

■ MANAGING TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS

The quality of social relationships is one of the most consistent predictors of subjective well-being (e.g., Diener & Seligman, 2002). In general, individuals who have satisfying relationships report feeling happy more frequently and feeling sadness less frequently, and report being more satisfied with their lives than those who do not have satisfying relationships.

However, social relationships can also be a major source of distress and misery (e.g., Rook, 1984). These negative social relationships are social ties that reduce the individual's well-being. Considering the significant impact that negative relationships can have on wellbeing, this tool was created to help clients identify whether any of their close relationships are toxic in this way. The tool then provides guidance on how to manage such negative, toxic relationships.

► GOAL

The goal of this exercise is to help clients identify toxic relationships in their lives and decide whether to and how to move away from these relationships in order to lessen their negative impact.

► ADVICE

- This exercise can best be considered a starting point for managing toxic relationships, as its goal is primarily to increase a person's awareness of the nature of toxic relationships and their personal costs. The exercise ends with coming up with identifying actionable next steps (Step 7), and follow through of this step requires additional time and support. The practitioner may offer suggestions during this last step, especially with regards to mental and emotional care (i.e., in line with professional psychological advice).
- It is important for practitioners to not coerce clients in any way as to how best to deal with a toxic relationship. Clients who have been involved in a toxic relationship for many years may have never considered their own power to change or break the relationship. Allow the client ample time to decide how to deal with the relationship and allow clients to make the choice themselves. Clients should never be forced to take a certain course of action.
- In the event that risk is disclosed during this exercise, such as physical or psychological abuse within a relationship, practitioners should make every effort to support these clients by linking them in with relevant support services (e.g. a local family violence organization).

► REFERENCES

- Diener, E., & Seligman, M. E. (2002). Very happy people. *Psychological Science*, 13, 81-84.
- Rook, K. S. (1984). The negative side of social interaction: impact on psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46, 1097-1108.

► INSTRUCTIONS

All too often, we hang on to relationships that do not serve us. For whatever reason, we put the relationship or the other person before ourselves/our wellbeing. In this exercise, we will have a look at some of your difficult close personal relationships and work out whether it is in your best interest to continue having these people in your life.

Step 1. Identify difficult personal relationships

Make a list of up to 5 personal relationships that you find challenging. In table 1 below, in the left column, write down the person's name. In the second column, describe your relationship (e.g., step-mother).

Table 1. My toxic relationships

Name	Relationship	Reasons for toxicity
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Step 2. Identify why the relationship is toxic

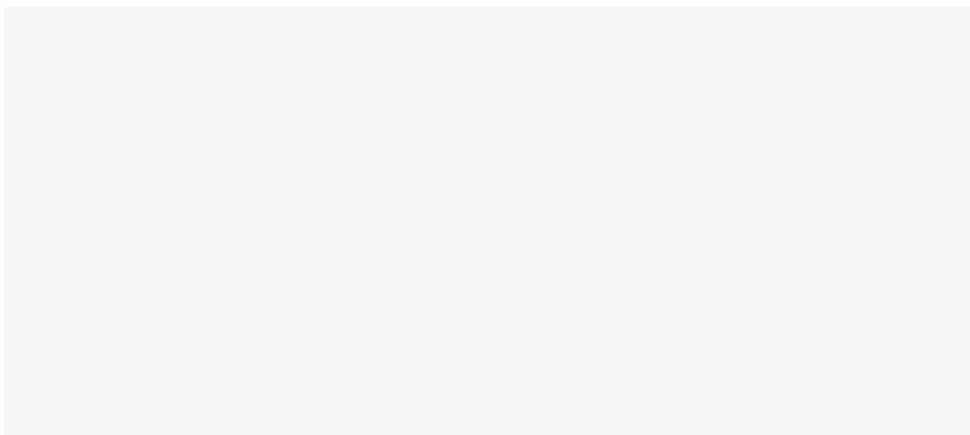
Consider what makes each of the above relationships toxic. You might like to use the list of reasons for why/how a relationship can be toxic for reference on the next page, as well as come up with your own. For each relationship, come up with

as many reasons or examples as you can think of, and write these down in the third column of Table 1.

- This person makes me feel unsafe
- Being around this person is emotionally distressing for me
- I feel nervous and on guard when I am around this person
- This person is manipulative or conniving
- I have felt this person push moral, ethical or legal boundaries
- I feel as though this person adds unnecessary challenges to my life
- I feel emotionally drained after dealing with this person
- I feel obliged to spend time with this person
- I feel bad about myself when I am with this person
- I do not want to spend time together
- Within this relationship, I give far more than I get in return
- My needs take a back seat to the needs of this person
- I do not feel listened to nor cared about in this relationship
- This person does not have many (if any) of the qualities I look for in a friend
- I feel like I am walking on eggshells when I am around this person
- I am unhappy with the way this person treats me or talks to me
- Other

Step 3. Choose a relationship to focus on

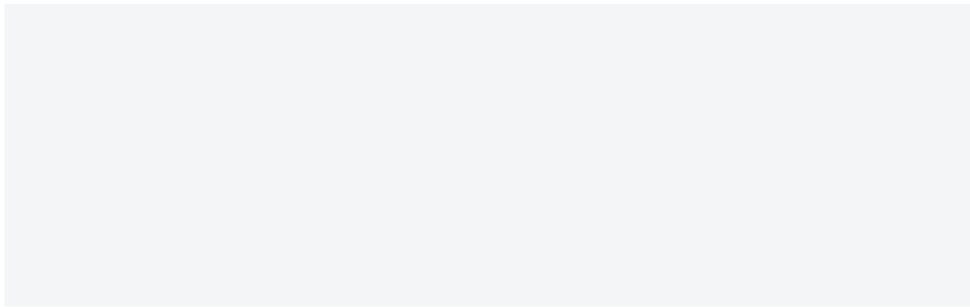
Consider the relationship that is most toxic for you at this point in your life. That is, which of the above-mentioned relationships is causing you the most stress at the moment? Write down this person's name in the space below.



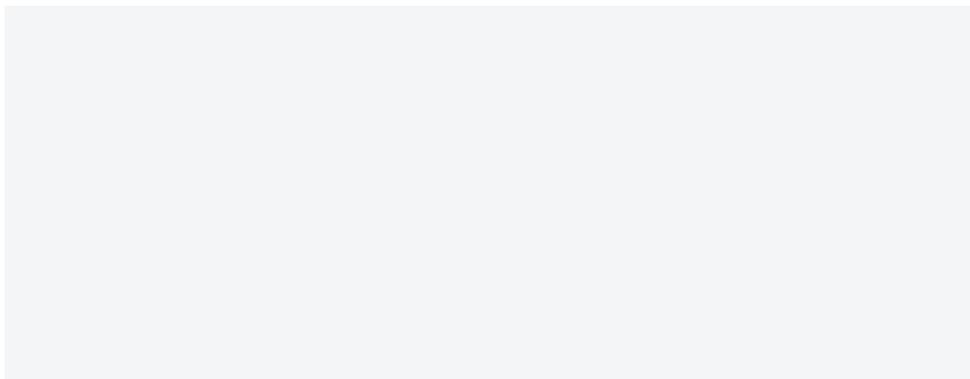
Step 4. Examine the amount of time and energy devoted to this relationship

We devote time and energy to our relationships both directly (through physical contact and communication) and indirectly (through thinking about the relationship and reacting emotionally to it). In the space below, write down the ways in which you, directly and indirectly, invest in this person/relationship.

Direct: time and energy spent emailing, talking on the phone, messaging/texting, talking face-to-face, physical contact, and so on.

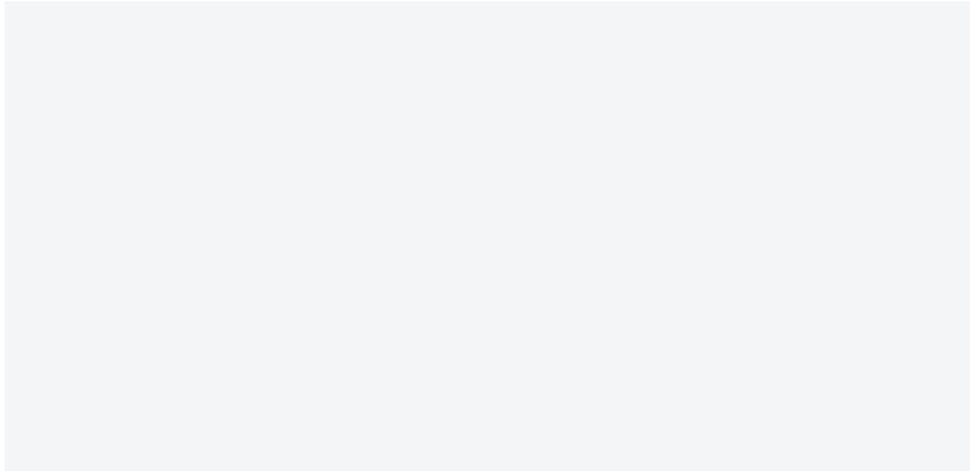


Indirect: time and energy spent thinking about and/or feeling upset (or other negative emotions) over the person/relationship.

**Step 5. Examine the costs of the relationship**

Now consider what you are missing out on because of the amount of time and energy you spend on this relationship (identified in step 4). For example, you might be missing out on an hour's worth of sleep whilst thinking about this person during the night, or you might be missing out on quality time with your family due to obligatorily spending time with this person. Other common costs include: difficulty concentrating on work or study, less time availability to spend

with friends and loved ones, financial costs (e.g., meals out, phone bills), feeling physically drained after interacting with this person, lack of sleep, etc. Come up with as many costs as you can think of, and do not hold back! It is important for you to identify just how much this relationship is interfering with your life and your wellbeing.

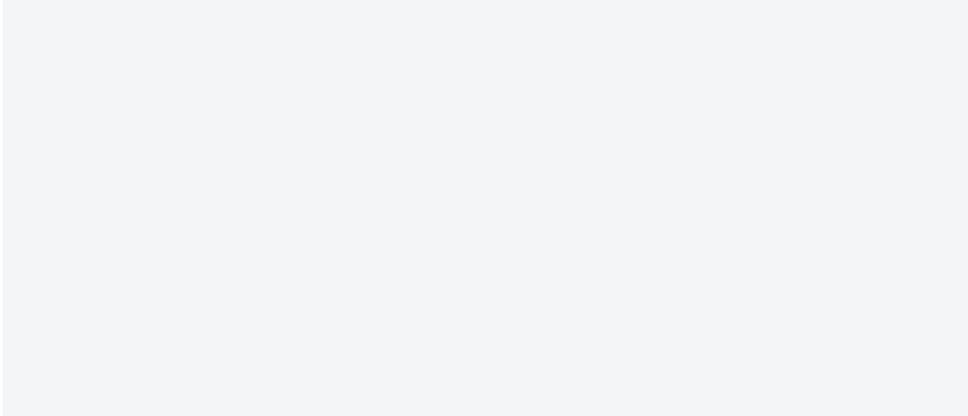


Step 6. Decide how to best manage this relationship

Ask yourself, what is the best action forward with regard to this negative relationship in your life? There are a number of actions that you can take to manage this relationship. You could:

1. *Do nothing.* This option involves doing nothing, which means the relationship will stay the same; you will likely continue to feel the way you feel now, as well as miss out on those things that the relationship costs you.
2. *Take a step back.* This option involves lessening your level of contact and connection with the other person. For instance, reducing the amount of direct contact you have with this person (e.g., taking fewer phone calls, catching up with them less frequently), and/or reducing the degree of indirect impact (e.g., spending less time thinking or agonizing about the relationship, and learning to manage your emotional reactivity). This option is about setting healthy boundaries in an effort to put yourself and your wellbeing first.
3. *Leave.* This option involves ending the relationship, meaning that you will no longer invest in this relationship at all.

At this moment, which option is most feasible for you? Why?



Step 7. Take action

What steps can you take to bring about your decision for this relationship (Step 6)? To help with this, look back on the ways in which you, directly and indirectly, invest in this person/relationship (Step 4) and for each of these, come up with at least one actionable step. For example, if you have decided to take a step back from the relationship (Option 2, Step 6), and you are currently spending one evening every week catching up with this person, an actionable step could be to change this catch up to monthly. In the space below, write down every possible thing that you could do to bring about your decision for this relationship.

