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Is Your Relationship Dysfunctional?

Identifying the Markers That Can Get You Back on Track

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Learning Outcomes

After reading this article, you will be able to:

- Define the term dysfunctional.
- Identify and explain common destructive patterns in relationships.
- Recognize strategies and patterns used in healthy relationships.

All relationships are more or less dysfunctional in different ways and at different times. No perfect relationships exist. In order to stay in a committed relationship, most intimate partners adapt to many disappointments and disillusionments during the time they're together. If there is enough good in the relationship to compensate, they weather those distresses and continue to love each other.

But, if over time, more heartaches than good times happen, the relationship bond weakens. Significantly painful events that occur during that time can be deal breakers. Even initially 90 percent positive relationships can fail after too many broken promises or repeatedly unresolved conflicts. If cumulatively dysfunctional interactions occur, the relationship will not likely survive a major deal breaking situation. Suppressed disillusionments weaken that foundation and make relationship more likely to fail.

Many couples push relationship distresses under the rug without resolution and find much later that they are unable to recover from these festering sorrows. Identifying and exploring these typical relationship damagers might have helped. Had the partners recognized them as they were occurring, they might have had a different perspective and learned some new ways to cope before it was too late. By understanding what

their dysfunctional patterns are, couples can strive to overcome them.

I have never seen a long-term relationship that didn't exhibit its own unique self-destructive behaviors. Each couple also has its own way of dealing with them, from ignoring their presence to constantly trying to eradicate them. Successful couples learn, over time, to do whatever they can to diminish these damaging effects. To stay committed to each other, they focus more on the things they love about each other and to minimize troublesome situations.

The following 10 common dysfunctional behaviors should seem familiar to you. They are representations of negative patterns that most couples experience. You may have your own that are not listed here, but identifying and recognizing these ten will give you the heads up for others you may share and help you stop them from damaging your commitment to each other.

Assignment of Blame

"There's been a malfunction. Who's to blame?" This immediate response to a conflict predicts significant hopelessness for resolution. Blame, guilt, defensiveness, counter-accusations, and excuses will certainly follow. By the time either partner finally agrees or doesn't agree as to who is the accountable culprit, the relationship has taken a hit. "Something's gone wrong. What can we learn about what happened, how can we prevent it from happening again, and how can we heal each other;" works much better. It requires that both partners are willing to look at their own accountability and reactions. Blame never results in a good outcome.

No one feels good when their partners are disappointed, disillusioned, or blaming of them. People can get in terrible,

repetitive arguments that go in circles for long periods of time, careening between blame and defensiveness. If accusations of blame were not thrown around in the beginning, and replaced with mutual and willing accountability, most partners would be more open to a more effective resolution.

Threats of Exile or Abandonment

"I'm out of here." "Get out and stay away from me." Both these phrases are often expressed when the partners in an intimate relationship are exasperated, frustrated, hurt, and angry at each other. Blame activates fears of loss and feelings of worthlessness in the recipient, not good experiences for lovers to engender for any reason.

Often, these words are only meant in the moment and are usually retracted later. Even when the negative feelings subside, the wounds often remain and accumulate. If they aren't taken seriously, they mean nothing. If they are, they may be the tip of an iceberg of dwindling commitment, especially if they are repeated in subsequent conflicts.

More men than women fear exile. More women than men fear abandonment. Both are the reciprocals of each other, and neither is ever a healthy way to resolve differences. If you ever use those phrases, make sure you mean them. Someday, your partner may take you seriously.

Dominance/Submission

Who has the ultimate power to make decisions in your relationship when you cannot agree as to a solution that satisfies both of you? If the relationship is a power hierarchy where one partner consistently is on top, the other, more adaptive partner will eventually lose hope and stop fighting as hard in succeeding conflicts. That leaves all the responsibility for the outcome on the shoulders of the top guy, and submission, martyrdom, and resentment in the emotional belly of the other.

In better relationships, the decision of the moment is generously given by either partner to the one who is better at that particular capability at that time. There is no need for either to always have more than fifty percent influence. When both partners see themselves as members of a great, effective team, neither player needs to be right all the time, or automatically get to direct the outcome of any situation. They work for the ultimate best function of the relationship, regardless of who is given the power at the time, and do so with compromise and support.

Grudges

Grudges come from unexplored, unexpressed, or powerless complaints that are not responded to with due consideration. Grudges can start small and seem too insignificant to fight about but, once buried, can fester and grow.

People who harbor grudges usually do so across the board. They often feel victimized by others, bitter about unfair losses, and resentful of actual or exaggerated injustices. When confronted by their partners, they usually will not reveal the depth of their resentment, but act it out in indirect ways or bring up a slew of past affronts in the middle of an argument.

Intimate partners who carry grudges don't ever let go of the past. They feel powerless in the present without using grudges to fortify their position. Underneath, they often see themselves as people who have been repeatedly cheated.

Ownership

Dysfunctional relationships are all about one person's emotional "ownership" of the other. Whatever the owning partner wants or needs, the owned partner must acquiesce for the minimization of anxiety or dissolution of threats to quiet down. There is only one-way concern and empathy, and it is not in the mind and heart of the partner who feels possession.

In functional, mutually supportive relationships, neither partner feels that they own the course of another's life. They know and accept that couples who truly care want each other's dreams to come true. Of course, they would rather be part of those dreams and there is grieving when that cannot be, but they would never ask that their partners become less of who they were meant to be just to stay together. That doesn't mean that they quit easily or run when things are tough. They are open and authentic with each other from the beginning and sad endings are not unexpected.

Interestingly enough, those partners who love without control are rarely left behind. They are rare specimens of what it means to feel true chivalry, the exquisite satisfaction of making sure that someone loved is free to stay or go. When that door is truly open, few partners go through it. They know that they are with someone who is not easy to replace.

Disloyalty

Destructive triangles are often part of dysfunctional relationships. One partner talks to someone outside the relationship about the intimate situations that lie within it without the other partner's knowing or consent. That confidante then knows things about that partner they may have no right to know. He or she, armed with information the other partner does not know is shared, may offer advice that may alter the situation unilaterally.

It is common for friends to gain advice and support from other friends when they are distressed about their relationships, but there is a big difference when doing so means selling out their partners' most intimate and vulnerable feelings and behaviors. It is especially problematic when the unknowing partner is also friends with the confidante. The resulting awkwardness can be significantly uncomfortable and many a time that trusted friend

tells the outside partner. Now the concomitant disloyalties multiply, leaving everyone in the triangle wondering who to trust.

Winner or Loser Arguments

When couples argue, they usually stop listening to each other early in that conflict. Within a very short period of time, it would be difficult for either to know or understand what the other is feeling. Great conflict resolution, on the other hand, can only occur when the partners in an intimate relationship stay deeply connected to their own feelings and also those of the other.

It is like a powerfully effective debate. At the blowing of a symbolic whistle, each could play the other's part. They realize that there are two sides to every disagreement and that compromise often requires innovation. That means that both partners are mutually searching for a resolution that holds both of their needs intact as much as possible.

Arguments are very different. Each partner will use whatever means are at hand to push his or her side of the "truth" no matter what the other needs. They may go on for round after round, losing sight of whatever they were arguing about to begin with, because neither is willing to give up his or her point of view or accept defeat. Eventually, all arguments cease. There is usually no clear winner or loser, because the couple now has to figure out how to resume intimate connection and both are either hurting or mad.

Most arguments neither solve a problem nor help either partner feel better about themselves. Assumptions are made on both sides and acted upon as if they were true. There is little inquiry or openness to any reasoning that might upend what is already felt or demanded. The argument ends when one or the other partner is just too tired to go on and retreats. Too many of these unresolved conflicts predict potential relationship failure. Emotional scars form that can make each succeeding negative interaction less likely to result in healing.

Snapshots Versus Moving Pictures

More men live in the moment and capture that moment with an emotional or mental snapshot. Though they seem to enjoy thinking about the past and future in battle, business, or sports, they strongly avoid doing so in their intimate relationships.

More women, on the other hand, are weavers of time. In their intimate relationships, they want to remember the past and anticipate the future, concerned about not repeating repetitive negative patterns and making a better future by doing so. They are content with snapshots of memories that bring back nostalgic feelings to enrich the moment, but need to make them relevant to what comes next.

Obviously, both genders are capable of using the past as the best source of learning, and the future as the most reliable place to plan for, but do that in different areas. To achieve a better compromise, they must enter each other's important realities and share that experience. There is no way to keep the past from being repeated in the future without that kind of teamwork.

Boundary Violations

Boundaries are the way people keep their internal vulnerabilities, concerns, and insecurities safe. The way we were raised as children plays a significant part in how easily we give up our rights to those decisions. Parents who consistently violate boundaries teach their children that they have no right to privacy in any situation.

In dysfunctional relationships, one or both partners often feel little conflict about entering the other's private world without permission. They believe that what is their partner's is also theirs, without question or concern. That can apply to material things, thoughts, feelings, plans, or desires. "What's mine is mine, and what's yours is mine," is their appropriate justification. And, in addition, once any of those "possessions" are usurped, they can be used in any way the partner now in possession wishes.

The other end of sorrowful dysfunction is when a partner doesn't know his or her boundary rights and gives up what is their right without question or argument. That means acquiescing to any demand the other partner wants, whether it is good for them or not.

Partners who violate boundaries may do so, not so much out of maliciousness, but out of the fear that their partners are keeping things from them that would affect their lives if they knew. Those who allow their boundaries to be violated may be seeking intimate blending without thought of consequences.

Early in romantic relationships, people often throw away the need for privacy and open their boundaries to their lovers without screening. Later, when either partner feels the need for privacy or separate thoughts, the other partner may feel rejected or abandoned. Sharing every thought and feeling may feel temporarily sweetly blending but, over time, can result in the loss of mystery and challenge.

Fear of Loss

The more a partner is attached to a relationship, the more he or she will fight for it if it seems threatened in any way. Being attached is not the same as being involved, interdependent, or deeply connected. Those are three healthy responses to a non-ownership relationship. Intense attachment, like a child might feel on the other end of a potentially abandoning parent, produces a feeling of anticipatory grief at the thought of losing the relationship. It can drive the person feeling threatened into a desperate grappling to hold on to it at any cost.

The sadness of that kind of response is that it usually has the opposite effect; it ultimately pushes the desired partner away. To stop the anxious partner's terror, he or she must be able to self-soothe, ease off, and focus on attending to the needs of that partner. If love is strong enough, those behaviors might be alright for a while, but no one wants to be on a shelf, waiting to be needed on demand.

How Dysfunctional Is Your Intimate Relationship?

If you willingly take a look at the ways your relationship is not functioning well, you can change those behaviors in the opposite direction and get back on track.

Take this short quiz to determine your relationship dysfunctional quotient. Give yourself an answer ranging from 1 to 5 based on the following definitions.

- Never 1
- Occasionally 2
- A little too much 3
- Frequently 4
- Always 5

1. When you and your partner have a conflict, do you spend a lot of time determining who the bad guy is and making sure he or she is "properly punished?" _____
2. When you feel hurt, angry, or threatened, do you threaten your partner with exile or abandonment? _____
3. Does one of you always have to have the last word and the right to determine the outcome? _____
4. Does either of you hold grudges against the other for long periods of time and then erupt in a fight with held-back feelings of resentment? _____
5. Do you feel you have the right to tell your partner how he or she must behave in the relationship? _____
6. Does either of you share confidences about the other without permission? _____
7. When you have a fight, does someone always have to win at the expense of the other? _____
8. Do you forget the past mistakes and continue making them in the future? _____
9. Do you disrespect each other's boundaries and violate them for your own comfort? _____
10. Do you react strongly and fight in whatever way you can if you think the relationship is threatened? _____

Add up your scores.

- 1–10 Your relationship is not dysfunctional
- 11–20 You are practicing some dysfunctional interactions
- 21–30 You are entering the danger zone of too many dysfunctional interactions
- 31–40 Your relationship is in trouble
- 41–50 If you don't begin soon to do things differently, your relationship might fall apart

Remember, the reason to approach this from a negative point of view is for you to stop these behaviors and move them in a positive direction. Even just diminishing them will give you a head start and will result in your seeing what you could do better.

Critical Thinking

1. The author states that "All relationships are more or less dysfunctional in different ways and at different times." Do you agree or disagree? Justify your response.
2. Of the dysfunctional behaviors listed, which do you see as the most damaging and destructive to relationships and why? Why do you think couples continue to engage in these behaviors and patterns even though they are damaging their relationships?
3. Take the short quiz at the end of the article. How did you do? Given your survey results, what can you do to improve the quality of your relationship with your partner? Why is changing patterns in relationships so difficult?

Internet References

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www.loveisrespect.org

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<http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org>

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www.twoofus.org

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