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Toxic Relationships 101

Workbook
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Toxic Relationships 101

Hello! I am Natalie Jovanic, and I am glad that you have downloaded this workbook. Before you start, let me tell you my story:

On a warm Tuesday morning in September, my mother died after a period of great suffering. I could not imagine my life without her, and I did not have any idea how my life was going to continue. Her doctor encouraged me to see my mother's death as though it had brought her freedom. *Freedom...* I sensed by the energy of her words that being free must be wonderful. Freedom was a concept that I had never known before; sadness and pain were what I knew. I felt that maybe it was a wonderful choice for my mom. Would I have to die first to be able to be free from suffering? It was that day when I was 19 years old that I left home forever. I left behind darkness, abuse and manipulation, and began my search for freedom.

Years later while washing my hair, I caught myself watching the water disappear down the drain. A feeling emerged from within me that I could finally put words to; I felt as if it was my life that was running away. I had a good job and a relationship, but I was trapped in my own fears and with a deep feeling of worthlessness. I knew that I deserved something better. I needed to do something and I knew that only I could make the difference. So I started this process of change. I cut my hair, took drawing classes, started yoga and moved into an internationally based career. I could not wait to see if the personal changes I was making would make other areas of my life better. That day, I took responsibility for my own happiness.

I was sitting in a little bar by the Bi Tan Lake in Taiwan sharing stories with some of my colleagues of our relationships. I could hear the love and respect they had in their voices when they spoke of their partners. My partner never had spoken about me this way; I did not feel those things. I realized with clarity that my relationship was not the way I wanted it to be. Soon after, my attempt to make changes failed and I decided that it was better to stay alone. I knew I would find the relationship that was right for me one day. Once again, I took the right action at the right time through self-awareness and responsibility.

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On my journey, I learned that happiness does not depend on my relationship status. My abusive childhood did not block me from finding happiness. I am the only person who is in charge of happiness. Nobody else can do this for me. I am responsible to find it within myself. As a happy single, I am empowered to say no to men that are not good for me and to choose a partner that suits me well. In a relationship, I do not depend on my partner to be happy, but I take care of it by myself.

The ideas I share in this workbook helped me to become empowered in my relationships and to become happier and more fulfilled. I now pass them on to support you on your journey.

After reading the workbook, you will be able to:

- Name 7 toxic dynamics in relationships
- Identify 6 principles to navigate toxic dynamics effectively
- Describe how to put these strategies into action with behaviours that are easy to implement
- As a result, you will feel happier and more positive in your life, and you will be empowered to choose people that are good for you.

Some activities will resonate with you, others not. Choose those that feel true to you. Trust your inner voice. Be creative and brainstorm new ideas. You are the hero of your life. Get into action today!

Signs of Toxic Dynamics in Relationships

Unfortunately, toxic dynamics are common in today's society. We may face them with our romantic partners, parents, siblings, or at work. If you have grown up in a dysfunctional home, you may have learned as a child that these behaviours were acceptable and normal. At least, this is what happened to me before I learned to discern between healthy and unhealthy behaviours in relationships. If we aren't aware of toxic dynamics, we can't identify them. Therefore, it is important to deepen your knowledge around them and to learn to navigate them in a way that is empowering for yourself.

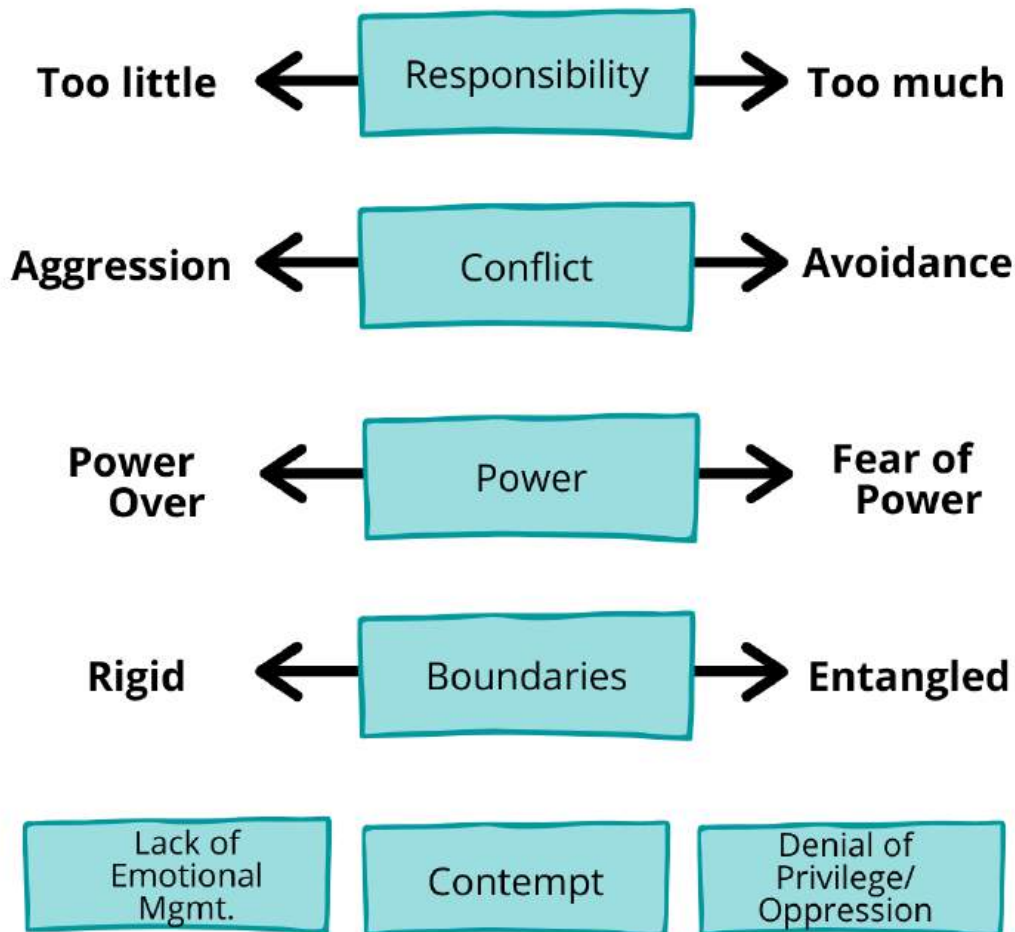
Toxic dynamics can come in all shades of gray. Sometimes, they are very subtle, and sometimes they are very obvious. In this workbook, I will explain in general terms so some of it may resonate, others not. I invite you to reflect on your relationships and which patterns you notice in them. Creating awareness is a key element to transforming your life and making choices that are good for you.

This workbook focuses on assessing hidden toxic dynamics in relationships as well as manipulative tactics.

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Hidden Toxic Dynamics

The following graphic gives you a brief overview of hidden toxic dynamics in relationships. Many of them are common in relationships and you may identify that your partner uses some of them but also that you may use others. Please don't blame yourself if you do, but see it as an opportunity for growth. Relationships are our greatest opportunity to grow as human beings. If we are able to identify them, we can choose to change them and create healthier relationships.



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Imbalances concerning Responsibility

We have imbalances in responsibility if one partner takes on too much responsibility and the other person takes on too little. These patterns can show up in different areas, such as household chores, emotional responsibility, and personal growth. In a toxic relationship, one person usually takes on more responsibility.

An example of imbalances is if one individual feels responsible for the feelings of the other person and they avoid setting healthy boundaries. The other partner avoids responsibility by making their partner responsible for their emotions, e.g. they may use language like "you always make me angry."

Signs of taking on too much responsibility

If you take on too much responsibility, you are likely to feel responsible for your partner's emotions. You may be harder on yourself than anybody else. Additionally, you may blame yourself very often. Furthermore, you may try very hard to understand your partner.

Signs of taking on too little responsibility

If we take on too little responsibility we may not contribute anything when it comes to the housework, or we don't contribute anything when it comes to growth in the relationship. So, we are pretty stagnant and we don't move forward. We may blame our partner very often, that they don't do what we want them to do, or that they do things in.

“It’s one thing if a person owns up to their behavior and makes an effort to change. But if a person disregards your feelings, ignores your boundaries, and continues to treat you in a harmful way, they need to go.”

— Daniell Koepke

Unhealthy Management of Emotions

When it comes to responsibility, it is also important that we evaluate how we take care of our emotions. In a healthy relationship, we can manage our emotions healthily and we can express them constructively. Our emotions build an important foundation to connect with each other. However, many of us have never learned how to manage our emotions constructively. There is a fine line on how we healthily communicate our emotions. Often, a relationship gets stagnant if we don't acknowledge the emotions that are part of it. For example, if we don't acknowledge that we feel hurt, it might lead to resentment. Resentment may also occur if we don't acknowledge that a boundary has been violated. Unexpressed emotions can erode a relationship over time.

As stated before, we may make our partner responsible for our emotions. We notice this if we communicate our emotions as “You make me feel” instead of “I feel...”

Sidenote

In a healthy relationship, each person takes responsibility for their emotions. Emotions are produced by our thoughts and our perception of a situation. Sometimes, our emotional response may be provoked by painful or traumatic past events that may require some healing. It is our responsibility to learn to our emotional response in a relationship constructively.

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Sometimes, we have learned these patterns when we were young and it may take some time until we can create awareness around them. If people have experienced past trauma, it may be useful to get appropriate trauma-informed professional support to develop their emotional regulation skills.

Contempt

Another aspect that disrupts a relationship is contempt which is related to having a sense of superiority over the other person. A person who feels contempt often looks down on their partner. They behave towards their partner as if their partner is beneath them. According to Dr. John Gottman, contempt is a very destructive behaviour in relationships. If a person is in contempt, it's difficult to have constructive communication about any type of conflict or anything else that is going on in the relationship.

Imbalances around Conflict and Power

Imbalances around conflict may appear as conflict avoidance, aggression, or any combination of those. Our conflicts may never be addressed or resolved. We never agree to disagree. We may not have any interest in finding a win-win solution for a problem.

We may experience different combinations of these patterns. In my second relationship, my partner and I avoided conflict. Superficially, it felt harmonious because we hardly ever argued. However, we didn't address the underlying issues in our relationship because we never addressed our conflicts. In my first relationship, my partner was aggressive and wanted to get his needs met, no matter what. I was afraid of conflict and did not set boundaries. While the dynamics were different in the relationships, both of them were toxic and prevented us from having healthier relationships.

Signs of aggression in conflict

A person who acts aggressively in conflict usually has an attitude like "I win and you lose" or "my way or the highway." The individual may often try to overpower their partner. They often ignore their partner's concerns and do not try to understand their partner's perspective. They claim that their ideas or intentions are "better" or "superior" than yours. They may have a lack of empathy and also a lack of curiosity about what's going on with their partner. It may also be connected with an aggressive communication style.

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Signs of conflict avoidance

A person who avoids conflict is silent and doesn't speak up. They may be submissive and always given in. Additionally, they may only focus on the good, but do not address important complicated topics that are part of any type of relationship. This behaviour is often connected with a passive or passive-aggressive communication style.

Power over

Our behaviour around conflict is also influenced by our relationship with power. An individual that tries to overpower the other person is often related to an attitude of "I win, You lose," "My way or the highway" or "I'm right and you're wrong." They intend to win over the other person no matter what and they don't care whether the other person gets their needs met.

Fear of power

Many people may have a fear of power so they aren't asserting themselves. Maybe they feel scared that they might abuse their power. We may see this tendency in people who have experienced abuse. So they rather avoid power instead of asserting themselves and their needs. Some individuals have an attitude of "You win, I lose." Some may feel powerless.

Sidenote

The patterns around conflict and power may also be influenced by past experiences of relational trauma or relationship violence. Healing the underlying trauma may be beneficial to create healthier behaviour patterns around conflict.

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Rigid Versus Entangled Boundaries

If we don't have healthy boundaries, we also have a toxic dynamic in the relationship. The two opposites are either very rigid boundaries or entangled ones. If a person has rigid boundaries, they build a fortress around them. In general, there is only very little or no connection at all. Conversations are typically very superficial. The other person cannot get close to the partner. There is a lot of distance in the relationship.

If the boundaries are entangled, it's hard to distinguish between two people. It may seem like they have merged into one person which is also unhealthy. We might identify this if one partner uses the term "we" frequently, terms like "we felt happy," instead of acknowledging their individual experience. Usually, two people feel differently, even if they have to experience the same event. You can find a worksheet to evaluate your boundaries in the appendix.

Denial of Privilege and Oppression

We live in a diverse society, and oppression is part of the system we live in. Oppression can be related to many different areas such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability level, language, class, or education. Each individual may have different social identities based on their intersectionality. These social dynamics also play out in our relationships. Therefore, it would be important that we create awareness around those areas where we have privilege and educate ourselves about experiences of oppression from other individuals.

For example, if I denied that I have white privilege in my relationship with my black friends and refused to manage it constructively, the relationship would be toxic.

Each time when we relate with people who have different intersectionality from ourselves, and we deny privilege or deny or minimize different experiences of oppression, we have a hidden toxic dynamic in our relationship.

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Assess hidden toxic dynamics in your relationship

The following questions allow you to gain more clarity about your relationship:

1. Which dynamics resonated most with you?
2. What imbalances do you notice in your relationship with responsibility and emotions?
3. Looking at the other individual: do they always want to have it "their way"? How often are they able to negotiate a win-win solution for you both?
4. Who puts more effort into the relationship?
5. How are emotions expressed in your relationship?
6. Do you feel responsible for your partner's emotions or their happiness?
7. Are you trying harder than the other individual?
8. Do you blame the other person or find excuses for your behaviour?
9. What patterns do you notice in your relationship around conflict and power? What is your responsibility in this? What is your partner's?
10. When do you give your power away? When are you being true to your own needs and wants?
11. What do you tolerate in your relationship that is not ok for you?

"Letting go of toxic people in your life is a big step in loving yourself"

— Hussein Nishah

Manipulative Tactics

Manipulative tactics come in many different forms. The following examples give you an overview of the most important ones. While it is an extensive list, it may not include every existing manipulative tactic.

Intentions of Manipulative Tactics

Often it is hard to understand why people use manipulative tactics. A manipulative tactic usually has the intention to control the other person. If you deal with a person who has manipulative tactics, they are often not interested that the relationship is mutual or that you may also get your needs met, it's really about them. They want to win.

They also want to keep the power over you and they want to control you. As described earlier, their attitude is "I win, you lose." Many of these tactics also have the intention to avoid change. In the end, a person who uses manipulative tactics is often very comfortable with the way they are, and they are unlikely to experience shame, guilt, or anxiety when they do something wrong. Therefore, it is unlikely that they take responsibility or change on their own.

Minimization

The first manipulative tactic is minimization, which means that the person claims that their behaviour isn't as bad as you describe it. If you have expressed concern, they will usually brush it off and minimize it. Sometimes they may tell you that you're exaggerating. Their likely intention is to tell you that they did nothing wrong. If you set a boundary, it's unlikely to be accepted (without resistance) and they are unlikely to adjust their behaviour.

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Lying or lying through omission

Lying can show up either that they simply don't tell the truth or that they keep important elements to themselves to cover up the truth. Furthermore, they may give you only vague information. This behaviour might be hard to spot because you may not find evidence for the lies. Therefore, it is important that you trust your intuition.

Denial

Denial means that they deny that they did something harmful or hurtful for you, especially after you stood up for yourself or asserted your boundaries. The purpose of denial is that the individual can continue to do what they are doing.

Selective attention/ selective inattention

They also may use selective inattention or selective attention: this means they completely ignore certain requests, or they intentionally choose elements where they agree with but dismiss the rest. Being the target of selective attention can be confusing because you might get something sometimes but other times you may feel completely brushed off.

Playing the victim

Playing the victim allows the other individual to not take responsibility for anything. They blame other people, and they use a narrative that says "It's not my fault."

For example, my ex-partner and I had conversations about what was going on in our relationship and how to improve it. These conversations usually ended in a huge list of the things he blamed me for. He did not acknowledge any responsibility concerning how he contributed to the problems in our relationship. Therefore, we weren't able to discuss any solution or move forward.

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Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde syndrome

Another manipulative tactic is the "Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde syndrome:" the individual may be very charming to get what they want. They can be kind and nice, but they become suddenly angry and aggressive if you don't do what they want. They use their charm to lower your defenses, and they use aggression if they notice that this strategy isn't working.

My sister used this tactic quite often. If she wanted something from me or if I did what she wanted me to do, she was the kindest and nicest person. It sounded like she appreciated me. However, when I set a boundary or disagreed with her, she would suddenly completely turn around and get extremely aggressive and go into attack mode. Dealing with a person with Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde Syndrome can be very confusing and exhausting. It may feel like walking on eggshells.

Distraction

Another manipulative tactic is distraction. For example, if you want to discuss your concerns about the relationship, the individual constantly changes the topic. You may not get a straight answer if you have a request. Being the target of distraction may also be very confusing. You may need to put a lot of effort to get an answer from the other individual.

Rationalization

Rationalization often shows up when you bring up a concern: for example, you might hear a very long explanation about why the person is doing what they are doing instead of addressing what is not ok for you. Usually, there is not an acknowledgment that their behaviour was not okay for you. Rationalization is serving the person so that they don't need to change.

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Gaslighting

Gaslighting is extremely crazy-making, and a form of psychological manipulation. Gaslighting makes you doubt your memories and your perception of certain things. The individual may doubt your memories, trying to not engage in the conversation, or labeling you as "too sensitive." They may also deny that they said or did certain things or they may label you in a dismissive way.

For example, in my past relationship, my ex-partner promised me that he would do couple's counselling with me if we struggled in our relationship. Years later, I asked him to do couple's counselling because I did not know how to navigate our problems anymore. He dismissed my request. When I reminded him of his promise, he told me that he had never said it and that I was crazy.

Intimidation

Intimidation means that your partner threatens you to keep you anxious or to get what they want. Intimidation can show up if your partner is yelling at you, if they invade your personal space or if they throw objects or slam the doors. Intimidation is used to demonstrate power and control. They use this strategy to get what they want and also to silence you.

Jealousy

Jealousy can be complicated because some people think that jealousy is healthy for love. I disagree with this statement. We need to be aware that jealousy is a feeling. Some people might experience jealousy because they have been betrayed in the past, but a person is responsible to navigate their jealousy constructively. When jealousy is used as a manipulative tactic, it means that your partner uses their jealousy to control you. They may try to isolate you from other people or to limit your contact with other people. For example, your partner tells you that you're not allowed to meet a former friend because they feel jealous.

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Guilt-tripping

Guilt-tripping happens if one individual tries to instill a feeling of guilt in the other person to get what they want. Usually, the person who is the target of the guilt-tripping feels responsible for something that isn't theirs. Guilt-tripping can also be communicated through body language: the individual tells you maybe through eye-rolling or a certain body posture that you "did something wrong" in the eyes of the other person. Guilt-tripping is toxic because it prevents healthy communication and conflict resolution. I used to be prone to be the target of guilt-tripping in the past because I used to take on too much responsibility. Therefore, I easily felt guilty.

When we feel guilty, we need to learn to work through our feelings of guilt first before making any decisions. Guilt usually disconnects us from our needs and may cause us to override our boundaries.

Shaming

Last but not least we have shaming which distracts the attention away from the individual's behaviour onto you. Shaming comes from a sense of superiority, and the targeted person might feel as if they are flawed. It might be very diminishing for the person to be the target of shaming.

Take away

Toxic dynamics exist in all shades of grey. Relationship dynamics can change over time, often they intensify. Experiencing toxic dynamics often feels confusing and crazy-making. Trust your intuition when it comes to assessing toxic dynamics.

The longer we stay in a toxic dynamic, the more it can erode our self-confidence and self-esteem. As a result, it is harder to get out of the relationship. The relationship dynamics are very unlikely to change if we don't change our behaviours.

Assess Manipulative Tactics in your Relationship

The following questions support you in reflecting on your relationship:

- Think about a specific situation in your relationship when you felt manipulated. Describe the situation. Which manipulative tactics do you notice?
- What do you feel and think when you are the target of these tactics?
- How do you usually respond to them?
- How could you empower yourself in these situations?

“Controllers, abusers, and manipulative people don't question themselves. They don't ask themselves if the problem is them. They always say the problem is someone else.”

— Darlene Quimet

Strategies to Handle Toxic Dynamics

Principle 1: Toxic Relationships as an Opportunity to Grow



While toxic dynamics are painful, they also offer us an opportunity for growth. I don't know about you but my experience of toxic relationships has taught me what I did not want in a relationship and helped me to define what I wanted. Since I grew up with emotional abuse, I had no idea what a healthy relationship looked like. I chose my partner whether our relationship "felt better" than the ones with my family of origin. However, it didn't mean that I was able to discern what was healthy and what wasn't. Many of us had childhood experiences that weren't healthy. Additionally, toxic behaviour in relationships is normalized in our society. While obvious sexual and physical abuse may be less socially tolerated, there aren't any clear social standards about emotional abuse. If we want to break the cycle of violence, we need to learn to discern what is healthy and what isn't.

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Furthermore, I also learned to love and respect myself. As a result, I was able to let go of relationships that were toxic and choose healthy relationships. Leaving a relationship may be especially hard if it is a relationship with a close family member, in my case it was my sibling. However, it is important that we set standards on how we want to be treated by others.

Toxic relationships also showed me the sore spots of past trauma that needed some healing because they caused me to neglect my boundaries and abandon myself. While this process took a while, it supported me in finding joy and fulfillment in my life.

I don't know what your learning would be but I invite you to see it as an opportunity for growth to empower yourself and transform your life for the better. Please note that doesn't mean that you are responsible for other people's toxic behaviours. However, there may be a deeper cause if we stay in relationships that aren't good for us. Growth and healing is like peeling an onion and becoming more empowered in our lives.

“No partner in a love relationship... should feel that he has to give up an essential part of himself to make it viable.”

— *May Sarton*

Principle 2: Focus on Yourself

If we are in a toxic relationship, it is easy to constantly focus on the other person because their behaviour is not ok. We may ruminate about the dynamics because they are confusing. However, this behaviour doesn't allow us to make a change. Even if the behaviour isn't ok, we cannot control what the other person does. We can only control how we respond to it. Therefore, it is important that we learn to focus on ourselves instead of the other individual.

Action 1: Ask yourself what is within your control

Shift your focus from the other individual to focusing on yourself. Instead of ruminating about their behaviour, focus on what happens within you if they use their different tactics. Reflect on how you respond to your partner's behaviour. Whatever they do or not do, it is out of your control. The only things that are within your control are your feelings, your thoughts, and your actions. Focus on what you can do to empower yourself.

Action 2: Create awareness around your sore spots and insecurities

A person with manipulative behaviours often knows exactly what they need to say to get what they want. If you have more awareness around your sore spots and insecurities, you can take responsibility for them and have more freedom of choice in your response.

Action 3: Challenge your beliefs about love

We need to be mindful that some beliefs around love aren't helpful for toxic relationships. Maybe you've heard that love changes everything or that love is unlimited. People with toxic behaviour often have had painful experiences and it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking, *if I just love them enough, they will change*.

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While love might be unlimited, relationships need boundaries. Love and respect go hand in hand. We also cannot heal the other person's pain. We can only heal our own. A person with toxic behaviour might have a very empty cup, they may feel desperate. The problem is that you can only support them on their journey, but you cannot walk the journey for them. Your love doesn't change anything if the other side isn't willing to change and isn't willing to take responsibility for what is theirs.

If you notice that you have beliefs about love that aren't healthy or helpful, challenge them and replace them with beliefs that empower you.

"A good relationship is when someone accepts your past, supports your present and encourages your future."

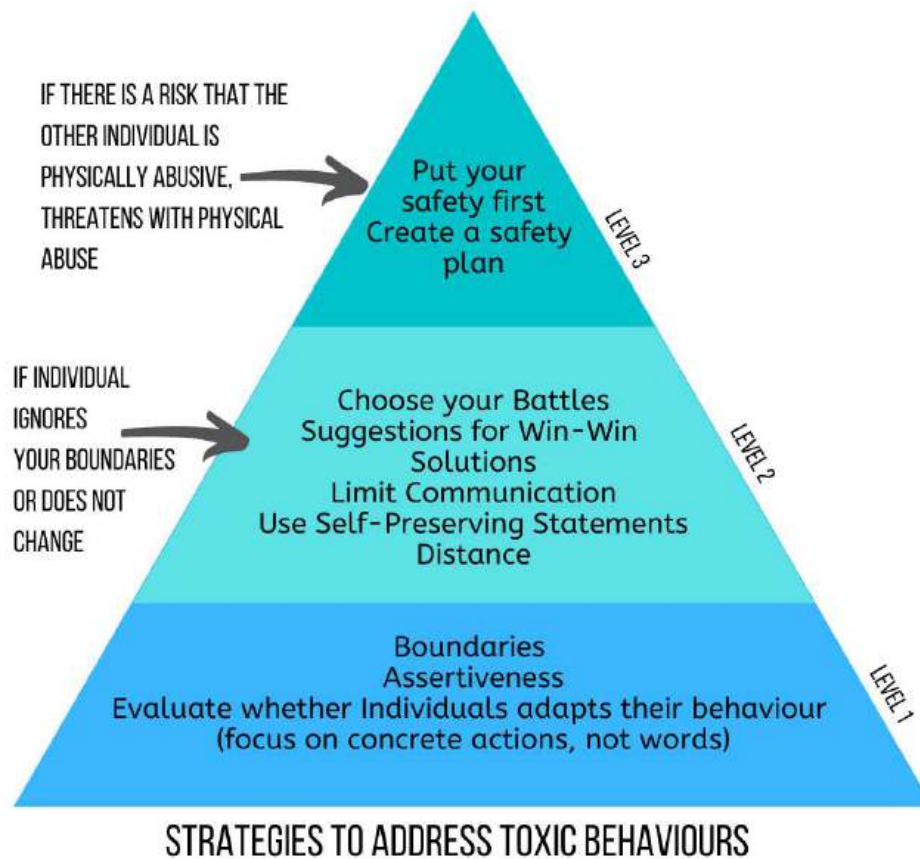
— *Karen Salmansohn*

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Principle 3: Change your Behaviour

This principle is all about how you can adjust your behaviour in your relationship depending on the current toxicity level in your relationship. Remember that it is unlikely that the relationship dynamics change if you don't change. However, you also need to be mindful of the level of toxicity that exists in your relationship to find the most effective strategy. You can evaluate the level of toxicity by observing how your partner reacts to your actions. Some relationships have the capacity to become healthy again, others don't. This capacity is influenced by many different aspects. The goal is to find behaviours to empower yourself, protect your boundaries, and take care of your emotional and physical wellbeing.

Here's is a summary of strategies for toxic dynamics dependent on the level of toxicity:



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Strategies for Toxicity Level 1

If your relationship is in toxicity level 1, you experience toxic patterns like entangled boundaries, toxic conflict resolution skills, and unhealthy communication patterns. You may also see certain manipulative patterns. At this level, you may have already tried to set some boundaries, however you haven't done it consistently. You also have not yet asserted your needs. Therefore, you do not yet know how the other side may respond.

Action 5: Set healthy boundaries and protect them

Your boundaries describe what is ok for you and what is not. Healthy boundaries are vital to establishing healthy relationships. It is also important that you use protective actions if the other individual ignores your boundaries. A protective action is about something you will do if the other person does not respect your boundary. Important is that you are willing to follow through with the protective action if you communicate it.

For example, I don't like it if people yell at me and I could ask, *would you be willing to stop yelling at me? If you are not willing to do so, I will need to leave the room.*

You can communicate boundaries by using this simple formula:

"When you do [describe the behaviour of the other person], I feel [describe your emotion]. Would you be willing to [stop or change the behaviour]. If you are not willing to [stop or change the behaviour], I will need to [describe the protective action you will take]."

If you'd like to dig deeper into boundaries, I invite you to check out the episodes "[Boundaries - A Smart Foundation](#)" and "[Boundaries - Interconnections](#)" of the podcast "Smart Relationship Moves."

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Action 6: Observe how the other individual responds

If you start to set healthy boundaries, it is vital that you observe what the other individual is really changing. Ask yourself whether the other person starts to respect your boundaries or takes your concerns seriously.

Focus more on the concrete action as the words. In a toxic dynamic, it is common that the other partner promises you everything you want, but then never follows up on it. If you set a boundary and the other person is just completely ignoring it, interpret this as an action and take this as a sign that the other person is not willing to change. Your relationship can only recover if your partner takes responsibility for their toxic behaviour and changes it.

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Strategies for Toxicity Level 2

If the other person is ignoring your boundaries or your concerns or is not willing to change, it is a sign that your relationship is in toxicity level 2. Navigating the relationship at this level is more complex. Be mindful that the relationship is unlikely to become healthy if the other person is unwilling to change. In a healthy relationship, two people need to take responsibility for what is theirs and two people need to grow. While it is common that relationships have some unhealthy aspects, it is vital that both partners work towards overcoming them. As long as your partner isn't willing to change, your relationship can't become healthy.

Action 7: Choose Your Battles and Suggest Win-Win Solution

At toxicity level 2, you need to choose your battles. Otherwise, you will fight too many losing battles because your partner isn't interested in having win-win solutions. How can you choose your battles?

- Make a list of topics where you need to see some change. Let go of topics that are of minor importance for you.
- Define what change you'd like to see concerning these topics. Brainstorm win-win solutions that you can suggest to your partner.
- Assess what your partner would see as a win for themselves in this situation.
- Give this win-win solution to your partner and get their agreement.

Action 8: Limit Your Communication

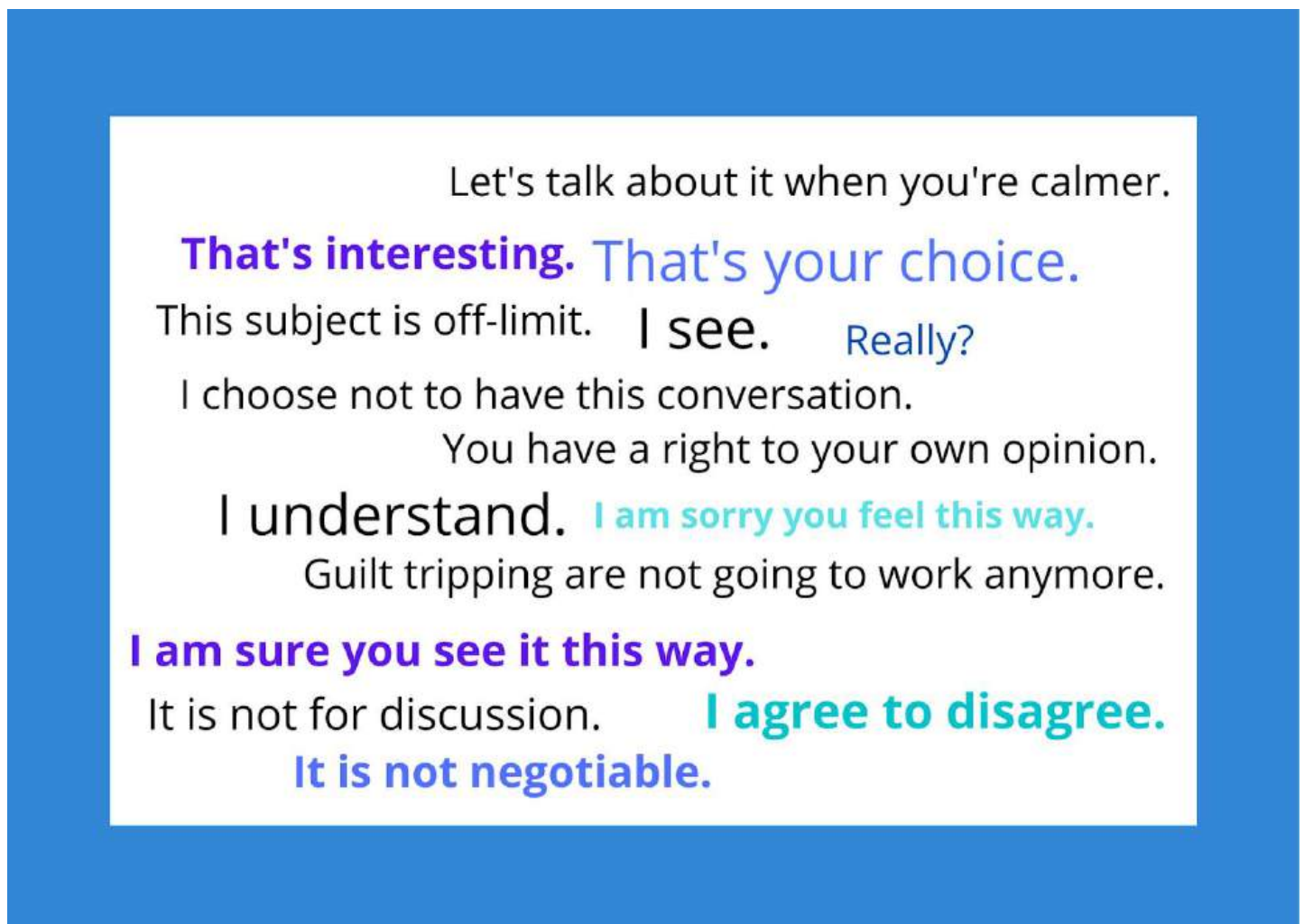
If you are in a relationship with toxicity level 2, you may also consider limiting your communication. Avoid talking about topics where you are aware that you will run into an endless discussion. You may also choose to not share your emotions with them or be vulnerable with them. An individual at this level of toxicity is likely to use your vulnerability against you.

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Action 9: Use self-protective statements

Self-protective statements allow you to set boundaries and protect yourself. If you use them, you don't need to give any further explanations. They also allow you to avoid endless discussions about who is right. For example, the other individual made a very critical comment about you and you reply, "this is your opinion and I agree to disagree." Since individuals at toxicity level 2 are likely to ignore your boundaries, self-protective statements allow you to reinforce them without wasting too much energy.

The following graphic gives you an overview of self-protective statements:



Let's talk about it when you're calmer.

That's interesting. **That's your choice.**

This subject is off-limit. **I see.** Really?

I choose not to have this conversation.

You have a right to your own opinion.

I understand. **I am sorry you feel this way.**

Guilt tripping are not going to work anymore.

I am sure you see it this way.

It is not for discussion. **I agree to disagree.**

It is not negotiable.

Action 10: Find some distance

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Furthermore, I invite you to put some distance from the person. Here are some examples: if it is a romantic partner, you find activities that you can do without your partner. If it's a sibling, you can choose to just meet them on special holidays.

Strategies for Toxicity level 3

A relationship at toxicity level 3 is a relationship where there is a risk of physical abuse or a threat of physical abuse. In level 2, your physical safety is not at risk. In level three, your physical safety may be at risk. At this moment, you need to put your safety first, which might also mean that you cannot choose your battles but that you may need to give in to keep yourself safe and protect yourself.

Action 11: Create a safety plan

At toxicity level 3, it is important that you create a safety plan. It might sound scary to create a safety plan but it is about taking care of yourself. You are not responsible for the other individual's behaviour but you need to take care of your safety as much as possible. This idea might collide with your beliefs about love and your beliefs about how safe you want to feel in a relationship. It might be hard to think about a safety plan because you want to be loyal to a partner and maybe some part of you just doesn't want to believe that physical violence is possible. These thoughts are common and natural. However, it's better to have a safety plan and not need it than not having a safety plan and needing it.

For example, I used to have a safety plan because my father stalked me. I remember how uncomfortable I felt the first time I had to talk to the police to keep myself safe. However, I also learned that it was worth it. I don't know what your relationship looks like, however, I invite you to trust your gut and not talk yourself out if you have a sense that your physical safety is at risk.

“You always have to remember to take care of you first and foremost, because when you stop taking care of yourself, you get out of balance and you really forget how to take care of others.”

— Jada Pinkett

Principle 4: Self-care

Self-care is essential if you are in a toxic relationship. Research shows that toxic relationships can affect our physical, mental, and emotional health negatively. Self-care isn't necessarily only about beautiful bubble baths but any type of conscious actions you take to care for your emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. Spirituality in this context isn't about religion but any kind of connection you have with your inner self, your higher self, your spirit, or soul or whatever you want to call it.

Action 12: Create a self-care plan

Self-care is individually different and we need to choose strategies that work for us. I'll give you some ideas but please check in with yourself what resonates with you.

Toxic Relationships 101

- Meditation or mindfulness

Meditation or mindfulness can be useful tools for our emotional and mental well-being. There are many different types of meditation available so you have a wide variety to choose from. If you've never tried it before, it could be useful to experiment with it. Be skeptical about it, give it a good try for a couple of weeks. Reflect on the changes you notice within yourself after you experimented with it for a while. If it doesn't work, let it go and choose something different.

- Nature

Self-care also includes being in nature, whether it's going for a walk or a hike, or maybe just sitting by a river and enjoying nature.

- Creativity

Furthermore, you can use creative outlets like drawing, painting, or making some other artwork. This allows you to express your emotions and connect with yourself.

- Traveling alone

Traveling often allows us to gain a new perspective. It may also support you in finding some distance from your partner, especially if you live with them.

- Journaling

Another element of self-care can be journaling and writing about the dynamics you are experiencing as well as expressing your emotion. It allows you to gain a deeper understanding of the toxic dynamics and work through your emotions. It may also be useful to journal about small things in your life you are grateful for.

- Mantras and affirmations

Furthermore, I also invite you to use some sort of affirmation or mantras. Depending on the level of toxicity in the relationship, you might be constantly exposed to critical comments about yourself. Probably most of us try not to take them in but there is a risk that you might internalize them. If you start to use mantras, it can support you in improving your self-esteem and your self-confidence. It may also be helpful for you so you are better able to resist these toxic messages you might be hearing.

Toxic Relationships 101

- Self-compassion

Self-compassion is another aspect of self-care. Toxic dynamics are often very confusing, and it's easy to blame oneself if we are in a toxic relationship. However, there are probably millions of reasons why you ended up in this situation. It is easy to be drawn into toxic dynamics because they are usually very subtle at the beginning. Self-compassion can help us to refrain from self-blame and allows us to work through complicated emotions like guilt or shame.

- Taking care of rumination

Another strategy for self-care you can use is to distract yourself if you start to ruminate about the relationship. For example, if you notice that you spend a lot of time thinking about the dynamics, visualize a stop sign and then find an activity to distract yourself, whether it is dancing, watching a movie, or going for a walk. This way you can break the cycle of constantly ruminating about the relationship and focus your energy on yourself.

Principle 5: Find a Supportive Person

Toxic dynamics can be very confusing, crazy-making, and draining. If you are currently part of them, it might be difficult to see them more objectively. It might be hard to deal with them on your own.

Therefore, it would be useful to find somebody who can support you through this. Additionally, try to stay away from people who normalize emotional abuse and toxic dynamics or people who don't believe you. If you talk about these dynamics for somebody who doesn't understand them, they may even further blame you or guilt-trip you. This can do more harm than good.

Action 13: Find a supportive person

Who would be an individual in your life who has awareness and knowledge of toxic dynamics? It needs to be somebody who believes you, who was able to label the toxic dynamic, and also somebody who validates your experience.

Principle 6: Gain Clarity

Toxic relationships can be confusing and draining. It is often hard to make a decision about whether it is time to leave the relationship or not. Our emotions may run high due to the toxic dynamics and we cannot think clearly. We may be between hope and despair. Therefore, it is important to work through the dark clouds and gain clarity.

What can support you in gaining clarity?

- **Action 14: Define what you want**

It is important that you gain clarity about the type of relationship that you want. Ask yourself, if you had a magic wand, what type of relationship would you love to be in and describe it in detail.

- **Action 15: Define a minimum standard for your current relationship.**

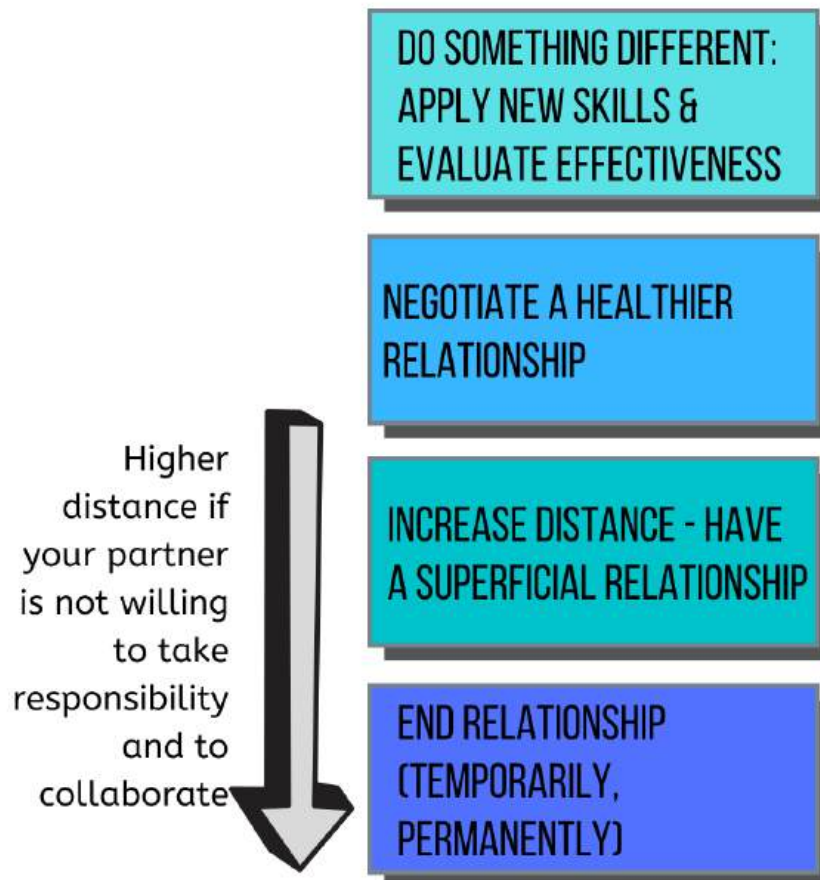
If you'd like to stay in your current relationship and it likely won't meet your dream of what you want, define a minimum standard for your current relationship. Ask yourself what is the minimum you'd need to tolerate this relationship. How much can you give in without feeling resentful? What would it make ok for you to be in this relationship? One key for this standard is that you'd be willing to leave the relationship if the minimum standard is not met.

- **Action 16: Request your minimum requirements to your partner and ask them whether they are willing to change.**

If you've defined your minimum requirements, have a conversation with your partner and ask them directly whether they are willing to change. If they agree with it, observe whether they are really changing. If they disagree with it, it gives you the clarity that you can't get what you want from your current partner.

Take away

The following graphic summarizes the different steps you can take to empower yourself.



Create a Change Plan

Action 17: Prepare yourself for change

Reading about the actions is an important step, however, the most important step is that you take action. The following questions may help you guide towards your next actions. Please be mindful that this will be a growth process. Some actions may not work out and you need to adjust them. Be patient, persistent, and practice.

Toxic Relationships 101

1. Which actions resonated most with you at this moment? What actions would you like to implement in your life?
2. Dependent on the level of toxicity in your relationship, which actions would be most appropriate to change your response?
3. Selfcare:
 - How well does your self-care work for you?
 - What can you do to take better care of yourself?
 - What activities give you joy? How could you do more of them?
 - What activities would you like to experiment with?
4. Defining your boundaries:
 - What do you tolerate in your relationship that is not ok for you?
 - Where do you need to speak up for yourself?
 - What self-protective statements could you use?
 - What do you need to say "stop" to?
5. Finding distance
 - How much distance would you need from the other individual?
 - What could you do to find more distance from them?
 - What topics do you want to stop talking about?
6. Defining what you want in a relationship
 - What would your ideal relationship look like?
 - What activities would you like to do with your partner?
 - How would they communicate with you? How would they treat you? How would you feel if you were around them?
7. Defining your minimum standard:
 - What are things that are not negotiable for you in a relationship?
 - How much could you give in without feeling resentful?

Toxic Relationships 101

8. Evaluate the result

- What actions have you used? How effective have they been?
- What has been helpful? What hasn't worked?
- What can you do differently the next time?

Action 18: Create a change plan

1. What is your goal for the next three months concerning your relationship?
2. What is the most important reason why you want to work towards this goal?
3. What steps do you need to take to reach this goal?
4. What obstacles could prevent you from achieving this goal (e.g. fears, past experiences, external influences)?
5. What would help you to overcome these obstacles?
6. On a scale from 0 to 10, how important is it for you to achieve this goal?
7. On a scale from 0 to 10, how confident are you of being able to reach this goal?

Further information

Thank you for your time to work through the handout. I hope that you have found clarity and gained insight about your next steps.

Individual Video Counselling

If you are interested in working with me, I am offering a free discovery session. This session is an opportunity to get to know each other better. We'll explore the biggest challenge you are facing right now and what outcome you'd like to achieve. I'll explain to you how I'd work with you. Last but not least, I'll answer any questions you might have.

Book your [free discovery session online](#). Alternatively, you can send me an email at nat@brighthorizontherapies.com.

About the Author

Natalie Jovanic (they/them) - as a counsellor and coach - specializes in working with clients who have experienced trauma and violence. Natalie is passionate about supporting their clients to transform their lives and experience more joy and fulfillment. Many of Natalie's clients belong to marginalized communities such as gender diverse people and BIPOC people.

Their therapeutic services are trauma-informed and integrate anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice. Natalie has extensive training in coaching and counselling services including EMDR which is recognized as the leading trauma-resolution method.

Additionally, Natalie creates and designs workshops and programs on navigating privilege for individuals and organizations in the context of anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice. They also offer mentoring services for white leaders who want to dismantle white supremacy and navigate privilege healthily.

You can find more details about their services at brighthorizontherapies.com.

