

UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

by Rebecca A. Stanwyck, LCSW

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Last month's topic was "Elements of a Healthy Relationship" – this month I'll address unhealthy relationships, how to recognize if you're in one, and what to do about it.

Does your partner find fault with nearly everything you do? Do you feel like you'll never be able to please her? Does he talk down to you, lie to you, cheat on you, hit you, or otherwise treat you with disrespect? Is it impossible to have a conversation with your partner about what's bothering you? Do you feel more alone than when you were single?

John Gottman, in his excellent book, "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work", talks about **four elements of an unhealthy marriage: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling**. In my practice, I have seen many couples, married or not, who exhibit these negative behaviors in their interactions with each other.

Perhaps these behaviors were present in the relationship from the beginning, maybe because of how one or both of them were raised. Sometimes negative behaviors develop after years of accumulated resentments, or are simply unsatisfactory attempts to cope with the stress of living with another person, dealing with work pressures, and/or raising a family. In other words, people argue and fight because they don't know any other way to communicate their needs or relieve their stress. Alcohol or drug abuse may also play a role.

If the angry outbursts become physical (shoving, slapping, hitting or worse), or if your partner has threatened to physically harm you, I urge you to remove yourself from the situation and seek help. Don't make the mistake of believing the abuser's next-day promise to "never do it again": the cycle of abuse and apology will most likely continue unless he (or she) gets specific treatment for anger management. (For confidential information and support, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233; or go to <http://www.ndvh.org>.)

While most of us know that physical abuse is not OK, people don't always realize that verbal or emotional abuse can be as harmful. "The Verbally Abusive Relationship" by Patricia Evans describes how the verbal abuser uses insults, intimidation and manipulation to control his partner by destroying her self-image and confidence, e.g. repeatedly telling her she's fat, ugly, lazy, stupid and/or selfish.

Sometimes verbal abuse is subtle, like mean-spirited teasing that the abuser will follow with "can't you take a joke?" or "you're too sensitive." Ignoring you, refusing to speak to you for days, or trying to make you think you're going crazy, are also forms of emotional abuse.

Should you find yourself in one of these unhealthy relationship scenarios, don't despair: ask your partner to go to couples counseling, and if s/he refuses, seek counseling for yourself. Once you take action to change your situation, your partner may come around; if not, then at least you will be able to develop the confidence and courage to move on.