

The
Emotionally
Destructive
Relationship

Leslie Vernick



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Part One
Seeing It

What Is an Emotionally Destructive Relationship?

*The range of what we think and do
is limited by what we fail to notice.
And because we fail to notice
that we fail to notice
there is little we can do
to change
until we notice
how failing to notice
shapes our thoughts and deeds.*

DANIEL GOLEMAN



One day, unable to contain her pain any longer, Terri blurted to her husband, John, “I would rather die than continue to be married to you.” Stunned, John could not fathom why Terri felt this way. He believed they had a good marriage. They were both Christians, loved God, and loved each other, or so he thought.

Yet what felt like a good marriage to John felt like death to Terri. For years she tried to be a good wife, meeting John’s needs, loving him as she thought a Christian wife was supposed to love her husband. John loved Terri loving him, and she did it well. John was completely unaware, however, that Terri felt unloved by him.

Throughout their marriage, John was confident, Terri was less sure of herself. Believing that his way was the best way to do things, John embarked upon a mission of helping Terri do things the way he thought she should. At times, John was harsh and gave Terri the impression that her own methods, thoughts, feelings, ideas, and desires were not as wise or as helpful or as spiritual as his.

Sometimes Terri spoke out, but over the years, she found it easier just to keep quiet and go along. She often received affirmation from other Christian women for her quiet and gentle spirit. Eventually, John's overbearing manner undermined Terri's fragile self-esteem and her ability to stand up for her own thoughts and feelings. She began to believe that if she thought or felt differently than John, she was wrong. Over the years, little by little, the person God created Terri to be disappeared.

John's habitual way of relating to Terri was not intentionally malicious; nevertheless, the damage was real. After Terri's blurring incident, they both realized that they each needed to make significant changes (the biblical word is *repent*) in the way they interacted and thought about each other. Only then could they breathe any health back into their marriage and into Terri's fractured sense of self.

Repentance for Terri would involve developing courage so that she could stand up and confront John's overbearing behavior. She would also need to work hard to rediscover and name her own thoughts, feelings, and ideas rather than always deferring to her husband's. Repentance for John would involve learning how to love his wife biblically, which included valuing and encouraging the person God created her to be instead of always trying to change her. He would need to learn humility and change his deeply held belief that his ways were always superior to Terri's.



In another situation, Tom was the associate pastor of a small

congregation for several years and loved his ministry. Without warning, his senior pastor asked him to resign. Tom and his family were devastated. They never saw this coming. Certainly Tom and his senior pastor approached ministry differently at times, but Tom believed they worked out their conflicts effectively—at least until the senior pastor told Tom that he was never a good fit in the church. When Tom protested and asked to have a meeting with the elders to discuss this, the senior pastor told Tom he was being divisive, and his unsubmitive attitude was a hindrance to the growth and health of the church. He asked Tom and his family to leave immediately.

Tom struggled. Should he stay and defend himself? Was that God’s way of handling this? Why hadn’t the senior pastor expressed his concerns before? Why was he asking Tom to leave when it seemed the ministry was flourishing?

Tom was caught by surprise because he believed his relationship with his boss was one way, when in reality it was another. Tom didn’t know why the senior pastor wasn’t honest with him (or perhaps even with himself), from the start. In the past, he told Tom he was doing a good job and Tom never suspected that his boss didn’t mean it.

Tom started to question his boss about his previous performance evaluations. Instead of taking a moment to listen to Tom’s concerns and examine his own motives, the senior pastor told Tom that his protests and questions were evidence of his ungodliness. Tom knew then that there was no way they could have an honest discussion about what happened. Their relationship collapsed, their joint ministry was negatively affected, and Tom and his wife left the church crushed.

“We were completely blindsided,” Tom sobbed in my office. “I don’t know if I can ever trust someone in ministry again. The worst part is that we can’t even talk with people about it without making the pastor look bad and hurting the overall ministry of the church. I don’t want to do that.” He paused.

“Leslie, I loved my job and I loved this man. He was like a father to me. How does someone recover from this kind of betrayal?”

“Not quickly or easily,” I said to Tom and his wife. “You will need to allow yourself enough time to be angry, to grieve, to question God, and to heal and grow from this experience.”

I also told them, “When someone deeply betrays us and will not take responsibility for the deception, the relationship itself may be beyond repair, at least until the Lord shows this other person his own sin. But you can learn from this situation and move ahead into new relationships with more wisdom. One of the things that might be most helpful eventually is to learn to discern some of the sinful heart themes that are typical in destructive relationships.” (I’ll address these in chapters 3, 4, and 5.) “Becoming more aware and alert can help you in future relationships so that you are not caught by surprise.”



Rita, a fortysomething single woman, lived at home with her mother and father until recently. Rita’s parents make most of her decisions and continue to treat her as if she were a child. In a burst of healthy independence, Rita started a relationship with Charlie, also in his forties, whom she met through an Internet dating service. They were both thrilled to find each other and, after dating for about six months, decided to get married. Rita’s parents strongly objected. They disapproved of Charlie and continued to exert pressure on Rita to do things their way.

Today, Rita’s new marriage is close to collapse because of her continued dependency on her parents. Rita feels torn between her love for Charlie and her loyalty to them. She tries hard to please everyone but is finding it impossible. Rita feels hopeless as she slides into anxiety and depression.

Rita’s parents believe they love her, but their love is smothering her instead of freeing her to live as an adult woman. Even if Rita’s

parents never recognize the effects of their behavior or change their ways, Rita can break free. She will have to acknowledge her dependence as destructive to her marriage and to her maturity as a person, and she will need to learn to stand on her own two feet with her husband. If she refuses to take these steps, her marriage will likely be destroyed by her parents' interference and Rita's inability to separate from them. In addition, Rita will never grow into the adult woman God intended. She will remain immature.



Terri and John, Tom and his pastor, and Rita and her parents are all in destructive relationships. Much of the way they relate to one another feels normal to them. They don't consider themselves abusive people or victims of an abusive relationship, yet the personal and relational damage is obvious.

If you find yourself in a similar situation, the good news is that there are some things you can do to recognize, identify, and stop destructive relationship patterns. With God's help, I believe that change, growth, and healing are possible for you. First, we need to name what's wrong, because you can't begin to change what you do not (or will not) see.

Is Your Relationship Difficult or Destructive?

No one is in any meaningful relationship very long without experiencing some pain. Pain is not proof of a bad relationship or even a harmful one. There is no perfect relationship or perfect person. Ever since Eve's decision to listen to the serpent's voice instead of trusting God, paradise has been lost. The consequences are sin and brokenness for everyone.

Each one of us has the potential to be destructive or sometimes abusive. Who hasn't in a flash of anger done or said something deeply regrettable? When my son, Ryan, was about two years old, he flung himself down in the middle of a store, kicking and

screaming because I wouldn't buy him a toy he wanted. Embarrassed and angry, I grabbed his arm and yanked him to his feet. His crying only intensified as he hollered loud enough for the entire store to hear that I broke his arm. Everyone's eyes turned to me, and Ryan's arm dangled limply by his side.

Horrified, I rushed him to the emergency room, crying and confessing my wrongdoing to the doctor. Fortunately, Ryan's arm was not broken. Instead I learned about "nursemaid elbow," which occurs when a young child's elbow joint is dislocated when pulled too hard. Although I never yanked Ryan to his feet again, his elbow accidentally dislocated several more times during his childhood.

Because of sin, all of us make poor choices at times and have sinful reactions to life's frustrations and hurts. But when we see we have been dishonest, disrespectful, unkind, or harsh with someone, we have the opportunity to admit it, apologize, and make necessary repairs to the relationship. We understand we have hurt someone, and we don't make excuses for our bad behavior by blaming the other person for what we did. We genuinely feel remorse for causing someone to suffer and make sincere efforts not to repeat the same behavior in the future.

That being the case, how can we tell whether our relationships are relatively healthy, if sometimes difficult (including sin and pain as well as mutual repentance and forgiveness), or unhealthy and destructive?

As I've just suggested, a single episode of sinful behavior does not usually constitute a destructive relationship. Pervasive and repetitive patterns of actions and attitudes that result in tearing someone down or inhibiting a person's growth, however, do. A destructive relationship is not the same thing as a difficult one. Learning calculus is difficult, but it leads to growth and to greater intellectual or mathematical maturity. On the other hand, ingesting cyanide is destructive. It harms and often leads to death.

Hurtful attitudes and actions can be exhibited in a variety of different ways within a relationship, such as by consistently treating

someone with indifference, neglect, disrespect, cruelty, deception, or harshness. These destructive patterns are often accompanied by the perpetrator's lack of personal awareness, accountability, and genuine remorse. The perpetrator does not experience empathy for the suffering they've caused the other person because, in his or her mind, that person is at fault or responsible for the problem.

You might find it difficult to identify destructive relational styles, especially if your childhood contained similar elements. Many of us are not even aware that the way we interact with someone or the way we have been treated *is* destructive. It feels normal. It may even feel like love. However, like termites silently invading a home, over time the evidence of destruction becomes undeniable.

Five Relationship Patterns That Are Always Destructive

Over the years, I have identified five distinct types of harmful relationships. As you read through this list, you might find that your relationship with someone contains all five characteristics, or you may identify with only one or two. Please understand that if you experience even one of these patterns consistently in your relationship with someone, the behavior will cause harm to both you and your relationship if left unaddressed.

WHEN DOES A RELATIONSHIP BECOME DESTRUCTIVE?

1. One or both parties commit physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual abuse upon the other. (See "Categories of Abuse" at the back of this book.)
2. One person is regularly overprotective, overbearing, or both toward the other.
3. One person is overdependent upon the other to affirm his or her personal value and worth, to meet all of his or her needs, and to make most of his or her decisions.

4. One person demonstrates a pattern of deceiving the other through lying, hiding, pretending, misleading, or twisting information to make something appear other than what it is.
5. One person exhibits chronic indifference, neglect, or both toward the thoughts, feelings, or well-being of the other.

Remember, because we are all sinners, we are all capable of doing each of these things. What makes these sinful interactions destructive is their repetitive pattern, as well as lack of awareness, lack of remorse, and lack of significant change. This distinction should not minimize the sinfulness and destructiveness of isolated instances. There are times when a single incident of abuse or serious deceit is all it takes to completely destroy a relationship, even if the offender is remorseful and desires to change. It only takes one bullet to kill someone.

Let's look a little more closely at why each of these five interpersonal styles is so toxic.

Abuse

Not every destructive relationship involves abuse, but any relationship that entails any kind of abuse is always destructive. When diagnosing the problem of relational abuse, there are important distinctions between relationships in which one person continually seeks power over the other and uses abusive tactics (whether physical, verbal, sexual, or economic) to control and intimidate, mutually abusive behavior (where both partners verbally or physically assault each other out of anger and frustration), and one-time abusive incidents (like my arm-pulling episode with Ryan).

Fear of being physically, sexually, or emotionally harmed squashes all healthy communication. When afraid, it is impossible for anyone to honestly express thoughts or feelings, to disagree, or to be different. Power-seeking abusers don't love their victims in a godly way. The abusers' focus is only on *their* feelings, *their* wants,

their needs, and *their* preferences. Their victims function merely as objects that can help to fulfill those desires, wishes, needs, and so on.

When an abuser fails to attain these goals, rage often results. The volatile response is both a punishment (the relationship partner has not met expectations) and a stern warning not to fall short again. The abuser learns that rage works. It is an extremely effective way to control someone.

Men and women both use rage to control others, although men are more statistically prone to physical and sexual abuse than women are. Most of the time, abusive relationships are confined to intimate partnerships such as dating, live-in, or marriage. But at times the imbalance of power and control can be seen between adult children and elderly parents, church leaders and their congregations, or in places of employment. Emotional ties, economic dependence, and (in marriage) biblical mandates against divorce keep many individuals feeling trapped and helpless. They have no idea how to change the balance of power.

In contrast to an abusive relationship where one person seeks power over another, abusive attitudes and behaviors can occur in any relationship when one or both individuals cannot manage the frustrations of life or their tempers in a mature and godly way. The apostle Paul warns us against this kind of interaction: “If you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another” (Galatians 5:15).

Phil and Joanne have been married for over 30 years. Most of those years have been a disappointment. Neither one feels loved, respected, or valued by the other. They stay together because God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), but emotionally they divorced years ago. Their best communication is functional (they can impart information to one another), but their regular communication is destructive. Joanne’s pattern is to verbally attack, demean, and humiliate her husband. Phil withdraws and distances himself until he can’t take it anymore, and then he explodes. Both Phil and

Joanne profess to be Christians, yet each regularly sins against the other. They justify their behavior in their own minds, citing their pain and disappointment. Each wants the other to change first.

There is hope for Phil and Joanne's relationship, but not until they both admit that their legitimate desires for a better spouse have blinded them to their own destructive patterns. Until they love and pursue God more than they love and pursue their own desires, they will continue to make excuses and avoid taking responsibility for their destructive and sinful interactions.

The important difference between this kind of mutually abusive pattern and oppressive abuse is that Phil does not try to micro-manage Joanne or gain dominance over her. She has plenty of decision-making power within their relationship, as does he. But when either of them becomes disappointed and angry with the other, both turn destructive. If left to escalate, mutually abusive attitudes and actions can be just as lethal to the overall safety and well-being of the people in the relationship. The underlying dynamics and solutions, however, are different from those of an abusive relationship in which power and control issues are central. When we get to part 2, this will be an important distinction.

A one-time abusive incident may suggest one person's attempt to gain power and control over another, like my effort to gain control over Ryan and his tantrum, but the abuser usually quickly repents, and the action is not likely to recur.

Overprotection and Overbearingness

A step down from the abusive relationship that I described above is a kind of controlling relationship in which there is a consistent pattern of giving advice, making decisions for another person, or telling someone how to act, all under the guise of "I know what's best for you or what's best for us." This might include telling someone what to wear, how to cook, which television programs are permissible, and how often to visit family and friends. Sometimes

the controlling behavior is limited to specific areas in the relationship, such as decisions related to money or friends.

John and Terri, the couple I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, fit this pattern. John was overbearing toward Terri but did not use verbally abusive language or force to secure Terri's compliance. If Terri had been firmer in the beginning of their relationship, things might have evolved differently between them.

What made John and Terri's relationship destructive was the combination of John's overbearing personality, his belief that his ways were always best, Terri's lack of confidence in herself, and her natural desire to please others. Had Terri confronted John's superior attitude and take-charge behavior early in their marriage, he might have backed down and learned to encourage rather than try to change Terri. He also might have developed more humility and tolerance of her differences. (On the other hand, John might have escalated his control, turning to more abusive tactics to gain more control and power over Terri.)

All of us who are parents have been tempted at times to become overbearing or overprotective toward our children. But when such a high level of involvement becomes a regular pattern, especially as children get older, it hampers their growth and maturity. It's true: We hate to see our children hurt or make a mistake, but when we take on what they should be learning or doing for themselves, we harm them. Today, more and more adult children continue to depend on their parents because they have not learned how to stand on their own two feet.

Overdependence

Dependent behavior typically occurs in unhealthy parent-child relationships like that of Rita and her parents. This pattern also occurs in adult friendships or in marriages when one person leans too heavily upon a friend or partner to make decisions, to be continuously available, and to meet all emotional and relational needs.

Jane and Marcy met at women's Bible study and were soon feeling like best friends. Single and lonely, Jane felt God had finally answered her prayers for a kindred-spirit girlfriend. Marcy had many other friends but felt a special draw to Jane. She knew what it was like to feel lonely, and her heart went out to Jane. Before long, Jane was calling Marcy every night. They talked for hours. Jane always hung up telling Marcy how much she liked her and enjoyed their friendship.

Marcy loved that Jane was so affirming of their friendship. She liked Jane too, but before long she began to notice that whenever she had something else she wanted to do, Jane expressed hurt feelings. Jane also insinuated that Marcy should include her in all of her other activities and felt angry whenever she discovered Marcy went someplace without her. Jane needed Marcy's friendship, and she felt rejected and furious when Marcy wasn't always available for her.

At first Marcy felt flattered to be so needed, but after a while Jane's expectations became burdensome and tiring. Jane's dependence on Marcy was unhealthy. She expected Marcy to fill her emotional void and leaned on her so heavily that Marcy began to distance herself in order to protect her personal boundaries. Jane got hurt, Marcy burned out, and their relationship eventually ended.

If you recognize that you are overly dependent upon people, or if you find yourself regularly inviting or attracting people to depend on you, understand that God did not intend for people to continuously depend on other people for their well-being. As we mature, he wants us to depend upon him. Certainly God uses individuals to meet many of our needs, but no one person can meet all our needs all the time. When we believe we always need a particular someone, we put that person in God's position in our lives. Replacing God with a person will destroy us.

In the same vein, it's possible to put others in God's position by giving them the power to determine your worth and value. You

might be a natural people pleaser who is captured by the fear of man (Proverbs 29:25). Most people want to be liked and valued by others, but when our entire well-being is dependent upon whether we are liked, loved, accepted, or valued by a particular person or group, we have allowed an unhealthy dependence to take root.

Lying

Carmen and Diane were becoming close friends when Carmen began noticing inconsistencies in what Diane said. Carmen caught her in some lies. Once, when Carmen knew Diane had not been honest, she gently confronted her friend. Diane reacted defensively and denied it. Carmen didn't argue but instead began distancing herself from Diane. Although she remained polite and friendly, she no longer considered Diane a close friend. Carmen didn't trust her. Diane's deceit and denial didn't destroy Carmen, but it did destroy their friendship.

In another situation, Cindy came to me for counseling, depressed and angry with herself over the breakup of her marriage. Her husband's secretary was pregnant with his child, and he wanted to divorce Cindy and marry his lover. For years Cindy had suspected that Gary was involved with his secretary, but Gary adamantly denied it. When Cindy would question how much time he spent with the woman after work hours, Gary managed explanations that sounded reasonable, even acceptable, and Cindy ended up feeling ashamed for even questioning him.

Other times, when Cindy would confront Gary with something she observed, he'd gently put his arm around her and tell her in a kind tone that what she saw didn't actually happen. Cindy began to think she was imagining things.¹ She left those confrontations feeling horribly guilty for questioning Gary, especially after he swore to her over and over that nothing was going on. Now she felt like a fool.

Gary's pattern of deceit not only destroyed their relationship, it eroded Cindy's confidence in her own perceptions and thoughts.

She had begun to suspect that she was either terribly insecure or crazy, when in fact she was right all along.

We lie not only when we contradict the truth, but also when we mislead someone's thinking. We lie when we pretend things are fine, when in reality we are angry or unhappy. We lie when we hide a problem with drinking or Internet pornography or other sin, making excuses and throwing up smokescreens that cover our tracks.

We even lie to ourselves when we make something bad look acceptable, or even desirable. I've heard some Christians defend a husband who demands his own way by explaining that he's exercising headship, when in reality he's practicing selfishness. Our culture is adept at using the power of language to mislead and warp perceptions. We call teacher–student sexual relations “affairs” instead of abuse of power. We call the brutal killing of a woman “a crime of passion” as the perpetrator sobs, “I loved her so much.” Language is twisted to make our actions look less heinous, more acceptable. But the Bible warns us, “What sorrow for those who say that evil is good and good is evil, that dark is light and light is dark, that bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter” (Isaiah 5:20).

Lying is one of the most destructive things we can do when we're confronted about something we've done wrong (Proverbs 26:18-19,28). I have witnessed marriage after marriage crumble because the person who has been challenged will not come clean through humble confession of the whole truth. Sheila discovered George was having an affair with someone at church. He broke down, admitted it, and seemingly repented. But he didn't tell Sheila that the woman was pregnant. George secretly arranged for her to leave the church and plan an adoption. When the whole truth came out (and it usually does), the trust that Sheila began to rebuild with George disintegrated and was impossible to restore.

Indifference and Neglect

Anna begged her husband to stay home with her and the kids after work and on weekends, but soccer always came first. He spent

two nights a week and many weekends with the guys, playing soccer, talking soccer, refereeing soccer, and watching soccer on TV. Anna felt like a single parent carrying the entire responsibility for the household. She also felt lonely. John enjoyed soccer and his friends much more than he seemed to enjoy her. She believed he saw her as someone there to cook, clean, pay the bills, wash his clothes, take care of the kids, and provide sex when he wanted it. Anna questioned whether he ever thought about what she needed or wanted. Was she important to him as a person, or was she merely a caregiver who met his felt needs?

From time to time in every marriage or close relationship, it's quite normal for one person to feel like the other isn't sharing the load. It's true—sometimes the burden is unequal. The question we need to ask ourselves isn't, *Am I giving more?* but, *Is there a habitual pattern of disregard for my felt needs, desires, feelings, goals, or perspectives?* If the answer is yes, then we need to learn to speak up so that this pattern changes. Otherwise, instead of being mutually caring, the relationship will turn into a one-sided ministry, or deteriorate and end.

Recently while I was counseling a woman, she asked me how long she should continue a friendship in which the other person never reciprocated. My client felt weary of carrying the entire friendship. She always had to initiate contact and plan time together. Her friend would often cancel their plans at the last minute and rarely rescheduled. I said, "It sounds like your friend isn't all that interested in maintaining your friendship. Why don't you talk with her about it and see if you can make it better? Or perhaps you will agree that the friendship has fizzled out."

Whenever we are in a relationship with someone, we expect it to be characterized by certain qualities that enable it to function and flourish. The basics are caring, honesty, and respect. Like Jane, sometimes our expectations of another person may be unrealistic, and our demands upon them will become destructive to the relationship. However, a healthy relationship requires effort. Like everything else in life, what we don't maintain deteriorates.

When we are chronically indifferent or neglectful toward someone, we effectively say, “I don’t care about you,” or, “You don’t mean enough to me to deserve my time and resources.” Because we’re not God and have limited resources of time and energy, we can’t commit to be in close relationships with lots of people, but those we have committed ourselves to expect some of our time, attention, and resources in order to feel cared about. When we make an implied or stated commitment to someone, then behave in a way that indicates indifference to the person’s needs, the person will feel confused and devalued.

Lucy suffered a miscarriage early in her pregnancy. Devastated, she turned to her husband, Allen, for support. Lucy cried, “He turned his back on me and went to sleep. I felt so hurt and unloved. It was like our baby and I didn’t exist.”

If a healthy mutual relationship with someone is impossible, don’t simply give up. God calls us to love always, and that includes our enemies; however, God never commands us to have close relationships with them. In parts 2 and 3 I’ll cover what loving our enemies looks like and how to do it.

Another way we can identify what’s wrong with relationships is by observing what’s right in thriving relationships. Bankers receive special training to spot counterfeit money by inspecting thousands of genuine bills. Medical students diagnose disease by studying healthy bodies. The best way to recognize unhealthy or destructive relationship patterns is to compare and contrast them with the characteristics that describe healthy relationships.

Foundational Elements Necessary for Relationships to Flourish

People engage in many different kinds of relationships. We have professional relationships, business friendships, and casual connections with neighbors across the fence and with folks at church. On a deeper level, we have close friends, best friends, romantic friends, and family ties with our siblings, children, parents, in-laws, and

spouses. In each of these relationships there are different expectations for how much honesty, commitment, support, and time will be required for the relationship to be mutually beneficial. Even so, the most casual or superficial relationship can deteriorate into a destructive encounter if the following foundational elements are devalued by one or both people trying to make the relationship work.

Let's look at the basic qualities necessary for any relationship to flourish in a healthy way.

Commitment and Care

In all healthy relationships, personal or professional, the well-being of the other person is important to us even when we're mad, tired, or busy. At its most basic level, commitment promises that the other person's feelings, desires, needs, wants, and thoughts will matter to us, and that when the person considers something urgent or important, we give it our attention. This doesn't always mean we have to do what the person wants. We don't even necessarily have to feel the same way about an issue, but at least we give it proper thought.

Some people are legally married but uncommitted to their spouses' nurture, support, or welfare. This consistent disregard for a partner's thoughts, feelings, and well-being creates significant emotional distress, because the promise of commitment and expectation of care is clearly part of the marital covenant.

Genuine caring values the other person's happiness, well-being, and goodness. Selfish love is only interested in what the other person has to contribute to the relationship.

Honesty and Integrity

Personal honesty (not lying to yourself) and interpersonal honesty (as appropriate for the level of intimacy in the relationship) are crucial for trust to flourish. Not all relationships require full transparency (in other words, keep your emotional clothes on

unless the relationship is intimate), but all relationships thrive on authenticity. Others deserve to see who you really are. I love that I can be myself with my husband. He knows my good side and my immature side, and although he may not like certain parts of me, he accepts me.

As I said earlier, pretending, denying, hiding, evading, shading, or twisting facts or your feelings to create a particular impression are forms of lying and will lead to mistrust. Like acid on metal, deceit erodes the foundations necessary to support a healthy relationship.

Honesty isn't the same as blurting out everything we feel at the moment of its greatest intensity—that can be very destructive. Healthy individuals know it's wise to contain their toxic emotions until they have some time to think through their feelings and pray about how to approach the problem constructively. People who exercise restraint can be more certain that their actions will lead to healing and restoration rather than mere relief or a descending spiral of anger.

Mutual Respect

All people, no matter how much we might dislike them or disagree with their beliefs or behaviors, contain within them the precious image of God. Christians should never mock, disdain, or disrespect an individual (Proverbs 14:21) even if they disapprove of the person's actions.

It is so easy to show our disapproval of people with disrespect. We roll our eyes, snicker at their feelings or thoughts, mock them, show disgust or contempt, make degrading comments, gossip about them, humiliate them publicly, or continually try to change them into the person we think they should be.

Healthy adult relationships exist where both people in the relationship give and both receive. David and Michelle didn't have a perfect marriage, but they certainly had a happy one. They loved

each other, and others readily observed their caring. People who knew them well saw that they mutually shared power and responsibility in their home. They both practiced sacrifice and submission for the good and welfare of each other and their children. Together they valued an open exchange of ideas, feelings, and thoughts in their family, and they considered everyone's perspective important. Not only was there room for mutual love, encouragement, and caring, but there was also freedom to respectfully challenge, confront, and strengthen one another.

Jesus modeled these kinds of interactions for us, showing us a picture of good mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Except for Christ, however, no person is always right or sees everything accurately all of the time. I am deeply concerned by those who discourage Christian wives from ever challenging their husbands, even when it looks like a man is driving himself or the entire family straight off a cliff. This kind of teaching is destructive, not only to the wife, who must lie to her husband in order to not wound his ego, but also to the husband, who believes he's doing well when in reality he's not (Proverbs 29:1; Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20). Each person in the relationship is harmed, a healthy marriage is impossible, and the children observe and absorb destructive relationship patterns only to repeat them in their adult lives.

Are You in an Emotionally Destructive Relationship?

If you think that a relationship you are in may be destructive or heading that way, ask yourself the following questions. Your answers to these questions will help you look at the health of one or more of your relationships and see the particular patterns that are destructive. Be honest with yourself. I understand that it can be extremely difficult to face the hard truth that something is wrong. Like one of my clients, you might even tell yourself, "I'd rather not know, because if I know, then I have to do something about it, and I don't know what to do." You can't fix or change something if you

are not willing to look at it truthfully. Don't turn back now. There is a part of you that already knows it's time to face what's wrong and to learn what you need to change, or you wouldn't have picked up this book. Remember, God sees you, and he is with you.

Some people realize that they are in several bad relationships at the same time or have had a string of destructive friendships or marriages. Complete this questionnaire once for each relationship you are concerned about. For example, if you're evaluating your relationship with your spouse, answer each question about your spouse first. Don't combine answers about your spouse with answers about another relationship. You can apply the questionnaire to each of your relationships. It will help you not only identify whether your relationships are destructive, but in what way they are destructive.

- | | | | |
|---|---------------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| 1. Does the person use physical force or threats of force to make you do something you don't want to do or to keep you from doing something you want to do? | Never
Frequently | Seldom
Almost Always | Sometimes |
| 2. Does the person use verbal weapons such as cursing, name calling, degrading comments, constant criticism, or blaming to get you to do something you don't want to do or to keep you from doing something you want to do? | Never
Frequently | Seldom
Almost Always | Sometimes |
| 3. Does the person curse at you, call you names, humiliate you in public, or degrade you when he or she is unhappy with something you do? | Never
Frequently | Seldom
Almost Always | Sometimes |

4. Does the person force or manipulate you to perform sexually in ways you do not want to?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
5. Do you ever feel afraid of the person?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
6. Does the person yell, scream, curse, or hurt you physically when he or she is frustrated or angry?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
7. Does the person threaten to alienate your children from you or use them to intimidate you into giving in to what he or she wants?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
8. Are you afraid to disagree with the person?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
9. When you share your thoughts and feelings about something important to you, does the person ignore you, make fun of you, or dismiss you?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
10. Are you verbally or physically abusive, or both, toward the person?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
11. Does the person always think he or she is right to the point of arguing with you until you concede or give up?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
12. Does the person make most of your decisions for you?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes

13. Does the person control the family money, giving you little or no say?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
14. Have you given up things that were important to you because the person pressured you?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
15. Does the person pout or withdraw from you for extended periods of time when he or she is angry or upset with you?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
16. When you ask for a time-out or don't want to talk about something anymore, does the person keep badgering you to engage?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
17. Does the person lie to you?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
18. Have you observed the person lying to others?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
19. Does the person tell you something didn't happen, when you know it did?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
20. Does the person question or challenge your certainty of what he or she said or did?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
21. Does the person depend on you to meet all his or her needs?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
22. Do you feel more like a child than an adult in the relationship?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes

23. Are you emotionally devastated when the person is upset with you or doesn't want to be in relationship with you?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
24. When you try to talk with the person about your feelings or something that's bothering you, do you end up feeling like the trouble is entirely your fault?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
25. When the person does something wrong, does he or she blame you or anyone else for it?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
26. Does the other person make excuses for his or her behavior (anger, jealousy, lies)?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
27. Do you feel loved and cared for in the relationship?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
28. Can you safely express an opinion that is different from the person's?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
29. Does the person show interest in you and your needs?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
30. Are you able to express your honest thoughts and feelings with the person?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes
31. When the person does something wrong, does he or she admit it and take responsibility for it?	Never Frequently	Seldom Almost Always	Sometimes

If you answered any question up through question 25 with anything other than *never*, you are likely in an unhealthy relationship.

If you answered most questions with *sometimes*, *frequently*, or *almost always*, you are definitely in a destructive and likely an abusive relationship. Now go back and look at which questions in particular you answered with any answer other than *never*.

Questions 1–16 describe the main characteristics of an abusive relationship where the abuser's desire for power and control is at the root. If answering this questionnaire has revealed to you that you are in an abusive relationship, please seek appropriate help from those in your church or community who are experts in helping victims of abusive relationships. (You will find information about various resources at the back of the book.) If you answered *seldom* to any question in this group, you still may be in danger, depending upon the severity of the abuse. Once a year is seldom, but it is still too often in a long-term relationship such as a marriage.

Question 10 looks in particular for patterns of mutual abuse. If you answered this question with *frequently* or *almost always*, then your relationship might be more mutually abusive. Review questions 1–16 and ask them about yourself. Are you engaging in the same abusive behaviors that you cite in the other person?

Questions 11–17 reflect less obvious ways in which the relationship may be controlling. That does not mean it is not abusive, but if you answered *never* to questions 1–9, you may be in a controlling relationship that is not obviously abusive.

Questions 17–20 describe a relationship where deceit is present. If most of your answers reflect problems in this area, your relationship is built on lies and it is unstable. You cannot trust someone who does not tell you the truth. And without trust, no relationship can endure.

Questions 21–23 describe a relationship that is overdependent.

Questions 24–26 describe a person who does not take personal responsibility for behavior or wrongdoing.

Stop here and name some of the specific destructive elements in your relationship with this particular person. Is there physical, verbal, or sexual abuse? How about controlling behaviors and

attitudes? Is there more mutual abuse? Are you too dependent? Is there deceit or a lack of personal accountability or responsibility?

Questions 27–31 describe the basic elements of a healthy relationship. If you answered *never* or *seldom* to any of these questions, your answers indicate that your relationship is unhealthy and probably destructive.



Right now you may feel overwhelmed and frightened. These feelings are normal for anyone facing difficult truths. If you want to become healthier and have better relationships, I want to assure you that you can begin working on your part. The rest of this book, especially chapters 6 through 12, will show you how.

When my septic system backed into my basement, I wanted to close my eyes and pretend that it wasn't happening. Then I wanted to move out. Instead, that evening I cleaned up what I could and told myself that washing everything with bleach was good enough. This approach would certainly be a lot easier than ripping apart my entire basement. However, when I consulted with professionals who knew better, they assured me that the bacteria would not be removed with bleach alone. It needed a more drastic approach.

I don't want to scare you, but it's important that you understand the serious consequences of destructive relationships so that you will do all you can to change these patterns. I know, it feels easier to simply close your eyes or try to get by, hoping that the damage won't be too bad, but trust me: Ignoring destruction doesn't ever make it better or even neutral. The damage only grows.

God never minimizes the destructiveness that someone's sin can have upon another person. Sin destroys. Let's look at the effects that destructive relationships have on our bodies, our minds, our emotions, our spirits, our children, and our personhood.