



Avoiding Unhealthy Relationships

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Do you find yourself drawn to unhealthy relationships whether they are romantic relationships, work relationships, friendships or family relationships?

Do you know other people who seem to be in this quandary and you don't understand why?

This phenomenon is unfortunately common. As in most human relationships, the dynamics are complex and the reasons vary. If you or your child, friend or family member seem to attract this kind of relationship please read on.

First, we need to define what a healthy relationship is. Many people do not know what this is. They may not have grown up seeing a healthy relationship and last I heard they do not teach it in school or college. Maybe they should!

Healthy relationships are comprised of the following traits:

- Non-threatening behavior
- Respect
- Trust and Support
- Honesty and Accountability
- Responsible Parenting (if you are parents)
- Shared Responsibility

Some important points to keep in mind before we describe traits of an unhealthy relationship are:

- Unhealthy or abusive relationships do not have to be physically abusive – they can be emotionally abusive, and therefore sometimes harder to recognize.
- Unhealthy or abusive relationships are progressive - meaning they get worse over time.
- Unhealthy or abusive relationships can take place in same sex couples.
- A specific relationship is not the source of the abuse – i.e., without help and outside intervention, the negative/abusive patterns *will be repeated in all relationships*.

People may not understand why they or others are in unhealthy/abusive relationships.

It is not that easy to identify as it takes subtle forms. The examples shown here, however, can help you to identify traits of abusive and unhealthy relationships:

- *Using intimidation:* making your partner afraid by looks, actions or gestures
- *Using emotional abuse:* putting your partner down by humiliation, guilt, shame., etc.
- *Using isolation:* trying to cut partner off from friends, activities, education and social interaction
- *Minimizing, denying and blaming:* making light of the concerns the partner has about the relationship

As we know, relationships in trouble can range from simple unhealthy and stagnating relationships to abusive relationships physically, sexually or emotionally. What about the more subtle forms? In healthy relationships boundaries are vital. Red flags of a relationship with poor interpersonal boundaries are:

- ☑ Talking at an intimate level at the first meeting
- ☑ Going against personal values or rights to please others
- ☑ Falling in love with any new acquaintance
- ☑ Falling in love with anyone who reaches out
- ☑ Letting others direct your life
- ☑ Expecting others to fill your needs automatically
- ☑ Being sexual for your partner, not for yourself
- ☑ Falling apart so someone will take care of you
- ☑ Allowing someone to take as much as they can from you
- ☑ Letting others define your reality.

Due to the prevalence of jealousy in unhealthy relationships, this topic deserves some attention.

People confuse jealousy as a sign of love. Jealousy has nothing to do with love, it's a sign of possessiveness and lack of trust. In an unhealthy/abusive relationship he/she will question his/her partner about whom she/he talks to, to accuse him/her of flirting or to be jealous of time he/she spends with family, friends or children. Often as the jealousy progress the behavior worsens with him/her constantly checking what his/her partner does.

By identifying healthy/unhealthy traits you, your friends and loved ones can prevent being or staying in a relationships that is unhealthy/abusive.

Why do people get into these relationships and why do they stay? On the outside looking in, we can see clearly these relationships are unhealthy relationships masquerading as love. But for those caught in the smokescreen, it's not so clear. For some it's all they have ever known - having grown up in an abusive family and having had abusive partners. Others are drawn to the dramatics and passion of it all, confusing it with love and minimizing the pain. Relationships like this can slowly deteriorate and the person's self esteem becomes so lowered, they think they deserve it.

Ideas for improving your situation. Remember that change takes time. Expect yourself to take small steps, "Rome wasn't built in a day." An attribute of unhealthy relationships is that people become numb and do not acknowledge what is going on. You need to look honestly at the relationship. Look at the characteristics of healthy/unhealthy relationships above. What steps you need to take also depend on the severity of the situation.

If your relationship involves physical/emotional abuse and the abuser is unwilling to own their behavior and seek help, the prudent course of action is to remove yourself totally from the situation. This is painful, but is generally safer and ultimately better for both parties than allowing the cycle of abuse to continue. **Important: make sure you do this in a safe way, statistics show abuse increases after the victim leaves.**

If the situation is less severe and your partner is willing to look at her/his behavior here are some tips:

- acknowledge your own behavior and unhealthy patterns
- identify what you want to change (is it realistic?)
- learn communication techniques that will help
- look at the relationship patterns in your family of origin
- either get counseling yourself or as a couple, if you are stuck

If you would like to talk to someone about this or any other issues, please call Solutions Employee Assistance Program (EAP) at 800-526-3485 for free, confidential assessment, short-term counseling and referral when needed.
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