Unhealthy and Violent Relationships: How to Help Yourself or a Friend

Do you know the signs of an unhealthy relationship? How do you recognize verbal and emotional abuse? Would you know how to get yourself or a friend out of a physically abusive relationship?

Rocky relationships—your own or a friend’s—can distract you from your studies. Even highly educated people sometimes need a third party’s guidance or intervention to end or mend a destructive relationship.

Healthy vs. unhealthy

Most people desire a healthy, supportive, loving relationship when they choose to pair up with another person romantically, says Shannon Cook, personal coach and relationship expert. “When both parties are emotionally balanced, this outcome is possible with effort and communication from both partners.” Sometimes people bring damaging personal issues or pathology into the union, says Cook. “An unhealthy relationship is any relationship between people that is physically, emotionally, or spiritually destructive to one or both parties, or that inhibits growth in those areas.”

“Unhealthy relationships can include verbal, emotional and physical abuse, addictions and chronic cheating,” Cook continues. “They can have a negative effect on your ability to focus on your own dreams and future goals.”

Toxic personalities can be either gender, notes author Kimberly J. Brasher in Toxic Relationships: How to Regain Lost Power in Your Relationship. Her book offers a self-test to help readers learn whether a relationship is worth saving, along with empowerment skills for turning a relationship around.

Verbal and emotional abuse

“Verbal abuse and emotional abuse are often difficult to recognize, mainly because living in such a relationship involves denial, rationalization and other distortions of reality,” says Licensed Mental Health Counselor Patricia N. Alexander, Ph.D.

“If you find yourself feeling inferior, incapable, or questioning your perception of reality when around your partner, this merits a closer look in your relationship dynamic,” says Cook. “Emotional and verbal abuse can include criticism of who you are as a person and the way you do even small or mundane tasks. This can mean name calling, but it can also come in the form of condescending suggestions about how to ‘do things right.’”

In emotionally abusive situations, it is common to feel like you are “walking on eggshells,” she adds. “You may feel that you can’t ask for what you want emotionally from your partner. It is also important to note that emotional abuse can develop into physical abuse.”

“It's OK, really. I'm used to it.”

Some people accept emotionally abusive situations, and there can be a variety of reasons. Some may have grown up with alcoholic families, or they may have been subjected to varying forms of abuse early on.

“Some people may have

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**Tips for Moving Beyond Unhealthy Relationships**

*Continued from page 1*

been expected to tolerate difficult conditions and were not taught to set limits on what behaviors would be accepted from others,” Cook explains. “Victims of abuse often display wonderful character traits such as kindness, generosity, nurturing, and non-judgmental attitudes, yet without solid boundaries these qualities can be exploited by those who abuse.”

**Regaining a healthy balance**

The amount of mental and emotional energy that goes into maintaining an unhealthy or toxic relationship is enormous, Cook notes. “It will detract from other areas such as schoolwork, employment, and outside relationships with friends and family. It can leave you feeling depressed, anxious, and even cause you to wonder if you are crazy.”

“It is important to get back in touch with yourself if you are struggling in an unhealthy relationship. Start paying closer attention to your instincts. Notice what your gut tells you when you are with your partner, then assess how you feel around healthy, positive friends. Work on taking good care of your body, eating right, taking vitamins, and exercising. Spend as much time as you can around people who can give you positive affirmation about your worth, and reduce time spent with the unhealthy partner as much as possible. Remember that an emotionally abusive partner is ‘programming’ your thinking and creating a reality for you in order to maintain control. See a counselor to help you work through your emotions and gain more perspective on what is actually happening. This is imperative if there is any threat of physical abuse. You need professional help to get out and manage your safety in this situation, Cook emphasizes.

“‘One of most dangerous junctures in an abusive relationship is during the break up.’

**Helping a friend**

If you know someone in an emotionally abusive relationship, Cook says it’s important to make positive statements about his or her self-worth whenever you can. “If he or she is receptive, you can provide information on emotional abuse. Communicate that you care and are available, and encourage good self care. When he or she is ready to make the break, it will be much easier if there is a solid emotional support network in place.”

**Resources**

- How can you tell if you are being abused? The Florida Department of Children and Families offers a free online questionnaire: www.dcf.state.fl.us/domesticviolence/beingabused.shtml
- Shannon Cook, personal coach and relationship expert: www.stoptoxicrelationships.com
- The Verbally Abusive Relationship, by Patricia Evans, 1996
- The Nice Girl Syndrome, by Beverly Engel, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.. 2008

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