

Is it a Toxic Relationship or Just Bad Communication?

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I am often asked how someone should know if a relationship is toxic or abusive or if it's a relationship with poor communication and differing wants and needs. Many toxic relationships have moments where the toxic person is less vicious and even kind to their partner— which is part of the cycle of abuse. There is verbal, physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse mixed in with moments of remorse and seemingly loving behavior. This cycle, known as “trauma bonding,” is why it is difficult to leave a toxic partner.

First, let's start with the three phases of a toxic or abusive relationship: idealizing, devaluing, and discarding. At the beginning of dating someone, you may be told that you are the most fantastic person in the world; you are showered with gifts and pressured to commit too quickly. This “too good to be true” scenario is called idealizing or “love bombing.” People with ADHD are especially susceptible to this because of difficulties with self-esteem and forming lasting relationships. Love-bombing is different from the intense beginning when both partners have ADHD. In love-bombing, the intent is to get you hooked and then start the *devaluing* stage of the relationship. In the idealizing stage, you can do no wrong. In the devaluing stage, you can do no right.

In the third stage, discarding, your toxic partner may suddenly leave the relationship. They may have left because they found a new “narcissistic supply” in another partner. You may discover they had multiple partners during your relationship. If *you* leave the relationship, the toxic person may try to “hoover” or suck you back into the relationship. They tell you things will be different when you come back. However, if you return, your relationship will continue to get more dysfunctional.

You may be wondering the difference between having difficulties communicating and being abusive. Abuse and poor communication are very separate things. Abuse is about power and control, while poor communication means you have difficulty stating your needs and possibly have some processing issues. When you have ADHD, you may have trouble communicating effectively due to executive dysfunction in the prefrontal cortex. In a toxic relationship, you may find that your wants and needs are ridiculed or aren't considered. In a healthy relationship where one or both partners has ADHD, there is an honest attempt to understand each other.

Your ADHD may be “weaponized” and used against you in an abusive relationship. For example, some of my clients have been told that they “couldn't be trusted” because of ADHD or needed to sign over their accounts and assets because of “bad decision making.” Some abusive partners have told my clients that they shouldn't take medication for ADHD because “it makes you more difficult.” These clients were gaslighted into believing that they couldn't handle their own lives. In reality, it was a way for an abusive person to gain control. Regarding medication, my clients found that taking stimulant medication for ADHD helped them see more

clearly that they were in an unhealthy situation, and their partners wanted them to stop doing what was helping them. Some clients have even had essential items hidden from them while their partners scolded them for being “irresponsible,” only for their partners to “find” the items later. If an event in your relationship or your partner’s behavior seems highly confusing, you’re not the problem. Your partner may be manipulating you to force you to accept their version of the “truth.”

The most effective way to handle a toxic relationship is to leave and go “no contact.” Going no-contact includes blocking a toxic person’s phone numbers, emails, and social media accounts. If you have children with a toxic person, no contact may not be an option. Instead, consider going low-contact. See a family law attorney regarding your and your children’s rights. Some family law attorneys will take cases pro bono (at no charge). You may need a detailed parenting plan, a coparenting app, and a parent coordinator to assist you.

Many people with ADHD experience more intense feelings of rejection and loss at the end of a relationship than people without ADHD. Those feelings are intensified at the end of a toxic relationship. At the end of a toxic relationship, you may feel even more distraught, and you may be suicidal. It is essential to talk with a licensed mental health professional to help you process the relationship’s ending, any trauma you may have experienced and help you rebuild. If you are suicidal, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.