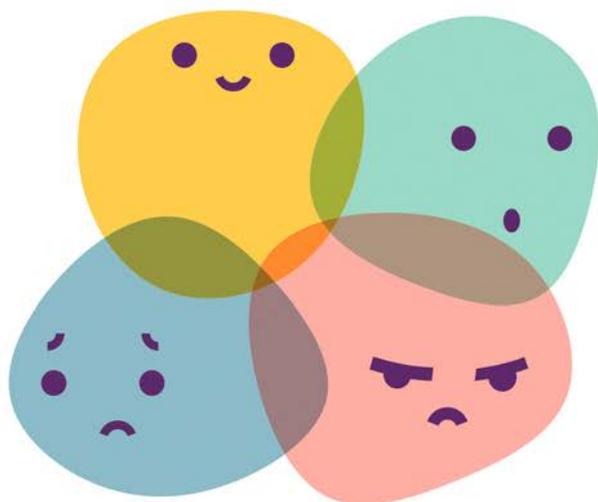


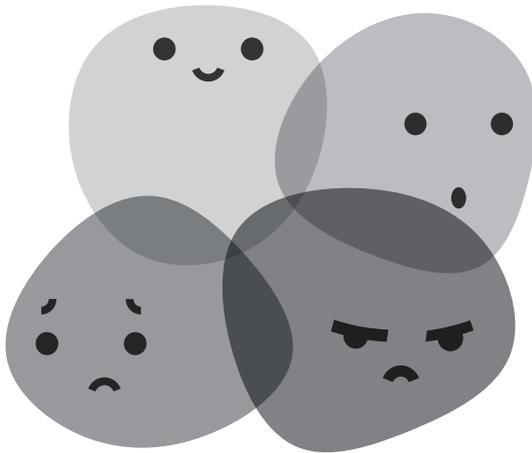
DIFFICULT PEOPLE



Navigating Toxic Relationships

Gregory L. Jantz, PhD

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Difficult People: Navigating Toxic Relationships

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People's names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. However, the facts of what happened and the underlying principles have been conveyed as accurately as possible.

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INTRODUCTION

YOU ARE NOT POWERLESS

He greeted you in the hallway like nothing had happened. Just yesterday, he humiliated you in front of coworkers, twisting your words into a joke at your expense. You told yourself to shrug it off—that he was just having a bad day—but you felt the sting of embarrassment and heard your coworkers’ nervous laughter. *Again.*

We all deal with people like this, individuals we frequently interact with who leave us second-guessing ourselves, replaying conversations in our heads, and feeling emotionally hollow and spiritually depleted. Whether it’s a family member who relentlessly criticizes you, a boss who takes credit for your work, a neighbor who belittles you, or a friend whose cutting “jokes” sting more than they amuse, the harmful effects of their toxic behavior can linger long after each incident has passed.

As followers of Christ, we are not without hope or help. The Bible teaches that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and

self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). God’s Spirit not only cultivates these qualities in our lives, but He also helps us reflect them into our world, giving us the wisdom to navigate difficult relationships and mitigate their harmful influence.

Sometimes God’s wisdom helps us draw clear boundaries with difficult people. In Proverbs 22:24-25, we are cautioned, “Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn their ways and get yourself ensnared.” You are not powerless!

Yes, Christians are “called to peace” (Colossians 3:15), and finding that peace often begins by identifying relationships that rob us of joy, disrupt our God-given identities, and hinder our spiritual growth. Creating these kinds of boundaries isn’t unloving; it’s biblical. Even Jesus stepped away from harmful people and situations, such as when He retreated to a mountain to escape those who wanted to force Him to become king (John 6:14-15) and when He fled from the Jews who sought to arrest Him (John 10:31-39).

The strategies outlined in this book will help you reclaim your peace and dignity, restore healthy boundaries, and find emotional freedom from toxic relationships. Along the way, you may find that some relationships won’t be reconciled this side of heaven. That’s okay. Your healing matters deeply to God, and you can trust Him to complete His work in your life. As you break free from the grip of toxic relationships, He will lead you to healthy ones.

This book is born not only out of forty years of experience in mental health counseling but also out of a deep

INTRODUCTION

desire to see people walk in the freedom that Christ offers. Jesus came to “bind up the brokenhearted” (Isaiah 61:1), and that includes healing us from the wounds inflicted by toxic relationships.

You were created for life-giving relationships, and God is on your side as you pursue them.



1

WHAT IS A TOXIC PERSON?

Toxic people show up in every area of our lives—from family gatherings to workplace meetings and, sadly, sometimes even in church pews. Their behavior drains us emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Yet Scripture prepares us for the reality of these difficult individuals:

People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having

a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.

2 TIMOTHY 3:2-5

It can be challenging to define what toxic people are because they might not always act in toxic ways. These individuals are often characterized by inconsistent or erratic behavior, which may be affected by personality disorders. And can't we all be a little difficult? Doesn't the reality of sin mean everyone is somewhat toxic? Certainly we all make our own contributions to unhealthy relationships, and we will address that reality in this book. But acknowledging your own flaws should not deter you from protecting yourself in complex human relationships. So let's take a closer look at the types of people the apostle Paul refers to when he warns us to "have nothing to do with such people."

If someone in your life sows discord and dysfunction, compromising your mental or emotional well-being, you may be in a relationship with a toxic person. Toxic people ignore and violate your boundaries, take without giving back, manipulate you, and always believe they are right.

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines a toxic individual as someone who is "very unpleasant, especially in the way [they like] to control and influence other people in a dishonest way."* As this definition indicates, control is a key aspect of toxic relationships.

**Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 10th ed. (2020), "toxic."

Being in a relationship with a toxic individual can feel like being on an emotional roller coaster, full of ups and downs. One moment you'll plummet to the depths of frustration, guilt, sadness, and disillusionment, and the next, you'll soar to the emotional heights of deep affection or love. Toxic individuals specialize in crazy making, gaslighting, and manipulation. Many are narcissistic and even abusive. Their negativity and criticism can sap the life out of you and leave you feeling anxious, unsupported, and undervalued.

Take Sandra, for example. For many years she admired her stepfather, Bob, a charismatic man whose commanding presence filled every room he entered. But when Sandra got older and moved out of the house, which created some space in their relationship, her admiration morphed into anxiety. Every time she saw Bob, the atmosphere would shift from warmth to tension in an instant. Her stepfather would frequently make negative comments about her life choices, and the conversation would often spiral into heated arguing, with Bob belittling her ambitions and dismissing her feelings. His condescending remarks frequently left Sandra in tears, making her feel insecure and defeated and causing her to question her decisions about her adult life.

In time, Sandra began to understand that her relationship with her stepfather shouldn't feel so much like a battle. Bob displayed many traits that characterize a toxic individual, including manipulation, belittling behavior, and the tendency to make disparaging comments. Bob's habit of escalating small disagreements into heated arguments also demonstrated

a lack of emotional control, which made every interaction feel like a confrontation rather than a conversation.

Recognizing the classic traits of toxic people can help you clearly identify unhealthy dynamics in your relationships, as Sandra did. Understanding these traits can also empower you to make informed decisions about whether to address the issues in a toxic relationship or distance yourself from it to create space for personal growth and healthier connections.

Let's examine eleven telltale characteristics of toxic people:

1. *Distorting the truth.* Toxic people often twist the truth for their own manipulative purposes. Even a slight variation on the truth or a careful omission of facts is enough to justify watching people like this more closely. If they engage in dishonest behavior, they may also exhibit other toxic traits. Proverbs 12:22 says, "The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy."
2. *Having difficulty regulating emotions.* The term *emotional intelligence* parallels the well-known concept of intelligence quotient (IQ). Emotional intelligence refers to the idea that a healthy *emotional* quotient (EQ) is essential for successful relationships. A person with a high EQ is able to manage emotions effectively, connect with others through both verbal and nonverbal communication, express empathy, utilize humor to navigate challenges, and positively resolve conflicts. Toxic people typically lack one or more of these vital

skills, as God's Word frequently observes. For example: "Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end" (Proverbs 29:11).

3. *Dominating conversations.* Toxic individuals often talk way too much and listen way too little. Dominating conversations can be a sign of insecurity, self-centeredness, or narcissism. As such, we are released from the control of such attitudes. Galatians 5:1 reminds us that "it is for freedom that Christ has set us free."
4. *Always needing to be right or to win.* It doesn't matter how big or small the topic or issue; toxic individuals don't allow room for differing opinions. Driven by a need to always be right, they turn discussions into debates they have to win. But Philippians 2:3 calls us to humility: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves."
5. *Creating drama.* Toxic people tend to attract, or even feel like they need, continual crises, conflict, and clamor in their lives. They seem to thrive on having big personal messes to clean up and feel uncomfortable with a calm life and daily routine. Scripture tells us, however, that "God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (1 Corinthians 14:33).
6. *Engaging in addictive behavior.* Toxic people tend to engage in compulsive behaviors involving alcohol, drugs, gambling, pornography, and other substances

or activities that can lead to addiction. Addictions can cause irreparable damage not just to their lives but to their relationships as well. Toxic people who struggle with addiction need compassion and treatment, but their compulsive behavior often leads to destruction (see Proverbs 23:29-35).

7. *Being overly sarcastic.* Derogatory comments and cutting humor reveal a lack of empathy for others or a need to prove one's superiority. Even if you aren't always the target, excessive sarcasm is another telltale sign that you are in a toxic relationship. Ephesians 4:29 encourages us to speak "only what is helpful for building others up," not tearing them down.
8. *Living like a victim.* Toxic people often have a victim mentality. They insist that every problem they encounter in life is someone else's fault—whether it's an unreasonable boss, unloving parents, a difficult roommate, the government, the "system," or the culture at large. Even when their own bad decisions and behaviors get them into trouble, they shift the blame to someone else. Constant blame shifting usually demonstrates a lack of personal responsibility. Scripture instructs each of us to "carry [our] own load" (Galatians 6:5).
9. *Flaunting an entitlement attitude.* Rude, insensitive, or entitled behavior toward people who serve the public, including waitstaff, dry cleaners, store clerks,

and postal workers, reveals an arrogant and selfish attitude—the opposite of the Bible’s directive to “walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

10. *Behaving in grandiose ways.* Toxic individuals tend to exaggerate their accomplishments, boast about the people they know, and brag about their activities and adventures. Behaving in grandiose ways is a sign of shaky self-esteem and a need for validation. Proverbs 27:2 says, “Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth.”
11. *Exhibiting passive-aggressive behavior.* Toxic people can pressure you to think and act according to their wishes. If you refuse to let them control you, they may express their displeasure in passive-aggressive ways. But the Bible warns us about allowing resentment to fester in our hearts: “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many” (Hebrews 12:15).

We all have people in our lives who display one or more of these traits. Remember that toxic relationships can lead to exhaustion, low self-esteem, and constant stress or anxiety, as Sandra’s relationship with her stepfather did.

Learning to recognize the traits of toxic people will not only help you protect yourself from the damaging effects of their behavior, but it will also help you understand what healthy relationships look like. Healthy relationships won’t

leave you feeling guilty for not solving someone else's problems or complying with their demands and desires. Healthy relationships won't leave you feeling confused about your own boundaries or beliefs or make you believe that your needs, thoughts, and feelings don't matter. No healthy person will consistently exhaust you physically or emotionally when you spend time with him or her but will build you up and empower you. A healthy person won't manipulate you, devalue you, lie to you, abuse you, or try to control you.

Although it can be difficult to admit you're in a toxic relationship, there's hope: You can take proactive steps to protect yourself from destructive behaviors, set healthy boundaries, and prioritize your own well-being. And being in a toxic relationship doesn't mean that the relationship will never change. God can transform any relationship if both parties are willing to change and participate in the process. Invite Him into your relationship. Ask Him to show you the truth, bring clarity, and give you courage. As Psalm 147:3 promises, "[God] heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." Let that message be the beginning of your healing journey, grounded in truth, guided by faith, and led by love.



REFLECT & RESPOND

Are toxic relationships in your family or your community draining your life of joy? Take some time today to consider how your family is providing a healthy environment where your family

members and those coming into your family's presence feel supported and empowered. Reflect on the following questions:

1. Which family member or family friend is your greatest challenge? Do you consider this person to be the most toxic (destructive, unsafe, etc.)? Which traits described in this chapter does this person exhibit? How do you feel after interacting with this individual?
2. What do you desire in this relationship (space, boundaries, affirmation, etc.)? What would it look like to invite God into the decision-making process for this relationship?

As you consider one or more complex or difficult relationships in your life, pray, *God, please help me see the truth in this relationship. Show me what's mine to carry and what's not.*

