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An Aching for Affection

TJ Quinlan

Abstract: As humans, we've needed companionship from the beginning of time. Therefore, what does a true relationship look like in today's society? In this world of newly emerging relationships, many people have either experienced, seen, or heard of a toxic relationship. This article dives deep into what makes a toxic relationship, how to notice the red flags, and how to ultimately fix or end it.

What are you searching for in life? What are all of us, as a psychologically and intellectually advanced civilization, looking for? Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist famous for his theory about humankind's "hierarchy of needs," states that every human has a very strong desire for love.¹ This psychological survival tactic has allowed our species to transform from several groups of isolated, primitive cave people into a highly sophisticated and populated society. With the modernization of society, humans no longer prioritize finding a mate as a method for survival. Instead, we seek a soul-mate and start a family for personal comfort rather than physical necessity. This search for affection is a fundamental component of our mental health that allows us to reproduce and thrive. However, social wellness has been put at risk due to the growing toxicity of relationships, both in the dating lives of college students and in marriages across the globe. In order to understand the impact of toxic relationships on society, one must explore Maslow's "hierarchy of needs," how relationships can be toxic, why people stay in these detrimental situations, and how to amend or end a toxic relationship.¹

Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" is a five-tiered hierarchical pyramid stating that the needs from the bottom of the pyramid must be acquired first before advancing to higher levels of the pyramid. According to Maslow, the hierarchy of needs is as follows (from bottom to top): physiological needs (water, food, sleep), safety needs (protection), belongingness and love (intimate relationships and friends), esteem (feeling of accomplishment), and self-actualization (achieving one's full potential).¹ Maslow originally claimed that one level must be completed before moving onto the next, but later retracted his statement by saying that each person does not have to move up the pyramid in a unidirectional manner. Because humans need energy to function, the physiological needs of food, water, and sleep are most important. From that point on, it is up to the specific person to choose what they wish to strive for. However, as evidenced by increasing divorce rates, the growing toxicity of relationships threatens society's ability to achieve peak self-actualization.

Dr. Lillian Glass, a world-renowned psychologist in the field of human behavior, claims that she coined the term "toxic relationship" in her 1995 book *Toxic People*. She defines a toxic relationship as, "any relationship between people who don't support each other, where there's conflict and one seeks to undermine the other, where there's competition, where there's disrespect and a lack of cohesiveness."² Toxic relationships often arise from cultural differences and mismatched personalities. If someone was raised without love or bullied, their brain might

develop to believe that the absence of love is commonplace. Glass says that toxic relationships may simply be due to an incorrect pairing, like two people who both need control in a relationship.² Regardless of the rationale, all unhealthy relationships have a root problem and the first step to resolution is understanding the warning signs.

The most serious sign of a toxic relationship is any form of physical or sexual abuse. If this is currently happening, please call 911 or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233. A simple measure of toxicity in a relationship, according to Glass, is persistent unhappiness.² In addition, jealousy is often a significant psychological factor in toxic relationships. Jealousy is a natural trait that all humans have, but dwelling on other relationships often distracts important personal connections, making it difficult to fix or understand your own relationship while experiencing jealousy.

Another sign of a suffering relationship is a change in other friendships. Dr. Kristin Fuller, a family medicine physician who specializes in mental health, states that "you may feel bad for doing things on your own time, because you feel like you have to attend to your partner all the time...You cross the line when you're not your individual self anymore and you're giving everything to your partner."² This change not only takes away from the trust a couple shares, but it is a constant burden that often leads to deceit.

There are a multitude of different indicators for toxic relationships and their effects on both parties, so why do people stay in them? Madeleine A. Fugère, a professor of social psychology at Eastern Connecticut State University, states six reasons why people choose to maintain toxic relationships: satisfaction, a priority shift, low-quality alternatives, manipulation, investment, and love.³ To begin, she speaks on being satisfied with an unsatisfactory relationship. People in this category often have low self-esteem and "low comparison levels," or standards.³ They either do not believe that they deserve a healthy relationship or do not expect much from their significant other. This may also be an effect of the surrounding environment. A motivational speaker (Brendon Burchard, Facebook post, July 11, 2019) once said, "The more you chase approval, the more you corrupt authenticity." Adolescents tend to compare themselves to their peers, often changing who they are to fit into the crowd. Instead of being true to themselves and ultimately being happier, people choose to mask their true

emotions in a fight to fit in. The second reason can be a shift in priorities or changing one's own values based on the values of their significant other. For example, if your partner is generous, but they are not thoughtful, you may start to value the quality of generosity more than thoughtfulness.³ The third basis of why people choose to stay in toxic relationships is low-quality alternatives. If you are unhappy in your relationship, you may look for more preferable alternatives to that relationship and vice versa. It has been proven that divorce is more common in nations where women achieve more economic independence, suggesting that women are more likely to divorce if they have the economic means to live independently and are in a position to find a better partner than they previously had.³ The fourth reason is manipulation, using any means to purposefully change the opinion of your partner for your own benefit. An example of manipulation would be a man who knew he wasn't as attractive as his partner, but belittles his partner into believing that they could not do better if they were to leave. Sadly, this is a common manipulation technique that individuals utilize to gain control in a relationship. The fifth case is investment, a situation in which two people may not want to leave each other because they have invested time, shared belongings, shared interests, or children in their relationship. The sixth and final case is love, the center of any healthy relationship yet also one of the most challenging emotions to describe.

According to some psychologists, there are three different components of attitudes, including the cognitive component or thoughts, the affective component or feelings, and the behavioral component or actions.³ Each of these components helps people create opinions about the world around them. A person's emotions may lead them to believe that their significant other loves them, despite love not being displayed through the partner's actions or words. All of these components of attitudes are important in understanding how relationships are toxic and why people stay in these relationships.

After learning about the warning signs of a toxic relationship, it is now time to take action. Dr. Glass states that she is a firm believer in trying to work through all of the problems in a relationship before deciding if you can live with that person or not.² If a person stays in a relationship for an extended period of time, there must be a reason why. The key to talking through the relationship is determining if each person is staying for the right reasons or the wrong ones. Kyle Benson, an 'Intentionally Intimate Relationships' coach and renowned relationship blogger, speaks on several key points regarding the ways to fix a relationship. Again, he emphasizes the power of simply talking to your partner. He then asks each party to write down what they believe to be "fact" and try to come to a conclusion as a couple. Another point he speaks on is his idea of "What's Your Role?"⁴ In this plan, he says that, "our natural setting [is] to make distance and loneliness our partner's fault."⁴ What he means by this is simple; humans tend to want to place blame on other people. It is crucial to remember that no one is at fault. Both parties should take responsibility and talk to each other about how they felt. The discussion should not be accusatory, but rather an open dialogue with both parties admitting their individual parts in the problem.

relationship. Carolyn Gamble, a Maryland-based motivational speaker, speaks on this idea by outlining how love should never cost you your peace, joy, or happiness. She sets a very simple ultimatum: if there are more negative aspects to the relationship than positive, something must change.²

As a species, we have grown from primitive cave people into technologically advanced civilizations. Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" demands that after we sustain ourselves physically, we must find a personal connection in order to reach our true potential. From consistent unhappiness to changes in other friendships, the warning signs of a toxic relationship are clear. Although the search to find a healthy partnership is not always easy, paying attention to how and why a relationship is toxic may just solve your aching for affection.

References

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If you have exhausted all other options, it could be time to end the