

ROMANCING AN IDEAL **TOXIC**

ROSHNI SHAMIM

When it comes to the word 'toxic', almost every single person on the planet automatically shrinks away from the term. Quite an intriguing reaction from human beings, given that the majority who react to it have often not actually experienced any toxicity in a relationship. What takes place here instead is the instinctive reaction triggered from the fear of the unknown. In an age

and time that emphasises, embodies and to a large extent, even romanticises "red flags" in a relationship, it creates an inherent and rigid fear within the human mind.

Ideally, this fear should perhaps be a blessing in disguise. After all, if this stemming fear is stopping you from butchering your self-respect in a relationship and essentially helping you avoid a traumatic experience, then there is naturally no harm in goading the fear. Unfortunately for our

innocent minds, this is often the wrong path to take. As it so happens, the fear stays but so does our silent curiosity. Despite our best efforts to spot the red flags that lead to toxicity, our eyes, mind and invariably even our hearts tend to glaze over all the warning signs.

If you believe that the reason why human beings tend to endure toxic relationships is simply because of being in love, think again. Avoidance of clear warning

signs in a relationship are often stemmed from a bigger root cause. Interestingly, trauma plays a crucial role in shaping your emerging thoughts and behavioral aspects as an adult. Your subconscious thus somehow buries your childhood trauma deep within the confines of our mind, which eventually projects itself later in your adult relationships. In the case of having an abusive parent in your childhood, your guttural instinct cautions you to stay away from pursuing any person with a remotely similar set of characteristics. The irony is that inevitably, the marked off person is exactly the one you end up falling for.

This is not a coincidence in most cases. You convince your mind that you will stay away from such obvious toxic characteristics, having faced the outcomes personally. Yet in the face of reality, it is that inexplicable familiarity that arises from that characteristic that makes you crave that relationship anyway. Often, this is a sidelined and subconscious attempt to hurt your abusive parent by making them witness the exact torture inflicted on yourself, as they have done on your other parent for years; it therefore becomes an endless loop of endless mental torture.

This is not to say that every toxic relationship dependency is stemmed from childhood trauma. It may also arise due to other kinds of suppressed trauma, that thus lead you to bury yourself instead in the open-ended toxic relationship than in dealing with your inner demons.

In your mind, it just seems like an easier escape to add another pile of trauma to the already growing pile inside of you.

A simple question now comes to mind: *what about the people that hold no past trauma whatsoever, yet somehow get tangled in a toxic relationship and refuse to leave it despite the mental unrest?* A key factor to incorporate here—as well as to always remember—is the power of human emotions. Both a blessing and in certain cases a curse, our grasp of emotions often delude our own hearts into thinking this is acceptable. Have you ever felt like your partner treats you like garbage, yet you conveniently forget all about it when the sun is shining bright on your relationship once again? This pattern is you clinging to your inherent hunger for positivity, thereby erasing the earlier wrongful treatment from your mind. By clinging to the sweet memories of your partner, whose version in your head differs starkly from the person in front of you, you begin to reason more and more on the matter through your memory version than the real life one.

It is suffice to say that if someone is hoping to find a clear cut solution here on escaping their toxic relationships easily, then the truth is—there isn't one. There is no easy "hack" on escaping that dependency you have built inside your head, over and over. The first step here though might just be your acknowledgment as well as eventual acceptance. Is there trauma that you have buried, a past that you are running away from by choosing to rather accept abuse in your present? Perhaps just a little shred of acceptance can actually help you not only cringe at the term "toxic" but also turn away from it, bit by bit.

Roshni strongly believes that the study of human behavior holds the answer(s) to all our internal issues. Mail her unusual facts on human psychology at roshni.shamim@gmail.com



HOW MUCH CONTENT IS TOO MUCH?

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Imagine this: it's been a long, stressful day of working from home or doing classes. Now that you have some time to yourself, you cuddle up in front of the TV or your laptop. You look for something to unwind to on Netflix. However, none of the movies or series seem appealing. You aren't in the mood for something new, neither are you willing to rewatch an old favourite. You end up scrolling through the app for an hour, only to close it in frustration.

It's not like you couldn't find anything to watch; there's just too many of it.

When the lockdown was imposed in order to curb the spread of Covid-19, people were urged to stay home except for essential purposes. While this new normal significantly hampers the regular flow of life for many, it has brought a few blessings in disguise for those with decent internet access. Since the 24/7 news outlets are preoccupied with the negativity surrounding this crisis, we rely on streaming services for a much-needed escapism. This is demonstrated in a JP Morgan research where Netflix saw 15.8 million new subscriptions in the first quarter of 2020, surpassing their estimate of 8.8 million.

One might put the extra leisure time to use by ticking off items from their watchlist, but the satisfaction begins to wear off after a while. Watching a movie or series can evoke instant gratification, similar to whenever you eat a slice of pizza or buy a new set of clothes. Yet, a long session of binge-watching can have similar effects on your brain as wolfing down too much fast food has on your stomach—you feel bloated. There's also the issue of the infinity of content within your reach, making it easy

to get lost among the unlimited options. Eventually, the unchecked items on your watchlist feel like chores to do.

"Although I browse Netflix with a particular genre in mind, I tend to lose interest upon seeing the various options, which leads to indecision. After spending quite some time in deliberation, I end up picking a show which rarely meets my expectations," says Tasnim Islam Ina, undergraduate student of Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). "I also feel a lack of motivation soon after I think of watching something. At first, I'm pretty excited to explore, but as soon as I start looking for movies I lose interest."

According to American psychologist Barry Schwartz in his book *The Paradox of Choice – Why More Is Less*, an excess of choice can pose a daunting challenge to consumers. As a result, they tend to stay within their comfort zones instead of carefully choosing. The often subpar outcome may result in regret or anxiety over failing to select a better option. Schwartz may have been inspired from a research conducted by psychologists Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper in 2000, where consumers were asked to choose from a large and small array of flavours of jam. Although interest in the larger assortment was more likely, the consumers were more inclined to make a purchase from the smaller one.

The findings from the book and study can also be applied to how we view content. Overwhelmed by the seemingly endless options, it's no wonder we like to narrow them down, even at the expense of quality. These days, algorithms do the work of helping us stay within our comfort zones by detecting our preferences and providing curated content. On the other hand,

algorithms might discourage us to find out content on our own by telling us what they think we like, which is not always spot-on. Just because you put on a lo-fi music playlist while studying doesn't mean you'll always want to listen to similar kinds of music. The algorithms can also struggle to figure out what consumers with an eclectic taste would like to see. This, in turn, may be beneficial to those users as they would more likely be actively seeking out content to their unique preferences.

Anika Tabassum, 20, concurs, "I personally think it should be up to users to choose what they want to see. People have their own interests, and they are likely to choose shows and movies they think they will enjoy rather than whatever the algorithms give them. Then again, algorithms can help people find shows similar to their recent watch history."

Tasnim holds a different view, "The option of having a personalised list based on my watch history can help filter other things out, but after some point even the list seems boring. Hence, there's no enthusiasm in looking for shows."

This lack of motivation might eventually make one turn away from streaming platforms altogether, at least for a while. Wading through so many confusing options can make one feel emotionally exhausted, resulting in detachment from looking for entertainment. These feelings allude to common symptoms of burnout. Although there has been no conclusive study linking non-productive activities and burnout, the syndrome can affect anyone and is not limited to job holders.

While taking a break from watching movies can free up your mind, going days without entertainment while staying mostly

indoors may also be detrimental to your mental well-being. To solve this, you can try improving your choosing strategy. Nobel laureate economist Herbert A. Simon was known for his work on decision-making. He classified consumers into two groups: *maximisers* and *satisficers*. The former share similar traits to perfectionists; they want to know for certain that their choice is the best one available by considering all the other options, but it's impossible to sift through the millions of shows or songs in a streaming platform's library. On the contrary, the latter don't stress over the quality of what they have chosen, nor do they compromise their standards. They usually stick to the first choice that suits them and stop exploring further. Thus, they end up feeling more satisfied with the outcome.

In the coming days, the production of content will only increase and give rise to more options, but there's no need to consume beyond your capacity or worry about better alternatives. Therefore, the next time you decide to watch a movie, just sit back and relax.

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