HEALTHY OR Toxic?



What is the health of your relationship?

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Healthy, Unhealthy, and Toxic Relationships

You're in a relationship to be happy, to smile, to laugh and to make good memories.
Not to constantly be upset, to feel hurt and to cry.
—Anonymous, LessonsLearnedinLife.com

God created us for connection—with Him and with one another. Relationships can bring love, belonging, and joy. They can also leave us confused or hurting when we don't understand the difference between healthy, unhealthy, and abusive behavior. I learned those differences through painful experience. My hope is that these pages help you recognize what you are living with and find clarity, wisdom, and peace.

Here is a simple way to understand the differences:

- **Healthy relationships are rooted in mutual respect, honesty, responsibility, kindness, and the freedom to be yourself. Both people can grow, speak openly, and work through difficulties safely.**
- **Unhealthy relationships include patterns that hurt trust or connection, such as poor communication, avoidance, disrespect, or weak boundaries. Change is possible when each person acknowledges their own behavior and consistently works to improve it.**
- **Abusive relationships involve patterns of intimidation, coercion, threats, manipulation, or control. Abuse can be emotional, spiritual, financial, sexual, digital, or physical. It is not simply an unhealthy disagreement, and the person experiencing abuse is not responsible for causing it.**

We can examine our own choices, attitudes, and boundaries, but we cannot make another person change. Each person is responsible for their own behavior. Recognizing this truth helps us respond with wisdom rather than carrying responsibility that belongs to someone else.

Many of us learned our understanding of love from the homes and relationships around us. If those examples were unhealthy, we may mistake control for care, fear for respect, or keeping the peace for genuine peace. Learning a healthier understanding of love takes time. It begins with recognizing what is happening, telling ourselves the truth, and choosing the next wise step.

My relationship with Jesus has taught me that love is not the same as tolerating harm. Following Him is a daily journey of learning, growing, and allowing His truth to shape our choices. Healthy love includes compassion and forgiveness, but it also includes honesty, responsibility, and boundaries. We can love someone without accepting destructive behavior.

Galatians 5:22–23 describes the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These qualities give us a meaningful picture of how love can be expressed. No relationship is perfect, but fear, humiliation, and control are not expressions of Christlike love. Your safety and dignity matter to God.

Jesus teaches us to recognize people by their fruit (Matthew 7:17–18). That doesn't mean claiming to know someone's heart. It means paying attention to consistent actions, not only promises or apologies. When words and behavior don't match, the pattern matters.

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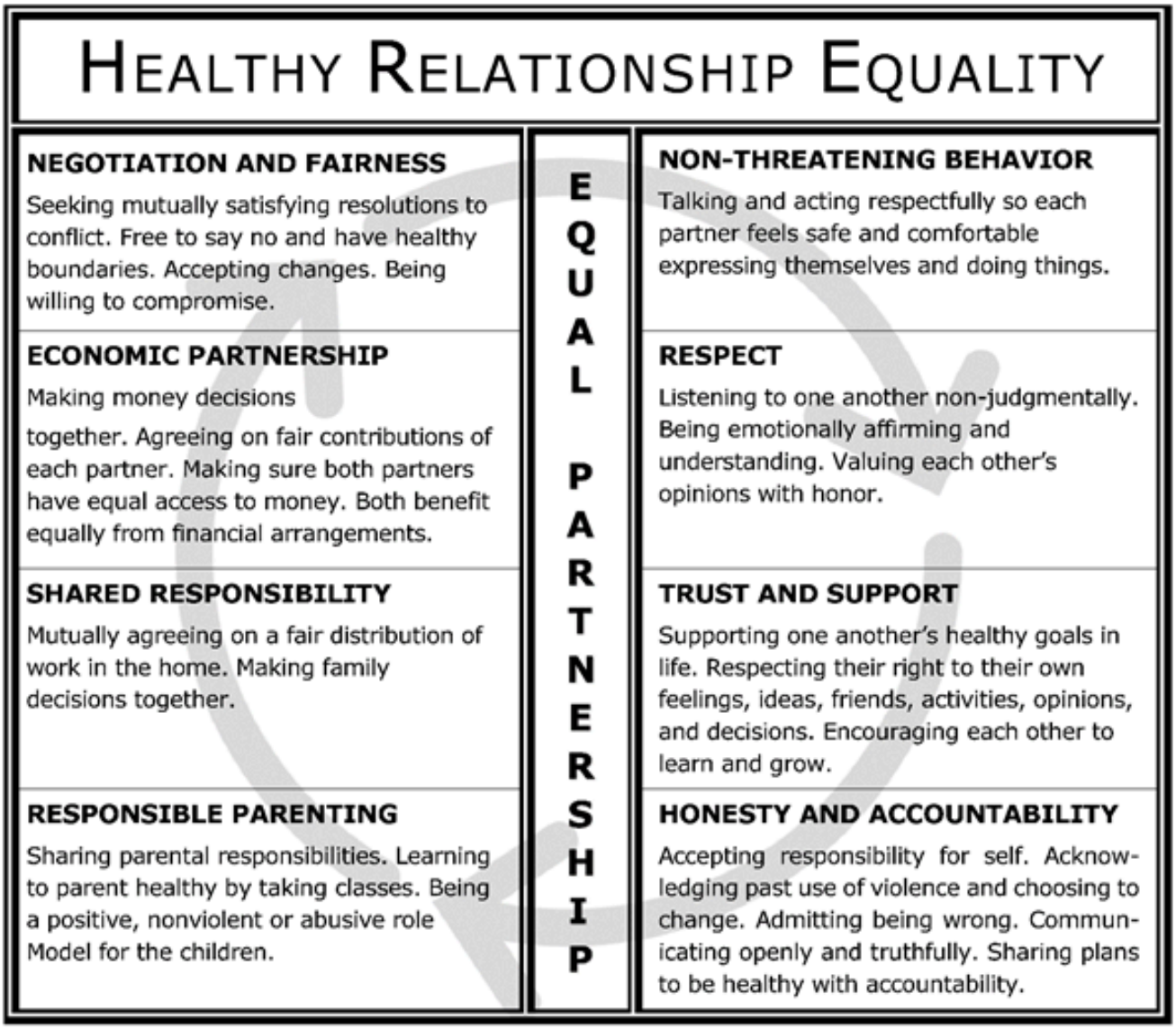
SIGNS OF A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP TABLE



It can be difficult to recognize what we have grown accustomed to. The comparison below offers a starting point for noticing the differences between healthy, unhealthy, and abusive marriage dynamics. Read it with compassion for yourself, and remember that no chart can capture every person's experience.

The following pages offer practical signs to help you consider the health of your relationship. As you read, notice not only what someone says, but how you are treated over time—and whether you feel safe, respected, and free to make choices.

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SIGNS OF AN UNHEALTHY OR TOXIC-ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

USING COERCION AND THREATS Making and/or carrying out threats to do something to hurt her. Threaten to leave, to commit suicide, to report her to welfare, make her drop charges or do illegal things.	POWER CONTROL ABUSE CYCLE	**INTIMIDATION** Making her afraid by using looks, actions, and gestures. Hitting or smashing things. Destroying her property. Abusing pets. Displaying weapons.
USING ECONOMIC ABUSE Preventing her from getting or keeping a job, making her ask for money, giving her an allowance, taking her money, not letting her know about or have access to family income. Taking out debts in her name.		**USING EMOTIONAL ABUSE** Putting her down and calling her names. Making her feel bad about herself. Making her think she is crazy. Playing mind games. Humiliating her. Making her feel guilty.
USING MALE PRIVILEGE Treating her like a servant, making all the big decisions, acting like the master of the castle, being the one to define men's and women's roles.		**USING ISOLATION** Controlling what she does, who she sees and talks to, what she reads, where she goes. Limiting her outside involvement, especially with her family. Using jealousy to justify his actions.
USING CHILDREN Making her feel guilty about the children. Using the children to relay disrespectful messages. Using visitation to harass her. Threaten to take the children away or kill them.		**MINIMIZING, DENYING AND BLAMING** Making light of the abuse and not taking her concerns about it seriously. Saying the abuse didn't happen. Shifting responsibility for abusive behavior saying she caused it.

As you study the wheel, pay particular attention to spiritual abuse and the use of affection or promises to regain control. Loving words do not excuse harmful patterns.

A healthy marriage is not one without disagreements. It is one in which both spouses seek to honor God and one another through respect, honesty, shared responsibility, and care. Each person can express concerns, maintain appropriate boundaries, and participate as an equal partner. Love makes room for truth and growth.
Faith can guide a couple toward healthy love, but a shared Christian identity alone does not guarantee safety. Consistent actions, accountability, and mutual respect are what we need to look for.

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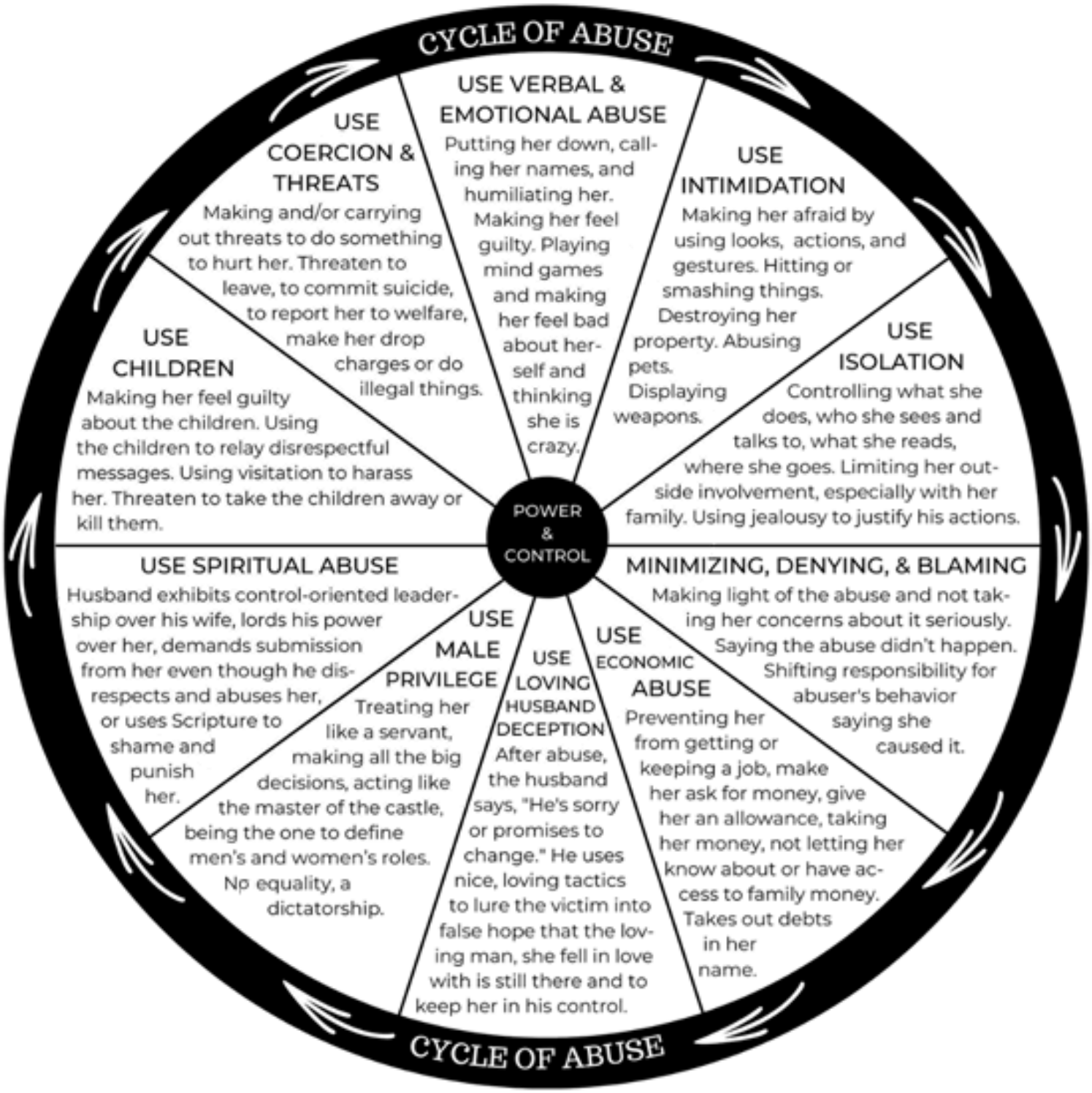
Cycle of abuse



As you study the wheel, pay particular attention to spiritual abuse and the use of affection or promises to regain control. Loving words do not erase harmful patterns.



Darla Colinet, CPC
Love and Abuse Expert, Author,
Speaker, & Certified Christian Life Coach,

Red Flags of Abuse: Signs to Take Seriously
Abuse may be Physical, Emotional, Verbal, Psychological, and/or Spiritual

As you read, mark any statements that describe your experience. Even one serious threat or act of violence deserves attention; you do not need a certain number of check marks to seek help.

- ☐ You feel as though you are walking on eggshells, even when your partner says they love you.
- ☐ Your partner withholds care or support when you are ill, injured, or especially vulnerable.
- ☐ Your partner insults, belittles, or calls you or your children hurtful names.
- ☐ Your partner repeatedly accuses you of infidelity, uses jealousy to control you, or deliberately humiliates you.
- ☐ Your partner hurts, pressures, or humiliates you sexually, or ignores your consent.
- ☐ Your partner embarrasses you publicly, interferes with your work, controls access to money, or repeatedly uses lies and broken promises to manipulate you.
- ☐ Your partner acts entitled to control your time, decisions, body, or relationships.
- ☐ Your partner blames you or others for their harmful choices and refuses accountability.
- ☐ Your partner drives recklessly to frighten you, restricts your transportation, punches walls, slams doors, or destroys belongings.
- ☐ Your partner invades your personal space or uses physical size or positioning to intimidate you.
- ☐ Your partner pushes, hits, injures, or strangles you, or uses prolonged silence and guilt as punishment or control.
- ☐ Your partner uses substances or angry outbursts to frighten or control you, threatens pets, or harms animals.
- ☐ Substance use alone does not establish abuse; threatening or controlling behavior does.
- ☐ Your partner threatens to take your children, abandon you, or use custody arrangements to control you.
- ☐ Your partner isolates you from friends, family, or support, or threatens self-harm or harm to others to control your choices.
- ☐ Your partner forces sexual contact, disregards your refusal, or threatens to kill you.
- ☐ Your partner constantly monitors where you go, whom you see, or what you say, or sends threatening messages.
- ☐ Your partner uses technology to harass you, access your accounts without permission, or interfere with your devices.
- ☐ Your partner shares private information without consent, tracks your movements, repeatedly follows you, or stalks you.

If You Recognize Abuse, What Can You Do?

If some of these signs sound familiar, please know that your experience deserves to be taken seriously. You do not have to solve everything today. Support, safety, healing, and a different future are possible. The next page offers places to begin.

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What You Can Do

Begin with safety and support. Consider speaking privately with a domestic violence advocate or a counselor who understands coercive control and abuse. A Christian counselor may be especially helpful if they are also trained in domestic abuse. A pastor can offer spiritual care, but spiritual guidance should not replace specialized safety support. Couples counseling is generally not recommended while abuse or coercive control is ongoing, because it can increase danger and place responsibility on the person being harmed.

Abuse is a pattern of choices and behaviors for which the person using abuse is responsible. Stress, alcohol, mental health struggles, or anger do not excuse threats, violence, or control. Periods of tenderness or promises to change do not by themselves demonstrate lasting change. Look for sustained accountability and safe behavior over time.

You can contact a local domestic violence program for confidential support and help making a safety plan, whether you decide to stay, leave, or are unsure. Leaving can increase risk, so you do not have to announce your plans or confront your partner. If you are in immediate danger, call 911 in the United States. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is available at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), at thehotline.org, or by texting START to 88788. If your devices may be monitored, seek help using a safer device when possible.http://www.thehotline.org/

Healing can include rebuilding trust in your own judgment, understanding what healthy love looks like, strengthening boundaries, and receiving wise support. For me, Jesus has been central to that journey. You can seek God's guidance while also taking practical steps to protect yourself. Forgiveness does not require reconciliation, and love does not require access to someone who is harming you.

Your life has value. You are worthy of dignity, safety, and respect. I believe God's love never asks us to pretend that abuse is good or to remain silent about harm. Matthew 25:40 reminds us how deeply our treatment of others matters to Jesus.

ABUSE IS NOT GOD'S DESIGN FOR LOVE OR MARRIAGE.

Healthy relationships are built through love expressed in actions: kindness, honesty, responsibility, respect, and care. Wherever you are on this journey, you can begin with one step toward truth, support, and safety. There is hope for restoration and peace.

After living through three abusive marriages over nearly thirty years, I learned how important it is to understand the difference between love and control. I share these lessons because I want others to recognize harmful patterns sooner and discover the hope and freedom I found through Christ. If you would like to explore this journey further, my book and workbook, Quest for Exceptional Love, explore relationships through Christ's design for love.
Additional resources and ways to connect:

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