

Published September 1st, 2021

Family Focus

By Margie Ryerson, MFT



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a local marriage and family therapist. Contact her at 925-376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com. Her new book, "Family Focus: A Therapist's Tips for Happier Families," is available from Orinda Books and Amazon.com.

Kristin, age 48, was working on managing her depression and anxiety in our therapy sessions. In the course of examining her relationships, she became more aware of how hurt and upset she was that her relationship with one of her closest friends felt so one-sided. Kristin considered all the ways she was there for her friend, Natalie. She felt that she was always interested in Natalie's life, was generous with her time and money, and, overall, was a considerate friend. However, Natalie rarely reached out to Kristin unless she needed something. When they talked, the conversation usually seemed to revolve around Natalie. Most hurtful were the times Kristin heard that Natalie had invited others to her vacation home and hadn't included her. As a matter of fact, Kristin had never even been to Natalie's vacation home.

Our healthy relationships produce positive feelings about ourselves. We feel valued and seen. These relationships enhance our lives. When we're in a relationship that pulls us down to a negative place where we question ourselves and our worth and feel hurt and neglected, we need to stop and take stock.

Kristin was already putting in a huge effort in her friendship with Natalie. The only missing element was telling Natalie how she felt. However, Kristin knew that Natalie's actions spoke loud and clear, and that her preoccupation with herself was firmly established. There seemed to be nothing that Kristin could ask Natalie to change that would help her feel better. After all, suggesting that she be invited to Natalie's vacation home wasn't an option. Kristin would never invite herself to someone's house or event, and besides, there was nothing that would compensate for Natalie's failure to invite her over the past years. Kristin was able to see that Natalie's treatment of her was overall inconsiderate and neglectful.

Kristin's choices were to continue the relationship as usual, to abandon it altogether, or to scale it down in her mind to a more superficial relationship. Because she lived in the same community as Natalie, Kristin decided to demote the relationship in her mind. She could still be friendly with Natalie, but she wouldn't consider her a good friend. In this way, she took more control and was able to avoid becoming so hurt and vulnerable.

We usually want to be able to speak up and ask what we would like from others in an appropriate way. Being assertive is difficult at times, but can be positive and rewarding. But if you are in a relationship with a toxic person, your feelings and perspectives will rarely be acknowledged or accommodated; the other person's version will take precedence. In extreme cases, the toxic person will gaslight you - feed you lies and distort your perception of events over time - and cause you to doubt yourself and your judgment. Once you have evaluated and recognized the nature of a toxic relationship in your life, it is important to take steps to protect yourself.

Ben, aged 34, was a kind and loving member of his blended family. Both of his divorced parents had remarried several times, and Ben prided himself on getting along with all of his various siblings, half-siblings, and step-siblings. However, Ben had one half-sister, Helene, who was a particular challenge. Helene was a single mom of a 3-year-old son, Chad, and regularly accused Ben of not being a caring brother

"Toxic relationships not only make us unhappy; they corrupt our attitudes and dispositions in ways that undermine healthier relationships and prevent us from realizing how much better things can be." ~ Michael Josephson

Emotionally healthy people don't set out to have a toxic relationship with anyone. Often, they become unwittingly ensnared in one and are unsure how to proceed. For those who hang on, hoping the relationship will improve, it is highly likely that they will experience ongoing distress. But many of us are loyal individuals who value the people in our lives and don't feel comfortable making radical changes.

There are many ways a relationship can be toxic; physical, emotional, and sexual abuse are widely recognized as indicators. Some behaviors don't qualify as full-fledged abuse, but still make for toxic relationships. If you are on the receiving end of bullying, manipulation, lying, gossiping about you to others, deception, general untrustworthiness, disregard for your time, money and/or feelings, or ultra-competitiveness with you, you may be in a toxic relationship.

and uncle. In reality, Ben knew that he often made an effort to spend time with Helene and Chad, and would treat them to meals and toys for Chad. He also knew that Helene was the one who didn't think of others, but mostly what others could do for her.

Their relationship gradually deteriorated as Ben became increasingly resentful of Helene's demands and lack of appreciation. But when Helene got angry at Ben for not inviting her son to participate in his wedding, even though only nieces and nephews ages 5 and up were participating, Ben decided that he'd had enough. He told Helene that if she couldn't control her anger and treat him better, he didn't want to see her for a while. He needed a break. Helene became furious and lashed out at Ben, cursing him and insulting him. Her behavior only confirmed his decision to distance himself from her as much as possible. Months later, Ben reported feeling only relief - and no guilt. Removing a toxic person from our lives can feel liberating and restorative.

A person may be toxic for one person, but not for others. Therefore, it is hard to get support for one's feelings if others haven't experienced the same behaviors from an individual. And each of us reacts differently. Whereas one person may perceive that he or she is being treated inexcusably poorly, another person may overlook the same treatment. It is up to each of us to decide for ourselves what bothers us and how much, if we can speak up and effect change, or if we're better off keeping a distance from certain people.

Reach the reporter at: margieryr@yahoo.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA