

Relationships

10 Signs You're in a Toxic Relationship

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By **Dr. John Delony**

People—especially those closest to you—have a profound impact on your well-being. We'll all experience the ups and downs of living with and loving imperfect people, but ultimately, our relationships should be a source of joy, not frustration.

Every human being on the planet is worth having rich, rewarding and safe relationships. And every human being on the planet has a responsibility to co-create those relationships. Let's learn to spot the signs of a toxic relationship so you can start creating healthy ones instead.

What Is a Toxic Relationship?

A toxin is poisonous—a substance that can cause illness, damage or even death. A toxic relationship, then, is one that's sick. It might even be dying. While we all have our moments and seasons of selfishness, a truly toxic person will take and take and take and give you nothing in return. It's like being bitten by a vampire (Team Edward!) and drained of your life. You find yourself serving someone at the expense of your feelings, needs and joy.



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Don't get me wrong—service and sacrifice are part of a good relationship. And so are challenges, disagreements, [forgiveness](#) and discomfort. But a healthy relationship is *mutually* life-giving. The challenges and sacrifices ebb and flow toward connection and love.

And by the way, most people talk about toxic relationships in the context of romance, but the reality is that *any* relationship can become toxic, including relationships with coworkers, in-laws, parents, siblings and friends.

Abusive vs. Toxic Relationships

Before we move on, I need to share one important caveat: Do not mistake *toxic* with *abusive*. *Abuse* is an extreme form of toxicity, and it should *not* be tolerated by anyone for any reason for any amount of time.

If you or anyone you know is trapped in a physically, sexually or emotionally abusive relationship, please reach out to the appropriate professionals to get help, including the police. You can also call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1.800.799.SAFE. You and your loved ones are worth being safe.

10 Signs You're in a Toxic Relationship

So, how do we distinguish between the normal challenges of any relationship and a truly toxic one? Here are a few common signs to watch out for.

1. You don't feel safe.

And I don't mean physically (although that would apply too). I'm talking about a sense of emotional safety. Can you openly share your thoughts and feelings with this person? Does

your voice matter? Or do you feel like you're always editing yourself, afraid of what they'd do or say if you were radically honest?

A healthy relationship gives space for people to be imperfect and accountable at the same time. You can tell each other the good stuff and the shameful stuff and openly talk about who has hurt you. You can be fully seen and still be fully loved.

Now let's be clear: In most cases, you wouldn't share your deepest hurts with your in-laws the way you might with a [trusted friend](#). Safety has levels, depending on the relationship. It takes wisdom to discern the depth and differences of each relationship.

2. You have bad (or nonexistent) communication.

Good communication is the heartbeat of every relationship, and it's easy to go off the rails without even meaning to. My wife and I have gone through seasons of toxicity because I was afraid to express my needs and desires. I would wish and assume, and when my expectations didn't become reality, I would judge her, experience massive [disappointment](#), and become resentful. It wasn't until I opened up that we could actually connect.

And make no mistake, being honest doesn't mean everything will magically be okay. It probably means things are going to be uncomfortable or painful. That's normal. But burying your hurts and needs deep inside you only leads to resentment.

Often, an emotionally charged [conversation](#) activates our fight, flight or freeze response. You become explosive, tackling the threat head on, or you withdraw into a cold silence.

Other examples of dysfunctional communication include gaslighting, manipulating words, being dishonest, and attaching judgment to their words without asking for clarification.

3. You feel neglected and exploited.

I live in the woods in middle Tennessee. Since we have so much space outside, we decided to start a garden. Imagine this with me: What if I left my plants to fend for themselves, never watering or weeding or fertilizing? Things wouldn't end well.

Not to sound like a hippie, but people need nurturing just like my garden. If your partner doesn't honor and tend to your basic needs—not because you can't do it, but because they care about you—then you're not in a healthy relationship. Chances are, you're not only [being ignored](#)—you're also being exploited.

4. You feel like you've lost yourself.

Toxic people tend to absorb, manipulate and mold people to fit their own agendas. Their plans and interests dominate the relationship. You often find yourself doing things that you don't want to do just to please them—violating your core values, going places that make you uncomfortable, or spending time with people who set off your anxiety alarms.

Never forget: YOU hold the power. It's up to *you*—not your partner—to recognize these patterns and set healthy boundaries. It's your job to say no, assert yourself, and live in alignment with your values. But toxic people will often become resentful, frustrated or angry when you [set boundaries](#) or live your values.

Quick note: This is often hard to see on your own. Give your friends or trusted loved ones permission to speak into your life when they see you disappearing into someone else's life. Those closest to us can often see things that we cannot.

5. Judgment—not curiosity—is the norm.

We all have our own weird things that make life both fun and challenging. The life blood of a relationship is curiosity, not judgment. If you like waking up early and your spouse likes sleeping in, that's cool. Instead of saying, "You should get up earlier!" ask, "Why do you like sleeping in so late?"

And beyond being weird, we all mess up. We say or do things that hurt other people or step on toes or accidentally walk into their personal land mines. We need people who care enough to call it out. Being challenged and held accountable are important parts of any worthwhile relationship. But a toxic person will approach you with condemnation, not compassion. They'll use your past mistakes as a weapon.

6. You feel belittled and ashamed.

Does this person make you feel less than? Do they belittle you? Make you feel stupid or ashamed? These are all signs of emotional immaturity, which makes for a toxic relationship. Emotionally immature people need to prop themselves up on a pile of your wrongs, failures and shortcomings. When they can't find something bad to point out, they tend to invent something or rub your nose in something from the past.

7. You don't receive empathy.

Empathy is like a pair of glasses that you put on to see the world through someone else's eyes. It's choosing to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Romans

12:15, NIV). It's choosing not to lecture those who are crying on why they should be grateful or remind people who are doing well of all the suffering in the world.

A toxic person is hyper-focused on their own needs and wants, blinding them to the realities of people around them. When you open up and share your heart with a toxic person, you're met with [apathy instead of empathy](#), and redirection instead of celebration. They might dismiss you when you share important things with them, turn the conversation back on themselves, and one-up you when you tell stories.

8. You're playing a dysfunctional role.

We often replay the relational stories of our childhoods in our adult relationships. For better or worse, these stories are our roadmaps for life. For example, a woman might marry a man who just sits on the couch and plays video games so she can fulfill a mothering role. Or a child might take on caring for a parent who's an addict, believing it's their job to fix their parent.

Being stuck in an unhealthy role is a sign of a toxic relationship because a relationship like that cannot be mutually life-giving and supportive. Is the person you're with willing to grow? Are you willing to grow? Because it's only when we start to question our automated roles that we begin to heal and change our generational legacies.

9. You feel controlled or manipulated.

A toxic person feels a compulsion to tip the power balance in their favor. They might check in on you all the time or constantly bug you about where you're going and what you're doing. Your partner might weaponize the relationship to manipulate you into doing things. They might withdraw when you upset them and come running back when you do something "right."

A good litmus test for this is to think of something that brings you joy. If you immediately think, *Yeah, but [insert name here] will get mad*, then you're probably being controlled or manipulated.

10. You're living under a cloud of rage.

Toxic people are often critical, mocking and chronically sarcastic. Are you always walking on eggshells around this person? Are they always frustrated by something? Do they explode in episodes of [rage](#)? A chronically angry person is not emotionally well and cannot be a supportive partner. When you feel like you have to hide, you know it's toxic.

What to Do if You're in a Toxic Relationship

So, what in the world do you do with all this information? Is it possible for a toxic relationship to change? While I can't help you come to that conclusion in a single article, here are a few things for you to consider as you move forward:

Get out of the other person's head.

It's tempting to dissect and analyze the behaviors of others, especially someone who has hurt you greatly. But this is a complete waste of your time and emotional energy. Stop trying to figure them out and instead focus on what you're bringing to the table.

There are only two things on planet earth that you can control: your thoughts and your actions. So, get out of their head and spend more time in yours.

Recognize that behavior is a language.

Behavior is a language. If you're in a relationship with someone who repeatedly hurts or diminishes you, they're saying all you need to know, even if they aren't using words. Read that again.

Ask: Are we just in a toxic season?

Like I shared earlier, my wife and I have been through toxic seasons in our marriage. Sometimes, life is just incredibly hard and one (or both) of you aren't handling it well. If you're going through a big transition, having a kid, or experiencing loss or illness, you might just need to hang in there and extend some extra grace. Remember that the earlier you get your feelings, hurts and concerns out in the open, the sooner things can heal.

Paint a picture for the kind of relationship you want.

You might be so used to toxicity that you don't even know what a healthy relationship looks like. Give yourself permission to dream about how you *actually* want to be treated. A healthy, supportive marriage only works if you wake up every day thinking, *How can I make my partner's day better?* (And if they think the same way about you!) It's not a 50/50 split of effort and love and intention—it's giving 100% each way. Everybody wins when you think about putting each other's needs in front of your own.

You're worth having extraordinary relationships, even if you don't know what that looks like right now.

Talk to a trusted friend or counselor.

You can't do this alone. Open up with a trusted, kind and wise friend who can help you get some perspective. You might even need to see a professional therapist. I tell other people how to do relationships for a living, and I still regularly see a professional. Yes, it's uncomfortable and expensive and hard work. Do it anyway. You can't afford not to.

Learn new relational tools.

Relational skills—just like anything else in life—can be learned. You might need to learn skills like assertiveness, boundaries, [self-forgiveness](#), confrontation or vulnerability. One of the best ways to do this is to meet with a mental health professional (see above), but there are tons of books and podcasts and other free resources. And as with any new tools, the key to getting better at using them is practice.

Leave if you need to.

If your relationship is toxic through and through, it might be time to end it—especially if you're dating them. Marriage or having another baby won't solve your problems—in fact, it will probably amplify them. If you're just hanging around, hoping they'll change someday, it's time to kill the fantasy and move on. You're worth healthy relationships.

Learn How to Co-Create Healthy Relationships

Good folks, relationships are messy. But you *must* have them in order to have a healthy, whole life. Don't run to the hills and swear off all relationships forever. Yes, they're risky. Yes, people will hurt you (and you'll hurt them too). But when done right, a good relationship is the most life-giving force on the planet. We need each other. Don't give up on people—or yourself.

I'm serious about helping people learn what it means to be in relationship with each other. And sometimes that means learning new ways to relate—to yourself and others. Tune into [The Dr. John Delony Show](#), where I coach callers live on how to deepen their relationships for a healthier future.

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Dr. John Delony is a mental health expert with two PhDs from Texas Tech University—one in counselor education and supervision and the other in higher education administration. Before joining Ramsey Solutions in 2020, John spent two decades in crisis response, walking with people through severe trauma. Now at Ramsey Solutions, John writes, speaks and teaches on relationships, mental health, anxiety and wellness. He also serves as co-host of *The Ramsey Show*, the second-largest talk show in the nation that's heard by 18 million weekly listeners, as well as host of *The Dr. John Delony Show*. In 2022, John's book *Own Your Past, Change Your Future* instantly became a #1 national bestseller. You can also find John featured on DailyMailTV, Fox Business and *The Minimalists Podcast*. [Learn More.](#)

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