

Love

In the Time of Toxicity

IS YOUR TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP "TOXIC," OR ARE YOU JUST COMING FACE-TO-FACE WITH THE DARKER SIDE OF YOUR OWN BELIEFS?

By CAT THOMPSON

AAAAH, THE BLISS OF A NEW RELATIONSHIP. Our eyes sparkle. The world looks rosy. We put our best foot forward, revealing all we're capable of and all the sides of us there are to love. This new person seems so magical, this relationship so different from our last, and we vow that this time we won't make the same mistakes. But what happens when our wonderful new relationship starts turning sour? What happens when a connection that once seemed trouble free starts feeling conflict-ridden and "toxic"?

Should we bail, or do we stay and try to work things out? How do we explain these apparently dramatic changes in the object of our affection? And how did such a wonderful and energizing experience become so darned difficult anyway?

INTO THE MIRROR, DARKLY

When we think of "toxic" relationships, we think of relationships that are stressful, stormy, full of ugly emotions and impossible impasses. Whether the strife in such relationships develops gradually or seems to arise out of nowhere, the roots of emotional toxicity often stem from beliefs inherited long before. One belief that many of us learn as children (and then never outgrow) is the notion that we're not whole or fully acceptable as we are — that we require another person to complete us.

"You complete me." That famous, tear-jerking line from *Jerry McGuire* may seem romantic, but the idea that we must find our "other half" in order to become satisfied, safe or fully realized also has a dangerous component: the implicit assumption that we can never be completely fulfilled on our own, that we must search outside ourselves for "a missing piece."

Think about the potential impact of that belief — that we can become whole only if and when we annex someone else capable of filling in all our blanks and divots. Sure, having a solid relationship with a wonderful person can enhance our lives. The trouble is, whenever we make someone else responsible for our happiness, we also give that person power to withhold happiness, or to set conditions around it. That sounds like a recipe for a "toxic-relationship" disaster. And it is.

Much of what we typically discuss and understand about "toxic love" concerns its symptoms:

oppressive dependencies; preoccupation with the other's choices and behaviors; exclusion of outside friends and interests; jealousy; possessiveness; blame; passive-aggressive manipulations. Anyone who has experienced these dynamics firsthand knows how trapped, hopeless, angry or depressed they can make one or both partners feel. And that, of course, is the other part of toxic relationships that we tend to focus on — the miserable feelings they produce.

Amidst all the focus on the symptoms and results, however, we often neglect to consider the causes. We fail to really examine and consider where all these experiences and feelings are really coming from in the first place, and why.

There's a natural tendency to associate "toxicity" with the attitudes and behaviors of the other person — and accordingly, to want to ditch or distance said person, making the toxic feelings "go away." But that's not always an effective answer.

Certainly, if you find yourself in a relationship where you are genuinely frightened, threatened, or are being abused, it's time to make your exit and get some help outside the relationship. But what if the relationship isn't dangerous or particularly damaging — just frustrating, difficult and not living up to your expectations and dreams? What if this isn't the first time you've been through this particular scenario, or if you're just plain sick of seeing yourself as a victim and your once-dreamy partner as an increasingly unlikable perpetrator? More importantly, what if you sense that this situation might have something important to teach you?

Whether or not you ultimately decide to get out of your relationship, you may also be ready to get some fresh perspective.

GIVING OURSELVES GRIEF

Instead of seeing the source of toxicity as something "out there," originating with the other person, it can sometimes be useful to regard our partner as a reflecting pool — one that contains its own weird stuff to be sure, but which can also powerfully mirror our own beliefs, judgments and unconscious, repressed behaviors.



This is an unfamiliar and inherently uncomfortable view for many people, in part because we are so conditioned to think that if we are upset and uncomfortable, it must be because someone else is “doing something to us.”

Indeed our partner may be behaving awfully. But we may also be playing an important (though unconscious) role in manifesting these toxic dramas — not because we like being miserable, or we are choosing to undermine the relationship, but because on some level we instinctively intuit that this particular brand of discomfort holds an important lesson for us. In some cases, these ugly struggles contain gems of truth that we need to uncover in order to continue growing as an individual.

Let’s look at how this might work.

In the beginning of a new relationship, the other person tends to reflect back to us our very best self, and all our brightest hopes and dreams. But down the road, as superficial barriers start to crumble and our more complex aspects begin to surface, the picture can get a lot more troubling. As our fears and self-limiting beliefs begin to surface, our partner begins reflecting them right back at us. Despising what we see, we immediately go into reaction, rejection and denial. We either curse our lot and resign ourselves to struggling through another “bad” relationship, or we decide to get as far away from this mess as possible.

But if, instead of turning away or giving up, we are willing to look a little closer, often we can gain some precious insights.

Each of us has specific rules and beliefs that we live by. Some of these are rules we have consciously chosen. But a great many of them are unconscious rules left over from our childhood or pressed into us by our society. They are rules that we have not chosen, that we have never examined and that may or may not be serving us.

As we become more conscious during our maturation process, our conscious self instinctively begins yearning to have these unconscious beliefs revealed so that we can begin questioning and refining them in ways that support our evolving identity.

Identifying Toxic Beliefs

WATCH FOR REPETITIVE PATTERNS and cycles. They will show you that you are working with a “stuck” belief or emotional fossil that some part of you is motivated to change.

PAY ATTENTION TO FEELINGS AND REACTIONS that seem disproportionate to the situation. If the nature and force of feelings in a given conflict seem to be “overboard,” ask yourself if it’s possible whether some gunky, leftover emotions from another time might be coloring the situation or fanning the flames. Write down what you’re feeling and see if you get a memory of some other time when you felt this same way.

MAKE A LIST of the things you consciously believe. This will help you see where you are right now, and if your actions match your beliefs. If they don’t, you can be sure there are some hidden beliefs lurking nearby.

WHAT BEHAVIORS do you have that are unhealthy for you? Examine them closely — they can tell you loads about your own toxic beliefs.

RULES MADE TO BE BROKEN

Once we have identified a questionable belief, we have the opportunity to ask ourselves: “Do I really believe this? If not, what would I prefer to believe?” Or “If I do really believe this, do my actions match my beliefs? Am I living this belief consciously and in support of my highest choices?”

This is how we become the person we want to be (vs. an arbitrary reflection of how we were raised or what others want us to be). But if your unconscious beliefs are unconscious, how are you supposed to go about figuring out what they are? You need some kind of catalyst to draw them out and make them apparent.

This is where relationships can come in handy. Relationships are great at getting us to examine our beliefs and at reflecting back parts of us that may currently be limit-

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ing us but that are primed to evolve. Unfortunately, those aren’t generally the most appealing parts, and seeing our own toxic beliefs reflected anywhere is rarely a pleasant experience.

Let’s say that growing up, you saw your parents fighting a lot. Let’s say your dad was possessive and jealous of your mother, and because he didn’t trust her (or perhaps himself) he became angry, domineering and confrontational, making unreasonable accusations and demands and limiting your mother’s choices. Observing this dynamic could easily leave you with some unconscious imprints or beliefs about how men and women relate to each other. Maybe you adopt a belief like, “Doing the things I love will cause conflict in my relationship,” or “In a committed relationship, one person has to give up their choices.”

Because you are young when you are making these observations, you are not conscious of taking them in as beliefs or “rules of engagement.” But they still become part of your relational structure and inform many of the invisible rules by which you live your life.

Fast-forward a dozen or more years. Now you’re all grown up, with a new love interest. It’s fun, it’s exciting, and you’re getting along great. Those scenes of your parents’ struggles are buried deep in your memory and you haven’t given them a thought in years. But then, at some point, your lover begins to exhibit some strangely familiar behavior — asking you where you are spending your time, calling at all hours, demanding to know what you are doing when you are not with him or her, and wham! — all those old fears and feelings come flooding into your body.

You may think, “Gads! I’m my parents! This is a toxic relationship! Gotta go!” Or you may get entrenched in the same angry, depressing dramas that your parents played out for decades. ➔

Life Balance

The problem with both these scenarios is that nothing has changed within you. The “toxic” beliefs around possessiveness are still held deeply in your subconscious memory. And so some part of you continues to attract and create the very thing you think you are trying to avoid.

It may seem perverse and counterproductive, but how else are we to know what is buried in our subconscious? This ability to manifest experiences that bring up all our old feelings can actually be a magnificent catalyst for clearing out our old childhood traumas.

CHANGE FOR THE BETTER

Like fossils, our buried imprints become part of our structure. They create impressions — changes in our emotional “shape” — that we may have trouble seeing on our own. But when our partner’s actions begin filling in that shape and reflecting our “fossils” back to us, often we can get a very clear picture.

How can we change the old imprints? The best way is

Often these are the very feelings that you were unable to express as a child. By simply allowing your body to express them now, they can transform themselves from old unconscious beliefs (“Doing the things I love will bring repercussions from my partner.”) to more conscious, productive beliefs (“My partner fully supports me in doing the things I love.”).

Think of it as withdrawing your emotional energy from an old toxic belief and reinvesting in a new, healthy belief.

The best thing about this process is that once we have upgraded our beliefs, very often the other person’s behavior will change to reflect the new belief. Really! Because our structure is different, our behavior and energy are different. Their behavior changes to match our new structure. As toxic beliefs are cleared from our systems, they are also cleared from the ties that bind us. We are free to move forward from a more evolved place in our relationship. Or to move on entirely, if we choose. ●

I Don’t Believe It!

As we start getting involved in a new relationship, it’s important to begin discerning the structure by which the other person lives his or her life. What are his or her core beliefs? How are they similar or different to our own?

If you believe the world is a wonderful place, generally feel optimistic and are naturally inclined to trust yourself and others, it might be challenging to enter a relationship with someone who is suspicious of everyone, and who is inherently cynical and critical of others. Being with a person who believes that the world is a cruel, dog-eat-dog place where everyone is out for themselves might be very helpful (in the short term) in helping you to identify and understand how your own core beliefs are different from that. But in the long run, assuming you both cling to your beliefs, you’ll end up sliding by each other like oil and water a lot of the time.

Of course, it’s also possible that one or both of you may be motivated to evolve your belief systems. Once you are aware of the differences in your core beliefs, you can evaluate whether there is room for movement and integration, and where there are dead ends. You can also use your understanding of each other’s core beliefs and assumptions to reinterpret and resolve your conflicts.

When you start to see how a thousand little battles are all pointing to a single core-belief rift, it becomes easier to see empathetic solutions emerge that might otherwise have never been possible.

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by simply feeling, accepting and expressing our feelings. When a familiar pattern starts up, or distressing feelings start to show up (“Oh no, this is just like my parents; I don’t like how this feels, etc.”), write them down.

Journaling, or writing of any kind, connects the conscious and the unconscious minds. So, by writing what you are feeling, you get a very clear picture of what’s going on (I feel frightened, like he/she is going to start yelling at me about where I have been and who I have been with; I feel angry that I even have to feel this at all; I feel angry that he/she can’t trust me, etc.).

Once you have a picture of what’s going on in your unconscious, the next step is to let yourself feel the feelings.