



Toxic Relationships Reader 2025



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Introduction

This document has been developed by NICRO at the request of our beneficiaries. It is being made available to the general public as part of our crime and violence prevention service. Individuals and organisations may make use of this document for non-profit and educational purposes.

This reader contains explanatory notes, examples and educational content, as well as guidance and advice.

The goal of this reader is to provide educational information on toxicity in relationships, so that affected people can make more informed choices about their current and future situations.

What is a Toxic Relationship?

A **toxic relationship** is a relationship in which the dynamics are consistently harmful to one or both parties. These relationships are characterised by patterns of **emotional, psychological, or even physical damage**, rather than mutual respect, support, and healthy communication. By recognizing the signs of toxicity and implementing effective strategies, we can protect our well-being and make informed decisions about these relationships.

Toxic Behaviours

Here are the more common examples of toxic behaviours.



- **EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION**

- Gaslighting – Making someone question their reality or sanity.
- Guilt-Tripping – Using guilt to control or influence others.
- Playing the Victim – Always portraying oneself as the victim to avoid accountability.
- Love Bombing – Overwhelming someone with affection to manipulate them.

- **CONTROLLING AND OVERBEARING**

- Excessive Jealousy – Constantly questioning loyalty or seeking reassurance.



- Possessiveness – Trying to control someone's actions, relationships, or decisions.
- Overstepping Boundaries – Ignoring or disrespecting personal limits- both physical and emotional.
- **DISHONESTY AND DECEPTION**
 - Lying and Deceit – Hiding the truth, twisting facts and omitting facts.
 - Breaking Promises – Frequently failing to keep commitments.
 - Two-Faced Behaviour – Acting differently in front of different people.
- **PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVENESS**
 - Silent Treatment – Ignoring someone to punish them.
 - Sarcasm and Backhanded Compliments – Masking insults as humour.
 - Withholding Affection or Support – Using love or approval as a bargaining tool.
- **NEGATIVITY AND DRAMA**
 - Always Complaining – Constantly focusing on problems without seeking solutions
 - Creating Unnecessary Conflict – Stirring drama or provoking arguments.
 - Blaming Others – Refusing to take responsibility for actions
- **DISRESPECT AND LACK OF EMPATHY**
 - Belittling or Demeaning Others – Making people feel small or unworthy.
 - Invalidating Feelings – Dismissing or minimizing others' emotions.
 - Lack of Accountability – Refusing to acknowledge wrongdoing.
- **SELF-DESTRUCTIVE AND TOXIC INDEPENDENCE**
 - Sabotaging Relationships – Pushing people away out of fear or insecurity.
 - Refusing Help or Support – Acting like needing help is a weakness.
 - Constant Negativity – Draining energy from those around them.



Common Gaslighting Techniques

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person or group deliberately makes someone question their own reality, memory, or perceptions. The goal is to undermine the victim's confidence and sense of truth, causing confusion, self-doubt, and dependency on the manipulator. This behaviour is often subtle and persistent, making it difficult for the victim to recognise and resist.

Technique	Description	Example
Denial of Facts	Flat-out denying events, conversations, or promises even when there is evidence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I never said that. You must be imagining things."
Minimising Feelings	Dismissing or belittling the victim's emotions or concerns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You're overreacting. You're too sensitive."
Blaming the Victim	Turning the blame onto the victim, making them feel responsible for the abuser's behaviour.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "If you weren't so difficult, I wouldn't have to act this way." • "You are crazy, that is why you go to therapy/take medication"
Withholding Information	Refusing to share information or pretending not to understand what the victim is saying.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I don't know what you're talking about," • "You're confusing me with someone else."
Countering	Questioning the victim's memory or perception, suggesting they're mistaken or forgetful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Are you sure that's how it happened? You have a bad memory." • "You know your medication affects your memory."
Diverting	Changing the subject or questioning the victim's credibility to avoid accountability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Why are you bringing that up now? You're just trying to distract me."
Trivialising	Making the victim's concerns seem unimportant or irrelevant.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "It's not a big deal. You're making a mountain out of a molehill."
Gaslighting by Proxy	Involving others to reinforce the abuser's version of reality or isolate the victim.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spreading rumours to make others doubt the victim's truth or sanity.
Love Bombing and Devaluation	Alternating between excessive praise and harsh criticism to confuse the victim.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You're the only one who understands me," followed by "You're so useless, why bother?" • "If you leave me, I will kill myself"
Rewriting History	Retelling past events differently to suit the abuser's narrative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "That never happened the way you remember it."



Why People Behave in a Toxic Manner Towards Others

People's toxic behaviour often stems from underlying personal issues, learned patterns, or situational pressures. Understanding these reasons can clarify that such behaviour is less about the victim and more about the perpetrator's struggles or intentions.

Toxic behaviour is often rooted in the perpetrator's unresolved issues rather than the victim's faults. While understanding these causes does not excuse harmful actions, it can aid in developing empathy, setting boundaries, and seeking appropriate help or intervention.

- **INSECURITY AND LOW SELF-ESTEEM**
 - People who feel inadequate or unworthy may put others down to feel superior or in control.
 - **Example:** A manager constantly criticises employees to mask their own fear of being perceived as incompetent.
- **NEED FOR CONTROL AND POWER**
 - Some individuals seek to dominate relationships or environments to feel safe or important.
 - **Example:** A partner isolates their significant other from friends to maintain control and prevent independence.
- **LEARNED BEHAVIOUR AND FAMILY PATTERNS**
 - Toxic behaviour can be passed down through generations as a 'normal' way to relate.
 - **Example:** A person who grew up in a household where yelling and blame were common might replicate this in their adult relationships.
- **UNRESOLVED TRAUMA OR EMOTIONAL PAIN**
 - Past abuse, neglect, or trauma can cause people to act out negatively, projecting their pain onto others.
 - **Example:** An employee who experienced bullying as a child may bully colleagues as a misguided way to protect themselves.
- **STRESS AND EXTERNAL PRESSURES**
 - High stress or difficult life circumstances can lower patience and increase irritability, leading to toxic behaviour.
 - **Example:** A stressed-out parent may snap harshly at family members despite not intending to harm.
- **LACK OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE OR AWARENESS**
 - Some people may not understand how their actions affect others or how to manage their emotions healthily.
 - **Example:** Someone who frequently interrupts or dismisses others might not realise the damage it causes.



- **JEALOUSY AND ENVY**

- Resentment towards another's success or happiness can provoke toxic behaviours such as sabotage or gossip.
- **Example:** A friend spreading rumours to damage another's reputation due to jealousy over their achievements.

- **FEAR OF VULNERABILITY OR REJECTION**

- Toxic behaviours can be defence mechanisms to avoid perceived threats to self-worth or safety.
- **Example:** A partner uses criticism and control to keep emotional distance, fearing intimacy or rejection.



Examples of Toxic Behaviours in Relationships

Toxic Behaviour	Family Example	Romantic Example	Friendship Example
Constant Criticism	A parent compares you to a more "successful" sibling and undermines your efforts.	A partner mocks your looks or job, even in front of others, and calls it "just a joke".	A friend regularly makes demeaning remarks and calls you "too sensitive" when confronted.
Manipulation or Control	A relative guilt-trips you into doing things by saying, "After all I've done for you."	A partner isolates you from loved ones, saying they're "bad for you".	A friend threatens to end the friendship if you don't prioritise them.
Lack of Trust or Honesty	Family members spread your personal information or twist your words.	A partner accuses you of lying or cheats and denies everything.	A friend gossips about you while pretending to support you.
Disrespect of Boundaries	A parent invades your space or makes life decisions for you without consent.	A partner insists on checking your messages or policing who you talk to.	A friend pressures you into things you're not comfortable with despite clear boundaries.
Emotional Volatility	A parent alternates between affection and hostility, making you walk on eggshells.	A partner flips between loving and cruel, leaving you emotionally confused.	A friend starts fights over trivial issues and ignores you until you apologise.
Unequal Effort	You provide emotional or financial support but get none in return.	You do all the planning and emotional work while your partner puts in no effort.	You're always the one initiating; your friend only shows up when it benefits them.
Blame-Shifting	A parent blames you for family conflict, even when it's clearly not your fault.	Your partner cheats or lies but blames you for their actions.	Your friend says you're "overreacting" and blames you for their bad behaviour.
Jealousy or Possessiveness	A sibling or parent resents your success or independence.	A partner gets angry if you talk to others or succeed without them.	A friend becomes jealous of your other relationships and tries to isolate you.
Neglect or Withdrawal	Family ignores your emotional needs or tells you to "get over it".	A partner shuts down during serious conversations and withholds affection.	A friend vanishes when you're struggling but expects support when they need it.



Common Traits and Characteristics of a Toxic Relationship

The table below summarises the common traits found in toxic relationships. Remember that toxic relationships can occur in families, between friends, in a romantic partnership, or in the workplace. These traits often accumulate over time, and the more of them present, the more damaging the relationship becomes.

Trait	Description	Typical Impact
Lack of Respect	Disregard for your boundaries, autonomy, values, or time.	Feeling devalued or unheard.
Poor Communication	Dishonesty, passive-aggressiveness, constant arguing, or refusal to address issues.	Misunderstandings, unresolved conflict, growing resentment.
Manipulation	Using guilt, gaslighting, or coercion to control or influence your decisions.	Confusion, self-doubt, erosion of confidence.
Control and Possessiveness	One party tries to dominate the other's choices, relationships, or daily activities.	Loss of independence and personal freedom.
Emotional Abuse	Verbal attacks, shaming, humiliation, or invalidating feelings.	Diminished self-esteem, chronic anxiety or depression.
Neglect	Emotional unavailability, withholding affection, or consistent lack of support.	Feeling alone even when you're with the person.
Jealousy and Insecurity	Unfounded suspicion, clinginess, or hostility over attention given to others.	Tension, mistrust, and isolation from others.
Blame and Deflection	Never accepting responsibility for issues; always making it your fault.	Internalised guilt and damaged self-worth.
Energy Drain	The relationship consistently leaves you feeling exhausted, anxious, or mentally overwhelmed.	Burnout and emotional fatigue.
One-sided Effort	One person invests heavily while the other contributes little or nothing.	Imbalance, frustration, and emotional depletion.
Instability	Constant ups and downs—apologies followed by repeated behaviour, emotional rollercoasters.	Chronic stress and unpredictability.
Disrespect for Privacy	Snooping, sharing private matters without consent, or invading personal space.	Loss of trust and feeling violated.



What Types of People Are More At Risk of Being in a Toxic Relationship

People from all backgrounds can end up in toxic relationships, but certain traits, life experiences, or social conditions can make some individuals more vulnerable to entering or staying in these dynamics. Below is a clear, practical breakdown of the types of people more at risk, with explanations grounded in psychology and lived reality.

Being more “at risk” doesn’t mean someone is weak or at fault—it means certain vulnerabilities can be exploited by toxic individuals.

1. PEOPLE WITH LOW SELF-ESTEEM

- a. **Why they’re at risk:** They may feel unworthy of healthy love or believe they have to “earn” someone’s affection.
- b. **Typical pattern:** They tolerate poor treatment, thinking they don’t deserve better, or fear being alone.

2. TRAUMA SURVIVORS (ESPECIALLY CHILDHOOD TRAUMA)

- a. **Why they’re at risk:** Early exposure to dysfunctional relationships can normalise toxic behaviour.
- b. **Typical pattern:** They unconsciously seek familiar dynamics—even if harmful—or struggle to identify red flags.

3. PEOPLE WITH A STRONG NEED FOR APPROVAL

- a. **Why they’re at risk:** Their self-worth is tied to how others see them.
- b. **Typical pattern:** They overextend themselves to avoid conflict or abandonment, tolerating toxic treatment to stay “liked” or needed.

4. OVERLY COMPASSIONATE INDIVIDUALS

- a. **Why they’re at risk:** They tend to prioritise others’ needs over their own and may feel responsible for “fixing” others.
- b. **Typical pattern:** They justify bad behaviour or stay to “help” someone change, at their own expense.

5. PEOPLE WITH CODEPENDENT TENDENCIES

- a. **Why they’re at risk:** Their identity is often wrapped up in another person’s well-being.
- b. **Typical pattern:** They lose sight of their own needs and boundaries, becoming enmeshed in toxic dynamics.

6. INDIVIDUALS WITH UNRESOLVED ATTACHMENT ISSUES

- a. **Why they’re at risk:** People with anxious or avoidant attachment styles may tolerate instability or chase unavailable partners.
- b. **Typical pattern:** They mistake emotional chaos for passion or equate inconsistency with love. A stable relationship may feel boring to this group, so they would seek the excitement of a volatile relationship.



7. PEOPLE SOCIALISED TO ENDURE (CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS, OR GENDER-BASED NORMS)

- a. **Why they're at risk:** Some are raised with beliefs like “keep the peace”, “sacrifice for family”, or “love conquers all”.
- b. **Typical pattern:** They stay in toxic relationships out of duty, fear of judgement, or religious/cultural obligation.

8. YOUNG OR INEXPERIENCED INDIVIDUALS

- a. **Why they're at risk:** They may lack relationship models or the emotional tools to spot and reject toxic patterns.
- b. **Typical pattern:** They confuse manipulation or control with care, or accept toxicity as part of the norm.

9. PEOPLE IN ISOLATED SITUATIONS

- a. **Why they're at risk:** Isolation (emotional, social, or geographic) reduces access to external support or perspective.
- b. **Typical pattern:** They become dependent on the toxic person due to lack of alternatives or fear of being alone.

10. THOSE WITH MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES

- a. **Why they're at risk:** Anxiety, depression, or trauma can distort self-perception and weaken boundaries.
- b. **Typical pattern:** They might cling to toxic relationships for stability, even if it's harmful.



Men's Experiences of Toxic Relationships

Men frequently experience **emotional neglect, control, or verbal abuse** that targets their identity and social roles. Due to stigma around male vulnerability, they may suppress emotions, avoid help-seeking, and show distress in less conventional ways, such as anger or withdrawal.

The below educational content unpacks how men may experience being in a toxic relationship.

1. EMOTIONAL NEGLECT AND SILENT TREATMENT

- a. Feeling ignored or dismissed when expressing feelings.
- b. **Example:** After sharing concerns about a problem, the partner withdraws completely and refuses to talk for days.

2. UNDERMINING MASCULINITY AND COMPETENCE

- a. Subtle or direct comments that challenge a man's ability or identity.
- b. **Example:** A partner frequently criticises his career choices or mocks his hobbies as "not manly enough."

3. PRESSURE TO SUPPRESS VULNERABILITY

- a. Social expectations discourage men from showing emotions openly, leading to internalised stress.
- b. **Example:** When upset, he is told "Man up" or "Stop being so emotional," causing him to bottle things up.

4. GASLIGHTING FOCUSED ON CAPABILITIES

- a. Manipulation that makes men question their decisions or memory.
- b. **Example:** Partner insists he never agreed to plans he clearly remembers, causing confusion and self-doubt.

5. EXPERIENCING PHYSICAL OR VERBAL ABUSE BUT RELUCTANCE TO REPORT

- a. Men may face abuse but hesitate to seek help due to fear of stigma or disbelief.
- b. **Example:** After being pushed during an argument, he chooses not to tell friends or authorities to avoid being seen as weak.

6. EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION VIA GUILT AND CONTROL

- a. Partner uses guilt trips to control behaviour or decisions.
- b. **Example:** "If you loved me, you would spend every weekend with me," despite his other commitments.

7. SOCIAL ISOLATION THROUGH PARTNER'S INFLUENCE

- a. Being subtly or overtly discouraged from seeing friends or family.
- b. **Example:** Partner complains or creates conflict whenever he makes plans with friends, leading him to withdraw socially.

8. INTERNALISED ANGER AND FRUSTRATION

- a. Difficulty expressing hurt, resulting in irritability or aggression.



- b. **Example:** Small disagreements escalate because he struggles to communicate feelings calmly.

9. FEELING TRAPPED BY GENDER ROLE EXPECTATIONS

- a. Pressure to be provider, protector, or always in control, limiting help-seeking or vulnerability.
- b. **Example:** Hesitates to attend therapy or support groups because “men don’t do that.”

10. DIFFICULTY RECOGNISING ABUSE OR TOXICITY

- a. Toxic behaviours may be minimised or rationalised as “normal relationship issues.”
- b. **Example:** Believing repeated insults are just “jokes” or that controlling behaviour is “caring.”

GUIDANCE FOR MEN TO RECOGNISE AND ADDRESS TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS

Recognising toxicity and seeking help requires courage, especially in environments where men are expected to “be strong.” Remember, prioritising your mental health and well-being is essential and a sign of true strength.

1. RECOGNISING TOXIC PATTERNS

- a. **Trust Your Feelings:** If you consistently feel confused, anxious, or “off” after interactions, take note—it may indicate manipulation or emotional harm.
- b. **Identify Common Signs:** Look out for gaslighting, persistent criticism, controlling behaviour, emotional neglect, or social isolation.
- c. **Keep a Record:** Write down incidents that bother you—dates, what happened, how you felt. This helps validate your experience and spot patterns.
- d. **Listen to Trusted Others:** Pay attention if friends or family express concern about the relationship dynamics.

2. BUILDING EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

- a. **Allow Yourself to Feel:** Recognise that vulnerability is not weakness. It’s healthy to acknowledge emotions like sadness, fear, or anger.
- b. **Seek Safe Outlets:** Talk to trusted friends, mentors, or mental health professionals who can provide objective support.
- c. **Educate Yourself:** Learn about emotional abuse and toxic dynamics to better understand your situation.

3. SETTING BOUNDARIES

- a. **Define Limits:** Clearly communicate what behaviour is unacceptable to you.
- b. **Be Consistent:** Enforce your boundaries firmly but respectfully.
- c. **Prioritise Self-Respect:** Remember that you deserve dignity and respect in any relationship.



4. SEEKING SUPPORT

- a. **Professional Help:** Therapists or counsellors specialised in relationship dynamics can help process emotions and plan steps forward.
- b. **Support Groups:** Connecting with other men facing similar issues can reduce isolation and provide practical advice.
- c. **Confidential Helplines:** Use services that offer anonymous support to discuss your experience safely.

5. PLANNING FOR SAFETY AND CHANGE

- a. **Assess Risks:** If the relationship involves any form of physical abuse or severe emotional harm, prioritise your safety first.
- b. **Create an Exit Plan:** If needed, plan how to distance yourself or leave the relationship safely, with support if necessary.
- c. **Take Your Time:** Leaving a toxic relationship is often complex; progress at your own pace without guilt.

6. CULTIVATING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

- a. **Reflect on Needs:** Understand what respect, trust, and support look like for you.
- b. **Practice Assertiveness:** Communicate your thoughts and feelings honestly and respectfully.
- c. **Surround Yourself with Positive Influences:** Build friendships and connections that uplift and validate you.



Women's Experiences of Toxic Relationships

Women often face direct emotional and physical abuse, with social norms encouraging them to seek support but also sometimes to tolerate toxic dynamics for the sake of family or relationship preservation. Their distress tends to be more openly expressed, but their vulnerability can be exploited.

1. Emotional Manipulation and Gaslighting

- Being made to doubt one's feelings, memory, or sanity.
- **Example:** A partner insists, "You're too sensitive, that never happened," after she expresses hurt about a comment.

2. Control and Restriction of Independence

- Partner limits social interactions, career choices, or personal freedoms.
- **Example:**
 - Told she can't see friends or family without permission or discouraged from pursuing a job opportunity.
 - Told that location-tracking software like life360 is on the phones for safety, but often used to track movements and have those movements questioned.

3. Verbal and Psychological Abuse

- Frequent insults, put-downs, or threats that erode self-esteem.
- **Example:** Being called "stupid" or "worthless" repeatedly during arguments.

4. Physical Abuse and Threats

- Actual or threatened violence creating fear and trauma.
- **Example:** Pushed or slapped during a disagreement, or threatened with harm if she attempts to leave.

5. Isolation from Support Networks

- Partner intentionally alienates her from friends or family.
- **Example:** Partner spreads rumours or creates conflict to turn loved ones against her.

6. Financial Control

- Restricting access to money or controlling spending to increase dependence.
- **Example:** Partner takes her salary or refuses to contribute fairly to household expenses.

7. Unrealistic Expectations and Blame

- Holding her responsible for all problems or expecting perfection.
- **Example:** "If you were a better wife/mother, we wouldn't have these issues."

8. Inconsistent Affection (Love Bombing and Devaluation)



- Alternating between excessive praise and harsh criticism to confuse and control.
- **Example:** Showering her with gifts and affection one day, then ignoring or belittling her the next.

9. Chronic Anxiety and Fear

- Constant worry about triggering conflict or walking on eggshells.
- **Example:** Changing behaviour to avoid arguments or outbursts, suppressing true feelings.

10. Self-Doubt and Loss of Identity

- Gradually losing confidence and sense of self due to ongoing abuse.
- **Example:** Feeling incapable of making decisions or trusting her own judgment.

GUIDANCE FOR WOMEN TO RECOGNISE AND ADDRESS TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS

1. RECOGNISING TOXIC PATTERNS

- Trust Your Intuition:** If you frequently feel anxious, fearful, or diminished around someone, take this seriously—it often signals emotional harm.
- Identify Key Warning Signs:** Look out for controlling behaviours, emotional or physical abuse, gaslighting, excessive criticism, or social isolation tactics.
- Document Incidents:** Keep a journal of troubling events—dates, descriptions, and your feelings—to help clarify the situation and identify recurring patterns.
- Seek External Perspectives:** Listen to the concerns of trusted friends, family, or professionals who may notice unhealthy dynamics you might overlook.

2. BUILDING EMOTIONAL AWARENESS AND SUPPORT

- Acknowledge Your Feelings:** Recognise that feelings of fear, sadness, or confusion are valid responses to toxic behaviour.
- Reach Out:** Confide in trusted individuals who can offer emotional support and practical advice.
- Educate Yourself:** Learn about emotional abuse, gaslighting, and other toxic behaviours to understand your experience better.

3. SETTING AND ENFORCING BOUNDARIES

- Know Your Limits:** Clearly define what behaviours are unacceptable to you and why.
- Communicate Clearly:** Assert your boundaries calmly but firmly, and don't hesitate to reinforce them if crossed.
- Prioritise Your Well-being:** Remember that maintaining your mental and physical health is essential.

4. PLANNING FOR SAFETY AND CHANGE



- a. **Evaluate Your Safety:** If physical abuse or threats exist, prioritise your immediate safety and seek emergency assistance if needed.
- b. **Develop a Safe Exit Plan:** Plan carefully how to leave the toxic relationship, including securing finances, housing, and emotional support.
- c. **Take It Step-by-Step:** Leaving a toxic relationship is complex; progress at a pace that feels manageable without self-blame.

5. REBUILDING AND MAINTAINING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

- a. **Reflect on What You Deserve:** Understand that respect, trust, and mutual support are non-negotiable in healthy relationships.
- b. **Practice Self-Care:** Prioritise activities and relationships that restore your confidence and joy.
- c. **Empower Yourself:** Learn assertiveness skills and trust your voice in setting and maintaining healthy boundaries.
- d. **Set Healthy Boundaries:** remember that those in your life who need the boundaries, will have a negative reaction to boundaries. Prepare yourself for that in advance.
- e. Often times you will find yourself in the mind set of just wanting to “keep the peace.” Peace isn't something that needs to be kept, if there is peace, it just is. **The person who is “keeping peace” is not at peace.**



Why You Are Not Responsible for Managing a Toxic Person's Behaviour

It is important to understand that **you are not responsible for fixing or managing someone else's toxic behaviour**. Toxicity arises from deep personal issues, choices, and patterns that belong to the other person, not you.

Expecting to change them through patience or forgiveness is often unrealistic and emotionally damaging. Your focus should be on your own safety, well-being, and healing. True change comes from the toxic individual's conscious choice—not from your efforts to manage or endure their behaviour.

- **You cannot control or change their behaviour.** No matter how patient, forgiving, or understanding you are, their actions are ultimately their responsibility.
- **Trying to “manage” or “fix” them often leads to emotional exhaustion and confusion.** It can create a cycle where you sacrifice your own well-being to accommodate their toxicity, which is unfair and unsustainable.
- **Their toxic behaviour is a reflection of their own struggles, not your worth or actions.** Blaming yourself or thinking you can change them often traps you in the relationship and delays your healing.

The Reality of Changing a Toxic Person Through Forgiveness and Patience

- **Change requires the toxic person's genuine willingness and effort.** Forgiveness and patience on your part do not guarantee they will change. Only the individual can choose to acknowledge their behaviour and seek help or growth.
- **Many toxic people repeat patterns unless they actively work on themselves.** Without self-awareness and commitment, toxic behaviours tend to persist despite external forgiveness.
- **Your forgiveness should prioritise your own healing, not their transformation.** Forgiving can free you from resentment, but it doesn't obligate you to stay or tolerate ongoing harm.
- **Setting boundaries is crucial.** Protecting yourself with clear limits is more effective than hoping patience alone will prompt change.



How Does Being in a Toxic Relationship Affect You?

Being in a toxic relationship—whether romantic, familial, platonic, or professional—can have severe, far-reaching effects on your mental, emotional, and even physical well-being. These impacts are often gradual, making them harder to recognise until you're deeply affected. A toxic relationship doesn't just hurt in the moment—it reshapes how you see yourself, others, and the world. The longer you stay in one, the deeper the damage tends to go.

Below is a structured breakdown of the main consequences, with practical examples.

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH DECLINE

Effect	Description	Examples
Anxiety	Constant stress from walking on eggshells, fearing the next argument or emotional outburst.	Feeling tense every time your phone rings or anticipating conflict daily.
Depression	Feeling trapped, hopeless, or emotionally drained.	Losing interest in activities, isolating yourself, or feeling numb.
Low self-esteem	Regular criticism, invalidation, or manipulation erodes confidence over time.	You start to believe you're not good enough or question your worth.
Emotional instability	Mood swings caused by unpredictable, chaotic relationship dynamics.	Feeling calm one moment and shattered the next due to their behaviour.

PHYSICAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Effect	Description	Examples
Sleep problems	Stress and overthinking disrupt sleep.	Trouble falling or staying asleep, or nightmares about the person.
Chronic fatigue	Emotional exhaustion spills into physical tiredness.	Always feeling tired, sluggish, or lacking motivation.
Weakened immune system	Prolonged stress lowers immunity.	Getting sick more often or taking longer to recover.
Somatic symptoms	The body manifests emotional stress physically.	Headaches, stomach aches, or muscle tension without medical cause.

COGNITIVE EFFECTS

Effect	Description	Examples
Self-doubt and confusion	Gaslighting or manipulation makes you question your reality.	Second-guessing your memory, feelings, or decisions.
Difficulty concentrating	Constant emotional distraction impacts focus.	Struggling to concentrate at work or school.



Effect	Description	Examples
Indecisiveness	Fear of making the wrong choice due to criticism or blame.	Overthinking even basic decisions like what to wear or say.

BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIAL EFFECTS

Effect	Description	Examples
Social withdrawal	Shame or manipulation causes isolation.	Pulling away from friends or family to avoid drama or having to explain.
People-pleasing tendencies	To avoid conflict, you over-accommodate.	Constantly agreeing, apologising, or suppressing your needs.
Neglecting self-care	Focus shifts entirely to managing the toxic person.	Stopping exercise, healthy eating, or hobbies.

IMPACT ON FUTURE RELATIONSHIPS

Effect	Description	Examples
Trust issues	After betrayal or emotional harm, trust becomes difficult.	Suspecting others of bad intent, even when unwarranted.
Emotional detachment	You shut down to protect yourself.	Struggling to connect or feel safe being vulnerable again.
Repeating patterns	Without healing, you may gravitate toward similar dynamics.	Finding yourself in similar toxic situations repeatedly.



Identifying a Possible Toxic Relationship

It's important to remember that one or a few signs may not necessarily indicate a toxic relationship. However, if you identify with several of these signs and find yourself feeling consistently unhappy, it may be time to reassess the health and viability of the relationship.

1. **LACK OF RESPECT:** Do you feel consistently disrespected, belittled, or demeaned by the person?
2. **CONTROL AND MANIPULATION:** Does the person try to control your actions, decisions, or isolate you from friends and family?
3. **CONSTANT CRITICISM:** Does the person frequently criticize and put you down, undermining your self-esteem?
4. **EMOTIONAL ABUSE:** Do you experience frequent episodes of emotional abuse, such as gaslighting, guilt-tripping, or constant blame?
5. **UNBALANCED POWER DYNAMICS:** Do you feel like the person has all the power in the relationship, making all the decisions and dismissing your needs and opinions?
6. **LACK OF TRUST:** Is there a consistent lack of trust in the relationship, with the person constantly questioning or doubting you?
7. **VERBAL OR PHYSICAL ABUSE:** Have you experienced or do you fear any form of verbal or physical abuse from the person?
8. **DISREGARD FOR BOUNDARIES:** Does the person consistently ignore or violate your boundaries, both physical and emotional?
9. **EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER:** Do you often feel anxious, fearful, or emotionally drained due to the ups and downs in the relationship?
10. **ISOLATION AND DEPENDENCY:** Has the person isolated you from friends, family, or support networks, making you dependent on them for everything? Does the person, without due cause, have negative reactions when you spend time with friends or family?
11. **BLAMING AND EXCUSES:** Does the person frequently shift blame onto you or make excuses for their behaviour, refusing to take responsibility?
12. **LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY:** Does the person consistently avoid accountability for their actions and refuse to apologize or make amends?
13. **UNEQUAL EFFORT:** Are you the one putting in most of the effort in the relationship while the person is consistently neglectful or indifferent?
14. **CONSTANT DRAMA:** Is the relationship marked by consistent drama, arguments, or a feeling of walking on eggshells?
15. **EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION:** Do you often feel emotionally exhausted, drained, or hopeless due to the dynamics in the relationship?



Are You In A Toxic Relationship?

Toxic relationships aren't always obvious, especially when you're emotionally invested. But if the relationship is costing you your peace, self-worth, or safety, it's no longer healthy—no matter who it is.

1. HOW DO YOU FEEL MOST OF THE TIME IN THIS RELATIONSHIP?

- Do you feel drained, anxious, or on edge around them?
- Do you dread interactions, even though you used to enjoy their company?
- Do you feel guilty or selfish for expressing your needs?

If you consistently feel worse *after* spending time with the person, that's a red flag.

2. IS THERE A PATTERN OF DISRESPECT OR HARMFUL BEHAVIOUR?

- Are your boundaries ignored or mocked?
- Are you often criticised, belittled, or made to feel "less than"?
- Do they use guilt, manipulation, or threats to control you?

Respect is non-negotiable. Repeated violation of boundaries is not a mistake—it's a pattern.

3. DO YOU WALK ON EGGSHELLS?

- Do you avoid being honest for fear of setting them off?
- Are you constantly trying to "keep the peace" or manage their mood?
- Do they overreact to minor issues?

A healthy relationship shouldn't feel like navigating a landmine field.

4. IS COMMUNICATION ONE-SIDED OR HOSTILE?

- Do they shut down, stonewall, or blow up when you try to talk?
- Are you the one always apologising, even when you're not in the wrong?
- Do they twist your words or deny things you know happened (gaslighting)?

Effective communication is the backbone of any functional relationship. Lack of it creates confusion and resentment.

5. IS THE RELATIONSHIP CONSISTENTLY UNBALANCED?

- Do you give far more time, energy, or emotional labour than they do?
- Do they show up only when they need something, but disappear otherwise?
- Are your needs regularly dismissed or downplayed?

Mutual effort is essential. One-sided sacrifice is not "love"—it's exploitation.

6. ARE YOU ISOLATED?



- Have you lost other relationships because of this person?
- Do they discourage or prevent you from spending time with others?
- Do you feel cut off from your support system?

Isolation is a classic tactic of control. Healthy people don't fear your independence.

7. DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'VE LOST YOURSELF?

- Have you stopped doing things you enjoy?
- Do you feel unsure of who you are anymore?
- Are you constantly second-guessing your worth, memory, or reality?

A relationship should enhance your identity, not erase it.

QUICK SELF-CHECK SCORECARD

Count how many of these statements feel true.

1. I often feel worse after interacting with them.
2. I hide parts of myself to avoid conflict.
3. I make excuses for their behaviour to others.
4. I feel emotionally exhausted or trapped.
5. I'm afraid to speak up or say no.
6. I don't feel safe, valued, or respected.

0–1 statements: Probably not toxic, though all relationships need work.

2–3 statements: Be cautious—there may be unhealthy patterns worth addressing.

4+ statements: Strong signs of toxicity. It may be time to set serious boundaries or exit the relationship entirely.



What Can You Do About A Toxic Relationship

You deserve relationships that build you up—not tear you down. Taking these practical steps will restore your sense of agency, protect your well-being and help you either rehabilitate the relationship or exit it safely. If at any point you feel unsafe, prioritise your personal security and reach out to professional or emergency services immediately.

1. CONDUCT A REALITY CHECK

- a. **Journal your experiences:** Write dates, incidents and how you felt.
- b. **Identify patterns:** Look for recurring behaviours (e.g. gaslighting, control).
- c. **Score against your self-check:** Revisit the self-assessment questions from earlier.

2. SET AND ENFORCE FIRM BOUNDARIES

- a. **Define clear limits:** Decide what is and isn't acceptable (time spent, topics discussed, tone of voice).
- b. **Communicate calmly, directly:** "When you raise your voice, I feel anxious. I need us to speak calmly."
- c. **Enforce consequences:** If they cross a boundary, pause contact or leave the room.

3. IMPROVE YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK

- a. **Confide in trusted people:** Share your journal with a friend, mentor or family member.
- b. **Join a support group:** Look for local or online groups for co-dependency, domestic abuse survivors, etc.
- c. **Limit isolation:** Plan regular activities with people who uplift and respect you.

4. INVEST IN SELF-CARE AND PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT

- a. **Routine self-care:** Sleep, nutrition, exercise—even short walks or breathing exercises matter.
- b. **Rediscover interests:** Reconnect with hobbies or activities you abandoned.
- c. **Build self-worth:** Read self-help books, listen to empowering podcasts, or practice affirmations.

5. LEARN HEALTHY COMMUNICATION SKILLS

- a. **Use "I-statements":** "I feel hurt when...", not "You always..."
- b. **Active listening:** Reflect back what they say to ensure mutual understanding.
- c. **Pick the right time:** Don't attempt serious discussions in the heat of an argument.

6. SEEK PROFESSIONAL GUIDANCE



- a. **Individual therapy:** A psychologist or counsellor can help you unpack trauma and rebuild boundaries.
- b. **Couples or family therapy:** Only if the other party is willing and both can commit to change.
- c. **Legal advice:** If there is any threat to your safety or financial abuse.

7. PLAN FOR A SAFE EXIT (IF NEEDED)

- a. **Create an exit strategy:** Identify where you'll stay, how you'll access funds, and whom you'll alert.
- b. **Keep essentials ready:** Spare keys, mobile charger, important documents.
- c. **Inform key people:** Let a neighbour, friend or HR manager know your plan and ask them to check in.

8. FOLLOW THROUGH AND MONITOR PROGRESS

- a. **Review your journal weekly:** Are boundaries being respected? Is behaviour improving?
- b. **Adjust your plan:** Tighten or relax boundaries as needed.
- c. **Recognise irreparable patterns:** If toxicity persists despite your efforts, consider permanent separation.



Dealing with Toxic Family Members

Dealing with toxic family members can be challenging, but there are strategies you can employ to navigate these difficult relationships. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Trust yourself and prioritise your own well-being as you navigate these complex dynamics.

- **SET BOUNDARIES:** Establish clear boundaries to protect yourself from toxic behaviour. Determine what is acceptable and unacceptable treatment from your family member. Communicate these boundaries calmly and assertively, and be consistent in enforcing them.
- **LIMIT CONTACT:** If possible, limit your contact with toxic family members. This might involve reducing the frequency of visits or interactions. Create physical and emotional distance to protect your well-being.
- **MANAGE EXPECTATIONS:** Recognize that you cannot change toxic family members or their behaviour. Adjust your expectations and focus on accepting them for who they are, while prioritizing your own well-being.
- **DEVELOP COPING STRATEGIES:** Find healthy ways to cope with the challenges that arise from interacting with toxic family members. This might involve deep breathing exercises, journaling, or seeking professional help to process your emotions and develop effective coping mechanisms.
- **PRACTICE EMOTIONAL DETACHMENT:** Emotional detachment can help protect you from the negative impact of toxic behaviour. Learn to observe and detach from their hurtful words or actions, understanding that their behaviour is a reflection of their own issues rather than a reflection of your worth.
- **MAINTAIN BOUNDARIES IN COMMUNICATION:** When communicating with toxic family members, stay firm and calm in asserting your boundaries. Refrain from engaging in arguments or trying to change their perspective. Keep conversations brief and focused on neutral topics, if possible.
- **PRIORITIZE YOUR WELL-BEING:** Remember that your well-being is paramount. Make choices that protect your mental, emotional, and physical health, even if it means distancing yourself from toxic family members. Surround yourself with positive influences and relationships that uplift and support you.



Setting Healthy Boundaries

Here is a step-by-step guide to set and manage healthy boundaries.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY YOUR BOUNDARIES CLEARLY

- Reflect on what behaviour you find acceptable and what you don't.
- **Examples:**
 - "I need honest communication without yelling."
 - "I am not comfortable with being interrupted."
 - "I require time alone to recharge after work."

STEP 2: COMMUNICATE YOUR BOUNDARIES CALMLY AND CLEARLY

- Use "I" statements to express your needs without blaming.
- **Example phrases:**
 - "I feel disrespected when I'm interrupted, so I need us to let each other finish speaking."
 - "I need some quiet time after work to decompress, so I won't respond immediately to messages."
 - "I'm not okay with being criticised harshly; please speak to me respectfully."

STEP 3: OBSERVE THE OTHER PERSON'S RESPONSE

- Healthy relationships respect boundaries. Notice if they listen and adjust behaviour.
- If they respond positively: "Thank you for understanding my need for space."

STEP 4: ENFORCE YOUR BOUNDARIES WHEN THEY ARE IGNORED

- Remind them firmly but respectfully if they cross your limits again.
- **Example phrases:**
 - "I've asked that you don't raise your voice when we talk. Please respect that."
 - "I need you to stop interrupting me; it makes it hard to communicate."
 - If necessary, limit or pause interactions:
 - "Since my boundary isn't being respected, I need to take a break from this conversation."

STEP 5: TAKE CONSEQUENCES SERIOUSLY

- If the person continues to disrespect your boundaries, consider appropriate consequences.
- **Examples of consequences:**
 - Reducing time spent together.
 - Seeking support from others or professionals.
 - Ending the relationship if toxicity persists and harms your well-being.



- **Example statement:**

- "I've communicated my needs clearly multiple times. If this continues, I will need to distance myself to protect my well-being."

STEP 6: PRIORITISE YOUR WELL-BEING

- Maintain boundaries consistently; don't compromise your mental or physical health.
- Seek support from trusted friends, family, or professionals when needed.
- Remember, respecting your boundaries is a sign of self-respect and strength.

Summary Example

- **Boundary:** "I need respectful communication without yelling."
- **Set:** "Please speak calmly when we discuss issues."
- **If ignored:** "I'm asking again for calm communication. If this continues, I will step away from the conversation."
- **If still ignored:** "Since you are not respecting my boundary, I'm taking a break from this relationship until respectful communication is possible."



Why Setting Healthy Boundaries Is Not Selfish or Unfair

Setting boundaries is a fundamental part of maintaining respect, dignity, and well-being in any relationship. It is important to understand that boundaries are not about controlling or limiting others, but about protecting yourself and fostering healthy interactions.

Setting boundaries is a necessary, fair, and respectful way to maintain balance in relationships. It is an act of self-care, not selfishness, and is essential for fostering healthy, sustainable connections based on mutual understanding and respect.

1. BOUNDARIES PROMOTE MUTUAL RESPECT

- Boundaries clarify what behaviour is acceptable, encouraging respect on both sides.
- They create a framework where both people feel safe and valued, rather than overwhelmed or disregarded.
- Boundaries Support Personal Well-Being
- Everyone has limits to what they can tolerate emotionally, physically, and mentally.
- Setting boundaries ensures your needs are met and prevents burnout, resentment, or harm.

2. BOUNDARIES ENHANCE RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

- Clear boundaries reduce misunderstandings and conflicts by setting expectations.
- They allow relationships to thrive on trust and honest communication.

3. BOUNDARIES ARE A FORM OF SELF-RESPECT, NOT SELFISHNESS

- Taking care of your own needs is essential; neglecting them can lead to unhealthy dynamics.
- Prioritising your well-being does not mean disregarding others—it means valuing yourself equally.

4. BOUNDARIES DO NOT RESTRICT OTHERS' FREEDOM

- You are responsible for your own limits, not how others choose to respond.
- Healthy boundaries invite others to respect your space and choices without forcing them to change against their will.



Case Studies

"SHADOWS IN THE HEART"

Naledi and Themba had been dating for two years. At first, everything seemed perfect—warm conversations, shared dreams, laughter. But over time, subtle shifts began to erode Naledi's sense of reality.

Whenever Naledi expressed concerns about Themba's late nights or secretive phone calls, he would respond:

"You're imagining things. I'm not hiding anything."

"Why do you always jump to conclusions? You trust me, don't you?"

Once, Naledi confronted him about a hurtful comment he made during an argument. Themba denied ever saying it.

"You're twisting my words again. You know how sensitive you are."

"Maybe you're remembering it wrong."

Naledi started doubting herself. She questioned if she was being paranoid or overly emotional. Themba often told her:

"You have a bad memory. You need to relax."

As the months passed, the pattern intensified. Themba would hide messages, then accuse Naledi of snooping when she noticed. He isolated her from friends subtly, telling her they "don't understand" their relationship. When Naledi tried to express her feelings, Themba accused her of being "too dramatic" or "controlling."

The **impact** on Naledi was devastating:

- She became confused about her own perceptions and feelings.
- Her self-esteem plummeted, feeling she couldn't trust herself.
- She felt isolated and emotionally trapped, unsure who to turn to.
- Anxiety and depression crept in, affecting her work and daily life.

It wasn't until Naledi confided in a close friend and sought therapy that she recognised the signs of gaslighting. With support, she gained clarity and started setting boundaries.

Naledi's story is a painful example of gaslighting in a romantic relationship—a manipulative cycle that chips away at trust, identity, and emotional safety. Victims often feel alone and confused, questioning what is true.

Understanding this dynamic is critical to reclaiming control and breaking free from emotional abuse. No one deserves to have their reality distorted, especially by someone they love.



"WHEN BLOOD ISN'T ENOUGH"

Nandi grew up in a modest home in Durban, the eldest of three siblings. From the outside, the family appeared typical—Sunday lunches, church attendance, birthday photos posted on Facebook. But behind closed doors, the dynamics were far from normal.

Her mother, Lillian, controlled everything. What Nandi wore, who she spoke to, how she styled her hair—even what career path she chose. Lillian often cloaked her dominance in concern.

"I'm only hard on you because I know what the world's like," she'd say. "You're too sensitive, Nandi. Toughen up."

At 15, Nandi saved up to buy herself a second-hand guitar. Lillian sold it a week later, saying it was a "waste of time" and "a distraction from her studies." When Nandi cried, her mother laughed:

"So dramatic. You're not being abused. You have a roof over your head."

Lillian never hit her children, but she **weaponised guilt, withheld affection, and used emotional manipulation as a tool of control**. Any pushback from Nandi was met with silence or passive-aggressive sulking.

*"After all I've done for you, this is how you repay me?"
"Maybe your siblings will appreciate me more."*

In her early 20s, Nandi was offered a scholarship to study abroad. She turned it down—not because she didn't want to go, but because Lillian said:

"If you leave, who will help me with your brother? I guess I don't matter anymore."

At that point, Nandi had internalised a toxic sense of duty. She believed that her worth was tied to self-sacrifice. She avoided conflict. She stayed small.

The **impact** crept in gradually:

- She developed **chronic anxiety**, especially around confrontation or criticism.
- She avoided close relationships, fearing she'd either be too needy or not enough.
- She didn't trust her own decisions, always needing external validation.

By 30, Nandi was successful on paper—a job, a flat, a partner. But she still flinched at the sound of her phone ringing with her mother's name. Each conversation left her tense, guilty, and emotionally spent.

It wasn't until she started therapy that she heard the words:



"What you experienced is a form of emotional abuse. Just because it's family doesn't make it okay. Sharing DNA with a person isn't blanket permission for allowing bad/hurtful behaviour."

That moment was both **liberating and terrifying**.

Nandi didn't cut her mother off completely, but she stopped sharing personal details and set firm boundaries:

- No unannounced visits.
- No involvement in her finances or career decisions.
- No guilt-tripping allowed.

The first few months were rough—Lillian called her selfish, accused her of being "brainwashed by therapy." But Nandi held the line.

Slowly, the fog lifted. She slept better. Laughed more. Reclaimed her voice.

Nandi's story is a clear example that **toxic family dynamics don't always look extreme—but their effect is deeply damaging**. Emotional abuse from a parent can be subtle, layered in cultural expectations or generational trauma. But the result is the same: **a person who learns to doubt their worth, their instincts, and their right to say no**.

"THE FRIENDSHIP THAT DRAINED ME"

Thandi and Lerato had been close friends since high school. They shared secrets, dreams, and countless late-night talks. But over time, their friendship began to shift—and not for the better.

Lerato was charming and fun, but also extremely demanding. She expected Thandi to drop everything whenever she needed emotional support.

"I'm going through a rough patch, can you come over now?"

"You never listen to me when I talk about my problems!"

Thandi found herself **always giving**, listening to Lerato's endless complaints without being allowed to share her own struggles. When Thandi tried to bring up her issues, Lerato would respond with:

"You think your problems are as bad as mine?"

"I don't have time for your drama right now."

Lerato also had a habit of gossiping behind Thandi's back and then acting innocent when confronted.

"I was just joking," she'd say with a smile, but the hurt lingered.



She often cancelled plans at the last minute or showed up late, leaving Thandi feeling unimportant. When Thandi expressed her disappointment, Lerato accused her of being “too sensitive” and “not a real friend.”

The **impact** on Thandi was significant:

- She felt **drained and undervalued**, questioning whether she was a good enough friend.
- Her **self-esteem took a hit** because Lerato’s criticisms were harsh and constant.
- She began **avoiding social gatherings** for fear of being disappointed or let down.
- She experienced **loneliness**, despite having a “close” friend.

Eventually, Thandi reached a breaking point and decided to confront Lerato honestly about how the friendship was affecting her. Lerato dismissed her concerns, so Thandi chose to distance herself.

Thandi’s story is a clear example of a toxic friendship, where one person consistently takes without giving, uses manipulation, and dismisses boundaries. Toxic friendships can be as damaging as romantic or familial ones because they undermine trust and emotional safety.

Learning to recognise these signs and valuing yourself enough to step back is crucial for your mental health and personal growth.



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