COLLECTION

The Essentials of Applied Psychology

Breaking Free from Toxic Relationships



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The Essentials of Applied Psychology
First edition — May 2026

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It is in no way a substitute for professional therapeutic care.

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CHAPTER 1 — What Is a Toxic Relationship?

> *"The worst loneliness is not being alone — it is being in a relationship where uou feel invisible."*
> *— Robin Norwood, *Women Who Love Too Much*

There are relationships that elevate us, that carry us, that allow us to become the best version of ourselves. And then there are the others. The ones that drain us, that gnaw at us from the inside, that leave a bitter taste in the pit of our stomach every night as we lie down to sleep. The ones where we eventually no longer know whether we are going mad, whether we are overreacting, whether we truly deserve what we are enduring.

If you have opened this book, it is probably because a small voice inside you is whispering that something is wrong. Perhaps in your relationship. Perhaps in a friendship. Perhaps at work. That voice — I want to tell you right away — is right. Not because I know your situation, but because the simple act of questioning deserves to be taken seriously.

As a psychologist specializing in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, I have been supporting people for years who are going through — or who have gone through — destructive relationships. What I observe, invariably, is that the first step toward liberation always begins with the same thing: naming what you are experiencing.

Defining the Toxic Relationship

The term "toxic relationship" has become extremely popular in everyday language. It is sometimes used indiscriminately, which can create harmful confusion. It is therefore essential to establish a rigorous definition.

A toxic relationship is not simply a difficult relationship. All couples argue. All friendships experience tension. All coworkers go through phases of friction. Conflict is an integral part of relational life and, when handled well, can even strengthen the bond between two people.

A toxic relationship, however, is distinguished by a repetitive and asymmetrical pattern. It is characterized by a persistent imbalance of power, where one party exerts control — emotional, psychological, sometimes physical — over the other. This control may be subtle or explicit, conscious or unconscious, but its effects are always the same: a progressive erosion of self-esteem, autonomy, and well-being in the person who endures it.

Recent scientific research confirms this definition. A 2024 meta-analysis published in the Journal of Interpersonal Violence (Kaighobadi et al., 2024) examined the relationship between narcissistic traits and violence in intimate relationships (IPV). The results show a significant correlation between grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, and various forms of relational violence — physical, psychological, and sexual. This study, encompassing more than 50 prior studies, confirms that relational toxicity is not a figment of the imagination: it is a measurable, documentable phenomenon, and above all, one recognized by the scientific community.

The Difference Between Healthy Conflict and a Toxic Relationship

To better understand where the boundary lies, let us compare these two types of dynamics:

In healthy conflict:

- Both parties express their needs and emotions.
- There is mutual listening, even if imperfect.

- The conflict has a purpose: finding a solution, a compromise.
- After the conflict, there is genuine repair.
- Both people's self-esteem remains intact.

In a toxic relationship:

- One party systematically dominates the exchange.
- The other's emotions are invalidated, minimized, or ridiculed.
- The conflict has no resolution: it goes in circles or ends in submission.
- "Apologies" are followed by repetition of the same behavior.
- The targeted person's self-esteem progressively erodes.

This distinction is fundamental. It allows us to move from guilt — "Maybe I'm too sensitive" — to recognition — "What I'm experiencing is not normal."

CLINICAL CASE: Nathalie, 34

The clinical cases presented in this book are fictional. They are inspired by real therapeutic situations but have been significantly modified to ensure anonymity. Any resemblance to actual persons is coincidental.

Nathalie came to see me on a Monday morning in November. She had dark circles under her eyes, her hands were trembling slightly, and she apologized three times in five minutes — for being late (she was on time), for the sound of her phone (it was on silent), for "taking up my time" (it was her appointment).

Nathalie had been in a relationship for six years with Julien. She described him as a brilliant, charismatic man, admired by his professional circle. "Everyone loves him," she told me with a sad smile. "That's the problem. When I try to talk about it, no one believes me."

What Nathalie was experiencing daily was like a slow suffocation. Julien did not hit her. He did not shout — or rarely did. But he had developed a repertoire of behaviors that, taken in isolation, might seem harmless, yet when put together, constituted a genuine system of control.

He systematically commented on her clothing choices: "You're really going out like that?" He questioned her memories: "You never said that; you're making it up." He sighed with irritation whenever she expressed an emotion. He alternated between periods of intense tenderness — "You are the love of my life" — and phases of glacial coldness during which he would ignore her for days.

Nathalie had gradually stopped seeing her friends. She had given up a promotion offered at work because Julien had made a scene, arguing that she "only thought about herself." She weighed every word before speaking, anticipating possible reactions. She had developed chronic headaches, sleep disturbances, and constant anxiety.

"I no longer know whether I'm going crazy or whether it's him," she confided during our second session.

This sentence — I hear it regularly. It is almost always the sign of a toxic relationship.

Over the course of our sessions, Nathalie was able to reconstruct the chronology of how the coercive control was established. The first months had been idyllic. Julien was considerate, attentive, romantic. He sent her messages throughout the day, organized surprises, and kept telling her she was "the woman he had always been waiting for." This is what the literature calls "love bombing" — a bombardment of love that we will explore in detail in Chapter 4.

The first incident occurred about six months in. Nathalie had planned a weekend with her childhood friends — an annual tradition she cherished deeply. Julien had said nothing explicitly. But on Friday evening, the night before she was to leave, he came home from work with a bouquet of flowers and a sad expression. "I thought we could spend the weekend together," he had murmured. "It's been so long since we've had a real moment just for the two of us. But go ahead, go with your friends — it's fine." The look he gave her — that mixture of disappointment and silent reproach — was enough. Nathalie cancelled.

"At the time," she told me, "I felt guilty. I told myself I was being selfish, that my relationship should come first. It's only now, six years later, that I realize it was the first test. And that I failed it — or rather, that I passed it from his point of view."

This account illustrates a fundamental point: a toxic relationship rarely takes hold through a dramatic event. It takes hold through a succession of micro-renunciations, each seemingly insignificant, which, when added together, end up forming a prison.

One evening, at the end of a session, Nathalie asked me a question that struck me with its clarity: "Could I have seen the signs earlier?" It is a question many victims ask, and the answer is both simple and complex. Simple, because yes, the signs were there from the beginning. Complex, because those signs were deliberately masked beneath the appearance of love, solicitude, and romance. Recognizing a toxic relationship when you are inside it is like trying to read a road sign while driving at two hundred kilometers per hour: the information is there, but the speed at which events unfold prevents you from processing it.

The Spectrum of Toxicity

Toxic relationships are not a binary phenomenon — black or white. They exist on a spectrum, ranging from occasional manipulation to systematic coercive control.

Level 1: Occasional manipulation
We have all, at one time or another, used some form of manipulation — a small lie by omission, an attempt at guilt-tripping. At this level, the behavior is sporadic, not systematic, and the person can acknowledge it when it is pointed out. This is not yet a toxic relationship, but it is a signal to watch for.

Level 2: Repetitive patterns
The manipulative behavior repeats itself. It becomes a mode of operation. The person on the receiving end begins to modify their own behavior to avoid conflict. Hypervigilance sets in. At this stage, the relationship is clearly problematic.

Level 3: Psychological coercive control