

The Curse of Toxic Friendships

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I spend a lot of time coaching people in the art of being a good friend rather than a destructive one. The Bible says in Proverbs 18:24, “*A man hath friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.*” Teaching people how to be good friends to others is actually one of my favorite counseling disciplines, especially when teaching couples how to be friends. The other key factor in developing good friendships is finding good relationship material. Relationships require investment whether they are romantic or friendship focused. It matters not if that friendship is with male or female. Usually becoming a good friend is the emphasis but what if you do everything you can to become the model friend and yet it often ends in disaster. What did you do wrong? What do you need to improve? Well, before you beat yourself up too much, “first make sure that you are not, in fact, just surrounded by people who are toxic.” I find that many of the people I coach and counsel need to do this sort of examination, because we all tend to have a specific blind spot towards the people in our lives. You see, we spend a lot of time examining and looking out for toxic relationships but give very little consideration to the possibility that we have toxic friendships.

It sometimes feels as if they are saying, “**Hey, bro! Got any shreds of self-esteem I can destroy today?**”

We put a great deal of attention on avoiding unhealthy *romantic* relationships, but *friendships* can be just as damaging, just as toxic, even as abusive. Toxic friends can actually be harder to recognize. We tend to be clear about the fact that we’d never be friends with abusers, therefore our friends couldn’t possibly be abusive. We may excuse their behavior as “that’s just how they are...”. We may choose to overlook the fact that our friends are toxic because we’ve known them for so long that we can’t really let them go. Maybe they have done something, that we feel is proof they are a good friend. But those toxic friends are destroying your self-esteem, ruining your happiness and in many cases actively holding you back. If you’re miserable, it may be time to look around and make sure you haven’t surrounded yourself with toxic friends.

You Are the Sum of the People You Hang Out With

We often see ourselves islands of self-reliance in a sea of conformity, shaped by our own wills, uninfluenced by the world around us. We know exactly who we are and why we are and why we feel the way we feel. We don’t respond to peer pressure, we’re uninfluenced by marketing; we’re too smart and strong-willed for that.

The problem is, as appealing as that idea is, it’s just not true. In fact, our environment affects us far more than we realize, and that is especially true when it comes to the people you surround yourself with. There’s a quote you see tossed around a lot especially in business circles – by Jim Rohn: “You are the average of the 5 people you spend the most time with.” What this means is that the people you associate with directly affect who are and how you behave, even if you’re not aware of it. Attitudes and beliefs are contagious after all, and the ones you spend the most time with are the ones that you’re going to absorb. That means you need to choose your social circle carefully,

because letting toxic friends into your life can change your life for the worse. This can be true even if your friends are the people you go to church with. Your friends, after all, are supposed to be a source of happiness, support and healthy validation. Good friends help prop you up when you're down, help you celebrate your successes, mourn your losses with you, cheer you on and ideally, help you pick up the pieces when you've made mistakes. Good friends will be honest enough to tell you the truth even when it's something you don't want to hear, but they do so with love.

Toxic friends, on the other hand ruin your self-esteem and leave you feeling lower than a snake's belly. They drain the life from you and leave you feeling miserable, especially about yourself and the things you love. Toxic friends will convince you that you are the problem. They'll *reinforce* every *self-limiting* belief you have and encourage the worst sides of you... and more often than not, they'll deliberately hold you back. They're the friends who will try to convince someone who's quit drinking to fall off the wagon or a happily committed friend to ditch their relationship. After all, why would they want to give up on their favorite punching bag? Who else is going provide *them* with validation? Who can they inflict their drama on? Toxic people can't abuse somebody or someone with self-esteem and healthy boundaries, so it's important to them to make sure that you never develop any.

Signs You Have Toxic Friends

Toxic friends are a lot like ticks; they get under your skin and inject us with their poison. Their manipulations and lies take up residence in the back of your mind, repeating all the nasty things they say to you. Sadly, it's all too easy to let them influence us and convince us that we're ugly, stupid and worthless. By being friends with them, we've given them a high level of authority and influence in our lives. It's incredibly easy to start buying into their noxious mindset because we (mistakenly) trust them. If your friend tells you something – especially if they tell you over and over again – then it must be true, right?

It can be hard to identify toxic friends at times, especially if it's a "friendship" of long standing. We don't like to think badly of our friends after all, we spend a lot of time defending them. You think that "this is just how he/she is". What's worse, is sometimes you begin to believe they're correct in their behavior and there's just something wrong with you. So it's important to watch for certain behaviors and reactions when interacting with your friends that will help you recognize toxic friendships:

- **They make you feel bad about yourself.** Toxic friends have turned insulting you into an art form. They may put you down, "bust your chops" or even flat-out insult you. Some friendships can have a bit of antagonistic teasing to them, but true friends know where the line is and keep well behind it. Toxic friends take great joy in stomping all over that line and your self-worth, on a regular basis. Your flaws are there for them to constantly point out and pick at... especially when they can compare themselves to you. They especially like to dress it in "trying to help" ... but it's interesting how their "help" seems designed to make you feel bad about yourself.
- **They undermine anything you do.** Everything you do is one more thing for them to taunt you with or criticize. If you're a writer, they'll tell you that you'll never get

published. If you're a singer, they'll mock your performances. If you're trying to lose weight, they mock you and taunt you about eating salad while they enjoy fries and a nice big grease hamburger. Your failures and setbacks are there to be made fun of while your progress will be minimized at best and ignored otherwise.

- **You can't enjoy anything around them.** They're more than just the little black raincloud in your life; they make it impossible to enjoy things, even things you love, when they're around. You don't want to mention your plans because they'll rain all over them. You don't want to talk about your day because they'll nitpick it to pieces. They judge you for the things you do, mock you for the things you love and otherwise pull the joy right out of your life.
- **They love to humiliate you.** If there's a chance to embarrass you, they're *all over it*. They'll "accidentally" blurt out secrets told in confidence. They'll remember "awesome" stories of times you screwed up while you're trying to impress someone or make jokes about how lame you are in the guise of being a good wingman.
- **Everything is about them.** Nothing you have going on in your life is as valid, interesting or otherwise *good* as what's going on in theirs. Your opinion doesn't matter; *they* are the ultimate arbiter of what is interesting or good or correct. They don't listen so much as wait to talk... if they wait at all. More often than not, they have absolutely no problem steamrolling over you to talk about what *they* are interested in... even if it has nothing to do with what you were talking about already. Your interests are secondary to their whims, no matter how fleeting.
- **They drain the life out of you.** Every time you hang out with them, you feel emotionally exhausted. You may be a happy, cheerful person normally but when you're around them you just... deflate. Having to constantly stay on your guard around them and watch what you say in order to avoid giving them more ammo takes all of your energy, leaving you with next to nothing left.

Unfortunately, like the ticks they resemble, toxic friends can be difficult to remove from your social circle and your life.

When your social circle develops into a case of toxic friendship, it can be hard to actually get rid of them.

On the whole, established social groups whether in church, at the office or anywhere tend to be conflict averse. Often there are few crimes worse than "causing drama" and creating conflicts within the group and making everybody uncomfortable. People can be quick to try to shut it down by labeling the person a "drama queen", telling them they're being irrational or that they're "making a mountain out of a molehill. The problem is that, more often than not, the person accused of "causing drama" is the one who is reacting to it. They're not causing the conflict so much as pointing out that it exists in the first place. This can be incredibly uncomfortable, even in the most well-meaning of social circles. Often, people's default response to discomfort is to try to ignore it and hope it goes away. They wrap the nugget of discontent in layers of denial and "well that's just Jane, you know how she is," like a passive-aggressive pearl in the socially uncomfortable oyster.

Surrounded in layer after layer of "it's not *that* bad," and "I'm sure you're

imagining things.”

This never actually *solves* the problem; it simply makes it easier to pretend that it doesn't exist. And for many people, that's almost the same thing.

The problem is that social circles, tend to be loathe to exclude people. Pointing out that someone is toxic means having to do something about it, but to actually get rid of them would be wrong... It can be even worse when it's a *group* of people within your social circle. Then you aren't just causing drama with one person, you're forcing people to pick sides and everyone knows that friends don't do that.

As a result: there is a great deal of pressure to stay quiet and not say anything.

The Healing Power of Strong Boundaries

The best defense against toxic friends having influence in your life is to establish and maintain strong boundaries. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to enforce your boundaries with people you consider your friends. You might not feel as though you have the right or the authority to stand up to them. If you've absorbed their bullshit for long enough, you might feel that you *deserve* what they're doing to you. You may think that they're right and "only trying to help". When you *do* start to show signs of enforcing your boundaries with them, they may try to frame things as though you're being unreasonable. Good, be unreasonable. You don't need to justify or explain why you're enforcing your boundaries. Your refusing to let other people stomp all over your self-worth is not up for public debate or open to discussion. You and you alone get to decide where the line is and who gets to cross it. Be kind, loving and compassionate when you set the boundary but be stern and determined.

So when they start putting you down, shut them down. **“Don't talk to me like that.”**
“You're not helping, you're being insulting. Stop saying things like that to me or around me.” **“I don't appreciate the way you treat me, now stop.”** **“Don't talk over me, I'm not done.”** **“Don't insult the things I like.”** **“Stop bringing up those stories.”** **“We're done talking about this.”**

Do not justify. Do not debate. Do not reason. You don't need to. Any explanations will quickly become a referendum on whether you have a right to tell them to stop. They will try to make you second guess yourself. They will try to minimize what they're doing or make it *your* problem. Debating the topic only means that you are tacitly giving them a say in how you feel. What you're doing is simple: you're telling them firmly that you are not going to let them walk all over you any more. If they persist or try to demand that you be reasonable, repeat what you said verbatim. Refuse to engage and firmly and pointedly change the subject.

Real friends will understand when they've crossed a line. They'll apologize and make a point to not cross it again in the future.

Toxic friends on the other hand, will try to make you feel guilty for having a line in the first place. They may try to recruit other people into getting you to not enforce your boundaries, using peer pressure to make you feel as though you don't have a right to tell people not to abuse you. They may get passive-aggressive and act as though they're the injured party. They will try to use your sense of fairness against you and make you feel bad for standing up to them. Don't let them. You absolutely have the right to tell people that you won't put up with the abusive behavior anymore.

They will explain that they're "just trying to help." **"Well, you're not helping. Stop."** They will say "you're being too sensitive, it's just a joke." **"No, you're being insulting. Stop."** They may say "Hey this is just who I am." **"Well, who you are is offensive."** The trump card is often "Hey, I'm just being honest," or "I'm just telling it like it is". Don't fall for it. "Being honest" is supposed to be the instant-win button; if you complain about someone "telling it like it is", then you're saying you can't handle the truth. It frames them as the realist and you as the person trying to hide behind illusions because you can't handle reality. But honesty is a scalpel, and people who wield it correctly understand how to do so without being insulting or causing undue pain. Honesty is not a club to beat someone with. Trying to justify toxic behavior with "hey, I'm just being honest" doesn't magically make it true.

You Can Dump Your Friends

Sometimes enforcing your boundaries means telling the person to stop and not letting them continue with their behavior. But sometimes enforcing your boundaries means that you need to simply walk away from the relationship entirely.

We talk a lot about breaking up with our girlfriends or boyfriends, ... but frequently we don't realize we can break up with our friends too. And, unfortunately, sometimes it's necessary.

It can be incredibly difficult. Ending a relationship is hard, but in many ways, ending a friendship can be harder. You may feel as though this means you've "failed" somehow. You may have a hard time of letting go of a relationship that's lasted for months or even years. You may worry that this is going to mean that you're going to have to give up your entire social circle or end up having no friends at all.

These are all valid and reasonable fears. Letting go of a long-term relationship, is scary. Sometimes cutting a toxic person out of your life does mean being willing to start over completely and having to find a new social circle. Sometimes those toxic friends are skilled manipulators. They will make you out to be the bad guy in the situation and use that pressure to try to make you feel unreasonable and to give in. They may use the threat of turning your friends against you to try to scare you out of walking away. But as scary and intimidating as it can be, ending the friendship is worth it. Your self-esteem, your mental and emotional health is far more valuable than putting up with someone who tries to undermine you at every turn.

Just having been friends with someone for a long time doesn't justify continuing to keep them in your life if they're toxic. This is known as the sunk-cost fallacy, you've been friends with them for so long that you really can't let go now, even though they make you miserable. In fact, many toxic friends will rely on this as a way of keeping you around and under their sphere of influence. In a lot of ways, it's better to leave a group if being with them means letting one of them or several of them abuse you emotionally. You can always try and maintain your friendships with the individuals who are real friends. Sometimes that's not possible and you end up having to start from scratch again, an incredibly intimidating prospect for many people. But it's worth it. You will find other, better, real friends out there, ones who actually treat you as a friend instead of a chew toy and punching bag. Having and maintaining those strong boundaries will help keep the toxic friends at bay. You'll find that you feel better,

that your life is better over all. Life's too short to let people steal joy from you. Take your life back. Take your self-esteem back. Firm up your boundaries and dump your toxic friends once and for all if they will not become that helpful, faithful, friend.