is something wrong with you. Attracting toxic people does not mean you are a bad, useless, or worthless person. It suggests you have unmet needs and issues from your past that have not been fully addressed. You may benefit exploring this with the help of a mental health professional.*

6. Maintain your boundaries.

7. Focus on you. *Consciously build your confidence, self-respect, and sense of worth and address guilt and shame.*

Note—If your safety is at risk and you are ending the relationship:

If you decide to end the relationship, these strategies can help you do so safely.

- **Seek support from a mental health professional or domestic violence advocate.** They can help you make a safety plan and access resources.
- **Share your situation with a trusted loved one.** Family and friends can offer emotional support, and may even offer you financial help or a place to stay.
- **Change your phone number.** If blocking the person's number is ineffective, consider changing your number. Block social media accounts so you do not feel tempted to respond if they contact you.
- **Take care of yourself.** Ending relationships is painful, so honor your needs by taking time to relax, sleep, and engage in self-care. Take time to heal before starting a new relationship.

National Domestic Violence Hotline, available 24/7 (languages: English, Spanish, and 200+ through interpretation service). 800-799-7233 or text **START** to 88788

Chat via the website: www.thehotline.org

<u>Parent/Caregiver</u> Traits	<u>Parent/Caregiver</u> Traits	<u>Partner/Friend</u> Traits	<u>Partner/Friend</u> Traits

What traits and behaviors does your partner/friend share with your parent(s)?

Repeat this exercise with past partners. What are some commonalities?

Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise that you did not know before?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What can you do differently to make progress in this area?
