

# What is a Dysfunctional Relationship?

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# **What Is A Dysfunctional Relationship?**

*Written by Tina B. Tessina, PhD LMFT*

Unless you're completely out of touch with any media, written, audio or video, you have been bombarded with words like "dysfunctional relationship", "codependency" and "toxic family system". You may have noticed that there's a lot of information available about these relationships, but not too much about what to do about them. This month, I thought I'd give a brief overview of the various terms and what they mean, plus a guide about the difference between these relationships and healthy ones.

Dysfunctional Relationships are relationships that do not perform their appropriate function; that is, they do not emotionally support the participants, foster communication among them, appropriately challenge them, or prepare or fortify them for life in the larger world.

Codependency means that one or both people in a relationship are making the relationship more important than they are to themselves. A classic codependent is hopelessly entangled with a partner who is out of control through alcoholism, addiction or violent behavior; but the term has been more recently used to mean anyone who feel dependent, helpless and out of control in a relationship; or unable to leave an unsatisfying or abusive one.

Toxic Family Systems are relationships (beginning with childhood families, and carried into adulthood) that are mentally, emotionally or physically harmful to some or all of the participants. Codependent relationships can also be toxic relationships, although the term "toxic" is usually used to mean the more abusive varieties.

In short, all three of these terms refer to relationships that contain unhealthy interaction, and do not effectively enhance the lives of the people involved. People in these relationships are not taking responsibility for making their own lives or the relationship work.

The degree of dysfunction, codependency or toxicity in relationships can vary. Most of us get a little dependent, and therefore dysfunctional, from time to time -- especially when we're tired, stressed, or otherwise overloaded. What makes the difference between this normal, occasional human frailty and true clinical dysfunction is our ability to recognize, confront and correct dysfunction when it happens in our relationships.

The question to keep in mind is: what is not working, and how can we make it work? Most people, when faced with a relationship problem or disagreement, reflexively begin to look for a villain; that is, they want to know who's at fault. Responding to a problem by looking for someone to blame (even if it's yourself) is a dysfunctional response. The functional question is not, "Whose fault is it?" but "What can we do to solve the problem?"

When you try it, you'll see that refusing to focus on blaming anyone (yourself or your partner), and instead insisting on solving the problem, will make a huge difference in all your relationships. Families who sit down together, in a family meeting, where everyone, including small children, gets to discuss the problem from their point of view, and everyone works together to solve the problem, become functional rapidly.

Couples who can sit down together and discuss problems calmly, without blaming, criticizing and accusing, find that looking for a mutual solution to their problems increases their commitment, their intimacy and bonds them together. Nothing binds you in relationship more powerfully than the awareness that by working together, you can solve whatever problems arise.

No relationship will be perfect; and how to successfully interact your lover cannot be worked out in advance. Yes, you can learn basic communication techniques, build your self-esteem, and develop patterns for healthy, equal, balanced loving before you get together -- and all of these will make your relationship, when you do find it, much more successful. But, because you are unique, and so is your partner, what works for the two of you must be developed on-the-spot. The only way I know to do this is through experience, communication and negotiation.

If you understand that your relationship, to be successful, must be healthy and satisfying for both you and your partner, you will also understand that codependently putting your partners feelings, needs and wants before your own is as harmful as

compulsively putting your wants, needs and feelings before your lover's.

Through focusing on solving issues and problems together, through honest and open communication, you can learn to achieve a balance. That is, you can work together to make sure both of you get your needs and wants met, and you can both care equally about your mutual satisfaction, health and happiness.

Any other definition of love tends to degenerate into dysfunction and codependency, and will become toxic to you and your lover. Finding out if solutions are mutually satisfactory is easy-- you ask each other how it feels and whether it's working. Beginning your relationship with this idea in mind, or renewing an existing relationship on this basis, is much easier and more pleasant than you may believe. I invite you to consciously move your focus from who's at fault to what will fix the problem, and to increase the mutuality and communication in your relationship, and watch whatever dysfunctional interaction you have, whether mild or severe, be significantly reduced. You can do this with relationships at home, with your parents, your children, your siblings, and even with friends and co-workers.

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