



6 Steps for Avoiding Toxic Dating Relationships

■ by Laura Goossens, MSW, LCSW

If you desire marriage but always find yourself brokenhearted from a continual trend of poor dating experiences, it might be time to dig a little deeper into the problem. As a counselor, I am in a unique position to see different trends take place in the dating world and uncover reasons behind these trends. A common theme I have seen played out goes like this: Someone starts a dating relationship, everything seems to be perfect, the relationship accelerates and becomes very vulnerable and physical very soon, and then it spirals into a negative direction towards a bitter and broken end. That might sound extreme, but if you are reading this article because toxic dating relationships are a struggle of yours, I am pretty confident you can relate.

With this in mind, consider these six steps for avoiding toxic relationships.

1. Be Picky

Don't compromise who you decide to date in the areas that matter most. As a Christian, this means dating other Christians. This is one of the most important decisions in dating you can make. First of all, God calls us to date other believers, and if we are living a life of obedience to God, we need to take this seriously. Second Corinthians 6:14 says, "Don't team up with those who are unbelievers. How can righteousness be a partner with wickedness? How can light live with darkness?" A dating relationship is a very vulnerable relationship, and if you are not dating someone who is trying to please God, there is no accountability in striving to have your relationship honor Him. Being in a relationship with someone who isn't a Christian also makes it easy to give into the temptation to compromise your faith and spiral in a negative direction. "Don't be fooled by those who say such things, for 'bad company corrupts good character'" (1 Corinthians 15:33).

2. Be Honest

Be honest with yourself about the relationship. None of us are perfect. There is a temptation to convince yourself in the moment that you are dating Mr. or Ms. Perfect, but I promise you that isn't the case. Don't put them on a pedestal, but instead be honest with yourself and them about issues, concerns, or red flags you see in the relationship. It's so easy to get swept up into the excitement, but this will only have you putting bandages over broken pieces of the relationship instead of facing them head on. These broken pieces will eventually be seen, but if you haven't established good communication and honesty in the relationship early on, it will be harder to instill later on.

3. Recognize Red Flags

When considering who to enter into a relationship with, look out for red flags while you are in the dating process. Is the person controlling? Do they constantly have to keep tabs on you or tell you who you can or can't see, do, wear, etc.? If someone isn't giving you room to be your own individual, this is a red flag. Is the person manipulative? Do you tell them no to something and find yourself doing it anyway because they have guilted you into it? Do you constantly feel like you are being swayed by them to fit into their agenda? If you see manipulative behaviors, this is a red flag. Is the person abusive? Do they belittle and demean you? If so, they are emotionally and verbally abusive. Has this person shown physical aggression towards you, hit you, thrown things at you, grabbed your wrist? If so, they are physically abusive, and you need to end things now. You should be looking for red flags, and be open with others you seek advice from about any red flags so they can help guide you from an unbiased perspective.

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4. Set Emotional Boundaries

Do whatever you can to slow yourself down emotionally. The Bible tells us that love is self-sacrifice, and that kind of love doesn't happen overnight. John 15:13 says, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." You can't fall in love with someone you don't know, so slow yourself down and get to know them. Go for walks, talk for hours on the phone, take your time getting to know them and let your love grow. Let it be a process. Your closest friendships where you feel most vulnerable didn't happen overnight, and your dating relationships will be the same way. It's important to give it time to build trust and safety before letting the person all in emotionally.

5. Set Physical Boundaries

When deciding to date someone, be upfront about all of your physical boundaries right away. I remember someone once said to me, "If I tell them I don't want to have sex before marriage, they won't stay with me." If we are honest, if someone won't stay with you because you are waiting to have sex until marriage, they don't really care about you or an investment in the relationship. God commands us to wait to have sex until marriage, and as a Christian we are called to obey this command. Genesis 2:24 says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." There is so much more beyond obedience here. God isn't trying to keep you from enjoyment. Instead, He loves you so much that He is trying to protect you from those who want to use you, have you build a strong foundation in the relationship, and give you the beautiful gift of intimacy in marriage. Marriage is hard, and there will be plenty of times when the physical drive won't be the focus. How reassuring it is to know that your relationship isn't built on your physical relationship, but a solid foundation of love for exactly who you are.

6. Cultivate Interdependence

Build interdependent relationships into your dating relationship. It's so important to make sure the dating relationship you are building is an interdependent relationship. An interdependent relationship means that both of you know who you are and have your own independence in the relationship. This means there will be plenty of times you will do your own thing and they will do their own thing, and then you come back together as a couple. You will have your own friends and different interests, and you can give each other the space to each be your own person. This means you have a respect for each other's goals, dreams, and desires, and you encourage each other to work toward them.

If you find yourself stuck in a trend of toxic relationships, take the time to think through your past relationships and what the pitfalls there have been before entering into a new one. I have this saying that "relationships are only worth it if they are worth it." Relationships are a lot of work, energy, and communication, so it's important not to settle. If you find yourself compromising your values, faith, and happiness to be with someone, you will never find peace. Pray and seek God's wisdom and guidance as you are on your dating journey. ■

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