

Toxic Intimacy

By Barrington Brennen, 2005

The word "toxic" refers to behaviors, attitudes, and philosophies that cripple or destroy relationships.

Question: Dear Mr. Brennen: I am presently on my twentieth intimate relationship since 1990. I seem to mess up every time. I am very good at attracting women but not good at keeping them. I get really deeply involved in their lives until they find out the truth about me. I usually end up hurting them. When one relationship is over, I must find someone else to love and be intimate with. If I do not find another partner, I may have a depression and become suicidal until I find another partner to get excited over again. What can I do?

Answer: Dear friend: It is evident that you are developing injurious or toxic relationships. You seem to be as James Henslin, sociologist describes a mania or ludus lover. "A manic lover cannot tolerate loss of contact with a love object, even for short periods of time, and is distressed by a lack of the lover's presence or anticipated interaction" (Henslin, 1989). A manic lover is one who tries to manipulate the behavior or feelings of the one he or she loves, "but because he or she seems to be bereft of logic, often succeeds only in looking foolish in his or her own eyes." Mania is usually associated with low self-esteem and a poor self-concept.

Ludus lovers are generally those lovers who "play" love affairs as he or she plays games or puzzles--to win, to get the greatest rewards for the least cost. A ludic lover does not like long-range plans, and is careful not to date the same person often enough to create the illusion of a stable relationship. "For a ludic lover sex is totally self-centered and may be exploitative rather than symbolic of a relationship" (Ibid.). This certainly describes toxic intimacy.

Here are several important points to understand about toxic intimacy.

1. **Toxic intimacy occurs when someone is obsessed with finding someone to love.** Usually the development of self is not a priority. Therefore, low self-esteem is evident, which can lead to depression. This combination of low self-esteem and the obsession to find someone to love, makes it impossible to establish stable relationships. Since one is dependent on another person to feel good, but lacks what is needed to hold on to the relationship, one would enter a cycle of first finding another lover, then enjoying the thrill and excitement in the novel relationship which shortly ends in pain and despair. This pain and despair only end when he or she enters another relationship. It is a vicious cycle.
2. **Toxic intimacy occurs when there is a need for immediate gratification.** That is the toxic lover wants to move the relationship too fast, skipping developmental steps toward intimacy. He or she can't wait and may be so impatient that demands are made on the partner that are usually detrimental to the progress of the relationship. There is plenty of pressure for sex and/or commitment.
3. **Toxic intimacy happens also when there is a power and control struggle in the relationship.** Toxic lovers have difficulty not being "in charge" in the relationship. Sometimes the toxic lover may try to isolate his or her lover from friends and maybe family members. Usually they want to spend a lot of time alone with the partner

under the disguise that having too many friends may destroy the relationship.

4. **In toxic intimacy, there are usually attempts to change the partner to meet one's needs.** Any attempt to change the partner is unhealthy. Many times women are convinced that they can change their lover's negative behavior. They live each day on hope and denial until a cancerous sore of jealousy and manipulation ruins the relationship.
5. This introduces the next point. **Toxic relationships are usually relationships based on delusion and avoidance of the unpleasant.** It is very difficult to admit that what you suspect about your partner is true and might be detrimental to the life of the relationship, especially if your own self esteem is dependent of the very existence of the relationship. Many times toxic lovers are so blinded by the obsession to love someone that they would deny even the very obvious evil behaviors in his/her lover no matter how unpleasant it is.

These are just some of the points about toxic intimacy I feel are important in helping better understand yourself.

What can you do now? Here are a few things you can do.

1. Place the development of self as first priority. People who feel good about themselves make better married partners. If you do not have a positive self-concept before marriage, you will not find it after marriage.
2. Remember you have the freedom of choice. No one should pressure anyone in a relationship.
3. Take time in your relationship. Desire long-term contentment. Develop the relationship step by step.
4. Let there be a balance of mutuality in the relationship. Treat your partner with respect. Each one should feel of equal value in the relationship.
5. There should be compromise and negotiation in relationship. There should be no struggle for leadership. Be open-minded and honest with yourself and with each other.
6. Allow sex to grow out of friendship and caring. It is futile to think that friendship can grow out of sex.
7. Learn to share your needs and feelings with your partner. Get in touch with yourself. It is only when you can reach into your own heart that you can truly appreciate what your partner means to you.

Dear friend, take time to examine your life. It might be painful, but it will be the first step in building the foundation for healthy, long lasting relationships. Unfortunately, men and women who do not place the development self as first priority in their lives usually end up with similar partners. The partner also has low self-esteem or has patterns of behavior that cause painful, short-term relationships. With these thoughts, you can move from toxic intimacy to healthy intimacy.

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