

Relationship Red Flags: People to Avoid During Recovery

by Rita Milios

Recovery is an exciting and challenging process. On one hand, you feel positive and encouraged because you are finally taking concrete steps to move from addiction to wellness, which you expect will lead you to a happier, healthier life. On the other hand, you have to leave behind much that is familiar and comfortable, including many friends and social contacts who were part of your “using” lifestyle.

Perhaps, like many addicted individuals, as you review your past relationships, you may come to recognize that many of your using friends mirrored your own problems and abuse patterns. This common experience occurs because of a psychological process called *assortative mating*. It is a natural process by which we tend to select partners and make friends based on similarities in ourselves. In other words, “birds of a feather stick together.” Unfortunately, in addiction, the similarities that draw people together are often things like turbulent family backgrounds, stormy intimate relationships, emotional fragility, and poor coping skills—all of which can easily threaten recovery. For this reason, it is especially important that you are aware and mindful when starting new sober friendships, so that you can take steps to avoid the kinds of “toxic” relationships that often occur when addiction is present.

Identifying Toxic Relationships

In order to avoid toxic people and toxic relationships, you first have to know what you are looking for. Emotional turmoil, drama, and manipulation often become so much of a part of an addicted person’s lifestyle that they fail to recognize these elements as potential dangers, but instead view them as a “normal” part of life. But this kind of “normal” is not healthy, regardless of how common it is.

Sadly, based on a joint survey by Today.com and *Self* Magazine, reported in August, 2011 in the Today Health Blog (www.today.com), it has been estimated that a whopping 84% of women in America have at least one toxic friend, and in about one third of the cases, the toxic friend is their best friend. According to the survey, a toxic relationship was one where the friend was critical and depressing (causing damage to self-esteem), or they were a bad influence because they took part in destructive activities such as binge drinking or drug abuse. Other examples of toxic behaviors include violating boundaries, self-centeredness, drama, and trouble-starting.

Essentially, you can recognize toxic people because you come to realize that you feel worse, not better, when they are around. The Today.com/*Self* survey described five types of toxic relationships:

- *Narcissist* (involving a self-centered, self-absorbed person)
- *Chronic Downer* (involving a depressed, depressing partner)

- *Critic* (when the other is eager to point out your flaws)
- *Underminer* (when the other exhibits sneaky, back-stabbing, or con-like behavior)
- *Flake* (friendship with an unreliable, undependable person)

Red Flags for Toxic Relationships

It is often difficult to recognize a potential toxic relationship. But if you are in recovery, it is essential to make an effort to avoid repeating patterns of behavior that draw you into such relationships. When starting a new friendship or relationship, don't jump right in. Instead, take it slow. Your number one priority should be your recovery. Ask yourself these questions early on in a new friendship or relationship:

- Do I feel better or worse when I am with this person?
- Do I feel insecure or needy for this person's attention?
- Do I feel controlled or manipulated in any way?
- Is jealousy or possessiveness apparent from the person's behavior?
- Do I feel responsible for helping this person, even if I have concerns about the relationship?

If any of these "relationship red flags" are present, especially early on in a relationship, you can be pretty sure that the relationship is, or soon will be, toxic and may likely undermine your recovery. Recognize that you are putting your recovery—the most important thing in your life at the moment—at risk. Revisit your commitment to your recovery and really evaluate whether this new friendship is worth the possibility of derailing it. Also look deep into yourself and reflect on why you would even consider having this kind of friendship or relationship. Are you a "pleaser" who garners self-esteem by doing for others? Do you secretly fear that you may be rejected by others if you do not cater to them or attend to them emotionally? Part of recovery is learning to know yourself, including your own emotional motivations and needs, so that you can get your needs met through healthy, not toxic means.

How to Disengage Yourself from a Toxic Relationship that Undermines Your Recovery Efforts

Once you have identified that you are in a toxic relationship, how do you get out of it? Here are some tips to help you disengage from a toxic relationship, if necessary. You can also use these strategies in future friendships or relationships to ensure that they are healthy and mutually supportive:

- ***Set and Maintain Healthy Boundaries***
Setting boundaries means establishing "rules" for what you will and will not accept. Your boundary rules should reflect your own sense of self-respect for your personal space, your time, and your emotional resources. However, you not only need to establish such boundary settings, but you also need to *defend* them as well. If a friend is taxing you emotionally, financially, or in any other way, it will be up to you to speak up and let them know. For instance, if a friend makes critical comments about you that cause you to feel badly about yourself, tell them that their comments are hurtful and not appreciated, *and* that you will not accept being spoken to in this way. You then put the burden of maintaining the friendship on them, and they can choose to change their behavior or risk losing your companionship and support. As you move further along in your recovery, you will be less likely to feel the need to allow others to violate your boundaries in order to avoid feelings of rejection.

- ***Retreat from the Relationship if Necessary***

If the relationship boundaries that you have set are consistently ignored or deliberately crossed, you may have to consider ending the relationship altogether in order to protect yourself and your recovery. Relationships require reciprocity and mutual support. They should not be all about one person's needs or desires. You may feel that you want to help your friend, but if helping them always involves hurting you or undermining your goals, then you should recognize that you do not have a true friendship; instead, you have a toxic relationship that is not healthy for you or for the other person involved. In the end, when you allow a toxic person to get their needs met at your expense, you are not helping them. You are simply encouraging their bad behavior and bad character. So, this is not a positive or helpful thing for them, either. Understanding this, choose to let them go and retreat from a toxic relationship when necessary.