



Psychological Aspects of Toxic Relationship

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What is a Toxic Relationship?

In recent years, it has become increasingly popular to label friendships or romantic relationships as "toxic." However, the term is quite vague—there is no clear definition of what exactly constitutes a toxic relationship. In scientific literature, the term is rarely used; psychologists typically refer to dysfunctional relationships instead.

The Meaning of "Toxic"

The adjective "toxic" has undergone a shift in meaning over time. Originally derived from the Greek word *toxon*, which refers to a bow, it later became associated with poison, as ancient warriors often coated their arrowheads with deadly substances. Over time, the word came to describe harmful substances in general.

Today, "toxic" is often used metaphorically, referring to anything dangerous or potentially harmful. It is commonly used in contexts such as financial risks ("toxic assets") or harmful behaviors ("toxic masculinity," "toxic work environment"). The term has become a striking metaphor for all things harmful and was even named *Word of the Year* in 2018 by Oxford Languages, the organization behind the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

The phrase "toxic relationship" has also gained popularity, with Google Trends reporting that searches for the term have increased more than tenfold over the past five years. This growing interest likely reflects widespread uncertainty about its exact meaning. In self-help literature, romantic relationships—and sometimes friendships—are typically labeled toxic when they involve severe emotional abuse.

For many people, such experiences are part of their daily lives; the label "toxic relationship" provides a concise way to describe them. For this reason, despite the term being somewhat controversial, it will continue to be used in this text.

How Do Toxic Relationships Develop?

Toxic relationships are often rooted in specific personality traits of one or both partners. A key factor is the presence of negative personality traits, collectively known as the **Dark Triad: Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism**. These traits share many similarities, and some researchers even suggest they stem from a common core, known as the **D-factor**. Individuals with a high D-factor tend to exhibit **antisocial behavior**—they prioritize their own interests, even at the expense of others. They are often highly skilled at manipulating people to achieve their goals.

- **Machiavellians** are master manipulators, often acting strategically and without emotional involvement.
- **Psychopaths** tend to be impulsive and lack empathy or guilt.
- **Narcissists** seek partners who make them feel superior, reinforcing their grandiose yet fragile self-image. They often exploit their partner's weaknesses, making relationships with narcissists particularly prone to emotional abuse.

Most people display traits from the Dark Triad from time to time—being a little self-absorbed, insensitive, or manipulative is not uncommon. However, when these traits dominate a person's personality, they may have a **personality disorder**, making a healthy relationship nearly impossible. Otherwise, the severity of these traits determines the level of toxicity: "**The dose makes the poison.**"

The stronger these traits, the harder it is to maintain a balanced relationship where both partners give as much as they take. People with pronounced Dark Triad traits tend to belittle their partners, have affairs more frequently, and show little interest in a committed relationship. Paradoxically, some individuals are **drawn** to such relationships. After all, a relationship always involves two people.

A 2021 survey by the online dating platform **Parship** found that around **36% of respondents** had experienced a toxic relationship—**33% of men and 41% of women** (Pawlik, 2021).

Signs of a Toxic Relationship

How can you recognize if you are in a toxic relationship? Here are some key warning signs:

1. **Love-Bombing:** At the start of the relationship, your partner overwhelms you with affection. You are put on a pedestal and made to feel like the love of their life—often within days of meeting.
2. **Things Move Too Fast:** Despite things feeling rushed, the toxic partner pushes the relationship forward quickly—wanting sex early on, discussing moving in together, planning vacations, or even talking about marriage soon after meeting.
3. **Extreme Highs and Lows:** One moment, your partner rejects you; the next, you experience intense (often physical) reconciliation. It's like an emotional rollercoaster, and over time, the happy moments become fewer and fewer.
4. **You're Never Good Enough:** Constant criticism is a major sign of toxicity. It starts with comments about your clothing choices and escalates to critiques of how you eat, yawn, or even breathe. The accusations become more severe and irrational over time.
5. **Gaslighting:** Your partner deliberately confuses you, twisting reality until you doubt yourself. They lie and manipulate to the point where you no longer trust your own perception.
6. **You're Always to Blame:** Your partner holds you responsible for every problem, even their own mistakes. If they cheat, they justify it by blaming your behavior.
7. **Boundary Violations:** No matter how often you set limits, they continue to cross them—verbally, by shouting, or even physically.
8. **Control:** Your partner tries to dictate how you spend money, whom you see, and what you do.
9. **Isolation:** You become increasingly cut off from friends and family—either directly (not being allowed to see them) or indirectly (feeling ashamed because loved ones have urged you to leave).
10. **Addiction to the Relationship:** The emotional ups and downs create an addiction-like dependency. If you also lack self-worth and social support, leaving becomes even harder.

Effects on Mental Health

Toxic relationships have significant impacts on the psychological and emotional well-being of those affected. The constant strain and emotional abuse can trigger a variety of negative emotions and mental health conditions, significantly reducing the quality of life.

Psychological and Emotional Strain

People in unhealthy relationships often experience severe psychological and emotional distress. Constant criticism and devaluation, manipulation, and control by a toxic partner, as well as emotional blackmail, create a persistent sense of insecurity and threat. These negative experiences can leave deep emotional scars and lead to a range of mental health issues.

Victims often feel worthless and lose their self-confidence. They are constantly tense and experience chronic stress, which can lead to physical symptoms such as headaches, sleep disturbances, and stomach problems. Emotional exhaustion and the constant fear of their partner's reactions often result in depression and a deep sense of hopelessness.

Symptoms: Anxiety, Depression, Low Self-Esteem, and Stress

The emotional and psychological burdens described above manifest in a range of symptoms that can severely impact daily life. The most common symptoms include:

- **Anxiety:** Victims often feel a constant sense of uncertainty and fear regarding their partner's reactions. This chronic anxiety can lead to panic attacks and a persistent feeling of being threatened.
- **Depression:** Persistent sadness, lack of energy, and loss of interest in daily activities are typical symptoms of depression that toxic relationships can trigger. Victims often feel worthless and hopeless.
- **Low self-esteem:** Continuous criticism and devaluation by the partner lead victims to lose confidence in themselves and constantly doubt their own worth. This sense of worthlessness can become deeply ingrained and affect all aspects of life.
- **Stress:** Chronic tension and nervousness are common consequences of the unpredictable dynamics in toxic relationships. The constant pressure can lead to physical and psychological stress symptoms, such as headaches, sleep disorders, and digestive issues.

How to Escape a Toxic Relationship

If you're in a toxic relationship, it's crucial to take steps to regain safety and well-being. Here are some effective strategies:

1. Set Boundaries

Establishing boundaries is vital for self-care and healing. They define what is acceptable and protect your emotional and physical well-being.

- Identify your needs and values.
- Clearly communicate your boundaries.
- Enforce them consistently, without guilt or manipulation.

2. Seek Professional Help

Therapists and counselors can help you understand the dynamics of toxic relationships and develop strategies to break free.

- Therapy provides a safe space to process emotions and build emotional resilience.
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) can help change negative thought patterns.
- Trauma-focused therapy can assist in healing deep emotional wounds.

3. Practice Self-Care

Healing is an ongoing process that requires prioritizing your physical, emotional, and mental well-being.

- Engage in activities that bring you joy, like hobbies, exercise, meditation, or time in nature.
- Maintain a balanced diet and get enough sleep.
- Be kind to yourself and acknowledge your feelings without judgment.
- Surround yourself with supportive people.

Preventing Toxic Relationships

Awareness and emotional strength are key to avoiding toxic relationships. Here are some prevention strategies:

- **Recognize red flags** such as excessive jealousy, control, or manipulation.
- **Trust your instincts**—if something feels wrong, take it seriously.
- **Know your own needs and limits** and communicate them clearly.
- **Create a supportive environment** where you feel safe and valued.

Conclusion

- Toxic relationships significantly impact mental and emotional health. Recognizing and addressing these patterns is essential for well-being.
- These relationships involve harmful behaviors like **manipulation, control, gaslighting, and emotional abuse**, leading to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and chronic stress.
- The journey out of a toxic relationship is challenging, but help is available, and healing is possible. Therapy and self-care play crucial roles in recovery.
- Everyone deserves a **healthy, respectful, and supportive** relationship. Recognizing the signs and taking action can lead to a happier, healthier life.

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