

RelationshipRX

WITH LAURA DABNEY, MD

READ THE RED FLAGS

How to spot and end a toxic relationship



LAURA DABNEY, MD

the intimacy MD

Relationship stress is no match for Dr. Dabney.

Every week, she works with patients in dozens of cities across the United States, helping them break the patterns of past relationships and beat a path to a happier, healthier future. She owns a leading clinical practice in Virginia Beach and Richmond while also Board Certified in Psychiatry.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2016, I published a short article online titled, "The Top 4 'Get Out Now' Red Flags When Dating." Within weeks, the download numbers soared. My patients wanted to discuss the article. Readers called our office because of it. To this day, the downloads have yet to slow down, and I continue to discover just how many lives are affected by this topic and how many people worry about their toxic relationships.

The article also shed light on what a relief it is for people to discover that they are not alone in dealing with the frustrations of a toxic relationship. Patients say, "Oh my gosh, other people experience this too?" Or they ask, "There is a name for this problem?" Yes, I assure them -- and those of you reading this -- lots of people experience this issue. And the name for it? Red Flags. Once you understand and learn to spot the warning flags in your relationships, you can take steps to stop their toxic pull.

Not that it's easy. People can learn quickly to recognize Red Flags, but taking the necessary measures to leave those relationships in favor of healthy ones can be a lengthier process. It is possible.

In my profession, I have the privilege of working with people in the midst of reshaping their lives. I get to see my patients end toxic relationships or begin healthy ones, so I know how great that change can be. And, thanks in part to that Red Flags article, I have a better idea of just how many people are struggling with the subject. That's why I wrote this guide. I won't ever be able to meet everyone working to change their relationships, but I can provide the same information I share with my patients. I offer this guide to lend the same insight that's helped hundreds of my patients find happier, healthier partnerships.

PART ONE

Identifying the Toxic People in Your Life

A first step in spotting the toxic people in our lives is accepting that we have the right to determine with whom we wish to associate. I refer to this skill as critical judgment. To establish healthy relationships, we must exercise the ability to recognize who's good for us -- and just as important -- who's not.

The trouble is, people often confuse critical judgment with judging others. Patients tell me, "I try not to judge," and "I don't like being judgemental." But these aren't the same behaviors.

Being judgemental of others is just that -- standing in judgment of their conduct, of what's right or wrong about what they do. Exercising critical judgment, however, is an assessment of what's happening to us and whether the interactions we have with another person are healthy or unhealthy. Critical judgment isn't about changing another person; it's about being in control of the types of relationships we wish to have and how we want to be treated.

That's where the Red Flags come in. To use our critical judgment effectively, we have to learn to read the "flags." These are issues that cause significant disruption to a relationship. They are issues that require professional help and are not to be treated lightly.

THE FOUR RED FLAGS

A Short but Life-Changing List

There are only four primary Red Flags, but each represents a serious issue and is never to be taken lightly. Every Red Flag leads to significant emotional and financial disruption within the relationship and are reasons to immediately end the relationship. No matter how understanding or patient or sympathetic you are, these Red Flag issues require professional help:

- Addiction or severe psychological issues
- Legal or financial trouble
- Lack of empathy
- Verbal or physical abuse

Let's take a closer look at each issue.

Addiction or Severe Psychological Issues

Many of the people who come to my office are grieving over the trauma and stress brought on by a husband's addiction or a girlfriend's severe emotional issues, such as eating disorders or suicide attempts. Very often, they tell me they knew about the issues before the relationship got serious but couldn't bring themselves to leave. They never even considered deserting the person they loved when they were down. "She clearly needed help," they say. Or, "I could never be that heartless." They tell me that the thought of leaving the relationship left them heartbroken and alone.

The truth is, good people struggle with addiction and other issues. The fact that alcohol, gambling, drugs or bulimia play a controlling role in a person's life does not define his or her worth as a human being.

In fact, it's a sign of his or her humanity. Everyone struggles with something. We cannot fairly define people by their challenges.

Nor does another person's challenge dictate our responsibilities. Addiction, in particular, is a powerful force that requires professional intervention, treatment, and often years of hands-on assistance. Simply being a woman's boyfriend does not demand that a man put his life on hold for her. Neither does it mean that he is in any position to help cure her.

People who are actively overcoming addiction and severe psychological issues are not ready to be in a relationship. Their attention must focus exclusively on recovery; for many, that process will take nearly everything they've got. Also, know that addictions and major emotional problems take people away from us. They draw all of that person's attention into the problem, ultimately leaving them with nothing to give emotionally (and sometimes physically) to anyone else. When you remain in a relationship with someone struggling with addiction or severe emotional problems, eventually you will be as alone in the relationship as you would be apart from it. Even more, staying in the relationship prevents you from finding your way into a happy, healthy one.

Legal or Financial Trouble

Another Red Flag predicament, in which people find themselves, is trying to deal with a loved one's legal or financial trouble. Maybe, it's a girlfriend's history of arrests and outstanding warrants or a boyfriend's sudden lawsuit filed against him. Whatever the case, legal issues are of significant consequence and often take years to resolve.

Like addiction or psychological issues, legal trouble does not necessarily reflect a person's character. One of my dearest friends got a speeding ticket and wrote the wrong date for her court appearance on her calendar, only to learn days later that the judge had issued a warrant for her arrest.

One-off mistakes happen and, as long as a person takes immediate steps to rectify them as my friend did, these mistakes do not qualify as Red Flags.

A pattern of severe legal offenses is indicative of a Red Flag issue. For starters, a pattern of legal trouble demonstrates a lack of respect for other people. It does not matter whether those people are police officers or family members or consumers; when a person habitually crosses legal boundaries, they are showing no respect for boundaries in general. Such a person is not one with whom you can expect to have a healthy relationship; eventually, this person will disrespect you and your boundaries, as well.

Legal troubles also lead to intense financial and emotional distress. If you begin a relationship with a man or woman in legal trouble, the best case scenario is that you distance yourself from his or her troubles. In the worst case scenario, these troubles will consume him or her, leaving less time and energy for the relationship. Eventually, you end up paying emotionally and financially for troubles that were never yours.

Lack of Empathy

I often refer to this as the “reddest of Red Flags” because I can’t tell you how many people tell me stories about spending their lives with loved ones who expect emotional, financial and practical support, but who offer virtually nothing in return. And many of my patients ignored the signs that his or her partner had no empathy as early as the first date.

Let me give you a typical example of how easily we can overlook this trait. One of my patients arranged to meet his eventual wife for their first date at a subway stop. He set a meeting time that would allow them to reach their destination -- a spot he chose to make their date special -- at a specified time. She arrived an hour late and offered no apology. Back then, he didn’t know that he could test her ability to empathize by saying, “I was upset by the hour wait.” This simple statement would have told him a lot from the very beginning of the relationship. If she’d responded with an apology, she would have been demonstrating empathy, but if she countered with a bunch of excuses or, worse, reassigning the blame for her lateness, that would have been a sign of lack of empathy. In the end, it came as no surprise that they could not work out their problems, and they divorced.

Happy, lasting relationships stand on a foundation of intimacy, and that requires an ongoing give and take by both individuals. Relationships that exist on anything less eventually head for heartache.

Judging a loved one’s ability to demonstrate warmth and empathy requires you to be frank with yourself. Don’t settle for anyone who gives less to the emotional health of the relationship than you. You deserve to be fully supported and cared for. Anything less is unfair and one-sided.

Verbal or Physical Abuse

Over the past few decades, we've grown more aware and intolerant of men who physically abuse their loved ones. That is as it should be. Violence is a zero tolerance behavior, no matter the gender of the perpetrator or the victim.

I must add that we are less aware, culturally, of the number of men who suffer abuse at the hands of their wives or girlfriends. This behavior is more prevalent than you may imagine. I have worked with men who tell me they were raised to "never strike a woman," but who have been slapped, bitten, hit with heavy objects and attacked by their significant other. Being the abused is much different than being the abuser, but those differences are not assigned by gender. Men can be abused, and women can be the abuser.

The abuse can be verbal, as easily as it can be physical. Verbal abuse is characterized by any attempt to make another person feel weak or powerless, to minimize or humiliate them. It can be as simple as her saying, "You're so dumb," and as complex as a need to one up your accomplishments whenever possible. I encourage a zero tolerance policy for verbal or physical abuse in any relationship. One time is too many.

"But Dr. Dabney, she just needs my help..."

One of the most wonderful things about human beings is our sense of altruism, our desire to help each other, and our wanting to be part of a larger whole. In fact, people who don't feel the pull of altruistic instinct demonstrate a troubling lack of empathy. See the Red Flag, above.

It's understandable that we'd try help someone we care for. Of course, we would. What can be more difficult to learn is the line between helping and helping too much or helping at the wrong time or under the wrong circumstances. That's why it's so crucial to exercise critical judgment.

You may feel a strong, nearly impossible pull to help a loved one through a tough time. The reality, though, is Red Flag issues are severe enough that they require professional attention. There is nothing you can do to fix that person. You cannot love her more or demonstrate tough love or wake up every morning and reassure him that you'll never leave his side. When people are struggling with Red Flag issues, they must put all their attention into fixing them. The issues are their issues to resolve. Not yours.

Your job is to rely on your critical judgment: look for flags, evaluate them, determine whether a relationship is healthy, and, if it is not healthy, break off the relationship or seek marriage counseling.

That brings us to Part Two.

PART TWO

How To Read and Confirm the Flags

Alright. You get it. If you're in a relationship with serious issues, you're headed for a lifetime of serious issues. But how can you uncover these Red Flags? How do you broach such delicate subjects? It's not as simple as, "Hey, honey. Would you please pass the ketchup? And by the way, I think you're an alcoholic, and I have no idea how to leave you."

Reading Red Flags in any relationship is comprised of two steps.

- Watch for clues
- Confirm

Let's take a closer look at each step.

One: Watch for Clues

The first step in reading the warning flags in a relationship is to watch for clues that may indicate Red Flag choices. You've heard the adage, "It's not what you say but what you do that matters." It means that people can be skilled at withholding the information conversationally, but it's more difficult to disguise behavior.

Again, this is what makes our reliance on critical judgment so crucial -- after all, our ears and our "guts" often tell a different story about the health of a relationship. To read the flags in your relationship, watch for two types of clues: behavior and evasiveness.

Behavioral Clues

When we watch for behavioral clues, we look at the choices people make from day to day, and whether they lead to positive or negative consequences.

Addictions, for example, are characterized by behaviors or activities that disrupt one's ability to function in daily life. Begin by examining your regular time together. When you go out, does he tend to drink to excess? Has she arrived at events under the influence or disappeared from an event, only to return behaving differently? Does he pressure you to consume drugs or alcohol? Does she take pride in stories of past "party" behavior? In short, watch for any behavior that gives you pause. Then stop, listen, and watch for further clues.

Evasive Tendencies

Addictions such as gambling, shopping, or porn are often difficult to spot because people become skilled at hiding them. Likewise, issues, such as legal or financial trouble, may not surface in your conversations during the early stages of a relationship.

In these cases, evasive or secretive behavior can be an alarm that something is going on that your loved one doesn't want you to know about. For example, when you ask what she did last night or last weekend, does she avoid answering you in full? Does he seem uneasy answering otherwise innocent questions? Do you have reason to believe he's not telling you the truth? Whenever you suspect your loved one is avoiding your questions or misleading you, you must continue to watch and listen. These may be signs of Red Flag behavior.

Two: Confirm

While step one is to recognize a Red Flag, the second step is to confirm it. A good relationship can perish under the weight of assumptions gone awry, and confirmation is a crucial followup to your reading of behavioral clues.

To do this, I teach patients a very simple method for broaching the subject:

I feel X [feeling] when you do Y [behavior].

For example: "I worry about your behavior when you drink alcohol." If your loved one responds with empathy and insight, then it's not a Red Flag. For example, he may say, "I'm so sorry. That's not like me, and I'll cut out my alcohol use so that you won't be uncomfortable."

However, if they go on a defensive rant by saying, "I can't believe you're accusing me of this!", then you have confirmation that your suspicions were correct; you are dealing with a Red Flag issue.

Here are a few more examples to help you get used to the XY method:

"I feel angry when you are late."

How many of us have stood waiting for a loved one, growing more frustrated with each passing minute?

By the time he or she arrives, we may be so angry that we strike out and say or do something we regret. The XY statement, however, keeps the focus of our anger on the behavior, rather than the other person.

"I feel sad when you don't return my calls."

No one who loves you wants to make you sad. But until you tell them how you feel, they may not even know they're doing something so harmful. By using an XY statement, you establish a clear boundary about your expectations around communication and responsiveness."

"I feel suspicious when you ignore my questions."

Maybe you're doing your best trying to explore the potential flags in your relationship, but your loved one isn't as forthright as you'd hope. You have the right to express your feelings about that. Healthy relationships build trust and transparency, not secrecy. Stating this expectation in XY terms can help establish this important boundary.

"I feel concerned when you drink to excess."

People tend to broach uncomfortable topics in an unhealthy manner, such as by saying, "You shouldn't drink so much." But this is criticizing, and the person on the receiving end is naturally going to be defensive. The XY method keeps you from being critical.

These discussions may not always be comfortable. Your loved one may question your intentions. He or she may try to make you feel guilty for asking. But anything other than open dialogue can be seen as a potential red flag in and of itself. Allow, encourage, and push yourself to exercise your critical judgment. Wouldn't you rather experience ten minutes of discomfort than years of stress and anxiety?

PINK FLAGS

Serious, but Under Control

I also teach what I call “pink flags.” These flags are not quite red, but neither can you disqualify them until you investigate further.

Any of the Red Flags can be pink. You can dismiss them if, using your critical judgment, you determine that:

- The event or issue happened a long time ago.
- Your loved one knows it's an issue but is making progress in resolving it.
- Your loved one understands the issue well enough to manage it.

- You meet a woman who is a recovering addict but has been clean for many years. In hearing her story, you use your critical judgment and determine that this behavior does not present a Red Flag because it meets all three criteria: it's history, she's actively managing her addiction, and she did the work necessary to complete a recovery program successfully.

- You meet a man who doesn't seem to have direction in life. If this is chronic, then you should consider it a Red Flag. But if it's short term (midcareer transition, was recently laidoff, etc.) consider it pink and refrain from committing until his life has stabilized.

- Your loved one has a “crazy” ex-husband or ex-boyfriend. If this ex proves to be an ongoing issue, consider it a Red Flag and exit the relationship. If, however, your loved one has developed excellent boundaries and a clear way of dealing with this ex, you can dismiss the flag.

PART THREE

Knowing When To Move On

Not all relationships are meant to last. That's okay. In our relationships, we encounter, we learn, and we move on. If you believe you're in a toxic relationship, review these signs before making any decisions:

Do I see behavioral signs of any of the Red Flags:

- Addiction or psychological issues
- Financial or legal trouble
- Lack of empathy
- Verbal or physical abuse

Have I openly discussed these Red Flags with my loved one using the XY method?

Have I confirmed my concerns as Red or Pink Flags?

You have permission to leave.

Red Flag issues are relationship enders. Protecting your health and happiness does not make you cold, uncaring, or mean. It simply means that you recognize the seriousness of these issues and that you are unwilling to sacrifice your life for them. It is okay to put yourself and your needs first.

As soon as you spot a Red Flag, you have permission to move on.

"But Dr. Dabney, I don't want to be mean..."

Ending a meaningful relationship is not easy, and this feeling can intensify when we see ones we love in pain. Of course, we don't want to hurt them any more than they're already hurting. Putting ourselves first does not make us mean. Rather, it's an indication of our strength.

If you find yourself hesitating to end a toxic relationship for fear of being mean, take time to evaluate what "being mean" represents to you. Does it mean you will be hated and ostracized? Does it mean you will hurt someone? Does it mean you won't ever find joy again? When I examine this question with my patients, the discussion typically leads us back to someone in their life who was "mean" to them, and who they feel they will become.

Remember that our experiences are different as adults than they were when we were children. As children, we understood less and suffered the pain caused by those more powerful than us. But we're adults now. We don't suffer in the same way. And neither do our loved ones.

Exercise Zero Tolerance

Exiting a toxic relationship may be as simple as having a frank conversation with your loved one. Or it may take time for you to distance yourself from the other person. However you choose to end the relationship, exercise a zero tolerance policy on Red Flag behavior.

CONCLUSION

As I wrote at the very beginning of this guide, no matter how understanding or patient or sympathetic you are, Red Flag issues require professional help. If you are in a relationship with a Red Flag person, you are in for a lifetime of hardship.

Admittedly, some relationships are easier to exit than others. There's less involved with ending a relationship with a man you've only dated for three months than it is to end a 20-year marriage. But now, having learned the Red Flags and how influential they are to the health of a relationship, you have all the information you need to make your next move -- whether it be breaking up or seeking marriage counseling. You now have the same information that has changed my patients' lives. Each of us has the right to be in control of the types of relationships we wish to have and how we want to be treated.

As I've seen time and time again with my patients, toxic relationships are the source of endless heartache, legal and financial trouble, and worse. Ending these relationships can be immensely painful, but that breakup pain is only temporary. Instead of staying, you can move on. You can have the joy and fun the Red Flag person is giving you but without all the problems and headaches.

Yes, life **CAN** be that good!

Wishing you every happiness in your relationships,
Dr. Laura Dabney

Call now!
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