

Recovery for Persons in Addictive or Abusive Relationships

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If you have a history of addictive or abusive relationships, take the important steps to avoid repeating the pattern. Healing from toxic relationships is necessary so you can be ready for a healthy, loving partner. Listed below is an outline for recovery that focuses on self-nurturing and improving self-esteem so you can make good relationship choices.

- *Line up a support network for yourself.*

A support network is critical for recovery from unhealthy relationships! You need people who will be affirming and act as personal cheerleaders during the tough times. Cultivate supportive relationships in order to avoid depending on a partner to meet all of your emotional needs. You may want to join a support group of other persons dealing with relationship issues similar to yours. This is a great opportunity to meet new friends and cheerleaders. Ask a counselor or friends for a support group recommendation.

- *Give yourself permission to feel!*

Avoid stuffing or repressing feelings because you're afraid of someone else's reaction. Don't let anyone talk you out of your feelings or minimize them. You have the right to feel any emotion and express it in an appropriate, healthy way.

If you've been ignoring your feelings, identifying them may be difficult. Take the time to do emotional checks several times each day so you can label and articulate your emotions.

Ask yourself these questions:

1. How am I feeling right now?
2. What is the name of the feeling?
3. How do I know that I have this feeling?
4. How is my body reacting?
5. Where in my body do I feel this emotion most intensely?
6. Why am I feeling this way?
7. Am I expressing my feelings or am I keeping them to myself?

Journal your feelings each day. Then periodically read over your journal and look for patterns that indicate which events elicit certain feelings.

- *Examine why you have been in an addictive or abusive relationship.*

Persons in addictive relationships are medicating emotional pain. Their self-esteem is generally poor and personal identity is not well defined. Because love addicts feel inadequate, they seek relationships to fill the voids and provide a sense of self-worth.

Love addicts often have a history of abusive relationships. Abuse can include behaviors other than physical violence as discussed on pages 71-75. Love addicts often stay in such situations out of fear that no one else will have them. They blame themselves for their abusive partners' behavior and believe that the inappropriate behavior will stop if they just work hard to avoid conflict.

Write out the reasons you believe you've stayed in an addictive or abusive relationship. Think about childhood family messages or messages from previous relationships that contributed to your choices.

- *Avoid making decisions based on taking responsibility for the behavior and feelings of others.*

Make decisions and take actions that hold your partner responsible for his or her behavior. Don't take on the load of someone else's poor choices and irresponsibility. This can prevent you from making sound decisions. If an incident occurs that is difficult to sort out, look honestly at the situation. List on a sheet of paper your contribution to the incident and the contribution of the other party. If you're not sure which part belongs to you, discuss it with an objective friend or counselor. Take responsibility only for your part of the problem. If the other person involved assigns you blame, don't automatically assume that he or she is right. Some people can be very convincing when it comes to blaming others for their problems. Make decisions based on what's right for you instead of what someone else thinks you should do.

- *Look at your childhood family and examine the messages that you received about yourself.*

Complete the exercises called Negative Relationship Tapes and Rewrite Your Old Childhood Tapes! on pages 27-32. Work the Examining Love Messages from Your Childhood? exercise on page 46 as well. Think about how these messages have influenced the relationship choices you have made. Practice rewriting any negative tapes which may be playing in your head.

- *Work on self-acceptance.*

Notice how often you're self-critical. Keep a journal of the negative thoughts and messages you give yourself every day. You can write the negative thoughts in a column on the left side of the journal. In a column on the right side of the page, rewrite these messages as affirmations or positive thoughts. Affirmations are positive statements about one's personhood. For example, if you make a mistake at work, you may give yourself the negative message: "I can't do anything right!!" If you rewrite the message as an affirmation, it might be: "I am a capable person even though I sometimes make mistakes."

- *Stop letting others define you and shame you.*

If someone abuses you by putting you down physically, emotionally or sexually, set clear boundaries. Let him or her know that you have enough self-respect to exit any situation involving such behavior. Review the section on The Relationship Bill of Rights on page 68 and read the book *Boundaries* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend if you need to know what boundaries are appropriate. If you have difficulty setting and keeping boundaries, join a therapy or support group or seek individual counseling.

- *Begin nurturing and loving yourself.*

Do something totally selfish for yourself at least once a week. Take a trip, go to a movie, or do something you enjoy but have postponed because someone else came first. Self-nurturing may feel uncomfortable at first, but keep treating yourself well until it feels good. See the Nurturing Menu on page 37.

Write a love letter to your child-self. The child-self is the part of us from childhood which still influences the way we act as adults. All of us were precious children with unique and special qualities. Somewhere along the way, we may have lost sight of the traits that made us lovable by taking on negative and shameful messages. Tell your child-self "I love you!" and list all of the positive characteristics that make him or her so lovable. If you had a loving childhood, reiterate the positive messages your family gave you. If you had a traumatic childhood, challenge the unhealthy messages and affirm your unique, special qualities. Tell your child-self that you're going to protect him or her from further abusive or toxic behavior. It may be helpful to visualize your child-self at an age that

seems significant. If you have trouble doing this, look at some photographs of yourself as a child.

- *Find out who you are.*

Make a list of your emotional needs. Persons in addictive or abusive relationships are usually able to identify their partner's needs, but have a difficult time describing their own needs. Discover ways to meet some of your emotional needs outside of a romantic relationship so you won't be emotionally dependent on your partner. The more independent you are, the more you'll learn about yourself.

Take another look at the values you ranked in the Clarifying Your Values exercise on page 16. These values are an important part of your identity. Remember, any relationship will have a greater chance for success if you and your partner have similar values and are operating out of a similar value base. Avoid making choices and decisions that violate your value system. When values are compromised for the sake of a relationship, it is difficult to maintain a clear sense of identity.

- *Decide what you want in a partner and a relationship.*

Your relationship shopping list helps you focus on traits you want a partner to have. Do you have traits on your list that will help you avoid unhealthy relationships in the future? Decide to make choices based on your relationship priorities instead of what happens to come your way.

- *If you're currently in a toxic relationship, decide whether or not you need to leave it.*

Has your relationship become so unhealthy and toxic that it can't be salvaged? If the relationship is toxic and you and/or your partner can't change the contributing behaviors, it may be time to exit the relationship. Outline your plan for detaching so you can leave. Read the section on How To End An Unhealthy Relationship on page 98 for ideas.

If you want to stay in the relationship, write out the reasons you have decided to stay. Are these reasons based on unhealthy needs? If you're not sure or if the answer to this question is yes, talking with an objective friend or counselor may be helpful. Outline a plan for your healthy survival while continuing the relationship. Since you can't control what your partner does, list what *you* will need to do to stay without jeopardizing your emotional and physical well being.

- *Set small goals for yourself and take one day at a time.*

Whether you stay in the relationship or leave, start by setting small goals for staying physically and emotionally healthy. If you are remaining in a relationship, these goals may include self-nurturing activities and involvement in social networking or support groups. If you are leaving a relationship, thinking about spending the rest of your life without someone you care about may be too overwhelming. Taking it one hour or day at a time may be easier. Your goal for the day or the hour may be to refrain from having contact with that person so you can emotionally detach. Keep reminding yourself of your relationship rights and the fact that you have too much to offer someone to stay in a sick relationship!

- *Seek professional help if needed.*

Addictive and abusive relationships can seriously damage self-esteem and impair one's ability to function. The emotional pain from such relationships can be overwhelming. Sometimes there are many complicated issues that contribute to such choices. If you are struggling to deal with these areas alone, seek the help of a professional counselor. Addictive and abusive relationships can have serious consequences. The time and expense of counseling is a wise investment in your future.