

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

THE 7 RULES ON HOW TO STOP BEING TOXIC

Understand The Signs And Root Causes Of Toxicity

Master Your Emotions, Stop Lying And Learn How To Stop Being Negative Angry And Mean So You Can Build Emotionally Healthy Relationships Free From Toxic Empathy — Chapter One.
About a 17-minute read.

Admitting that you have a problem is the first step to recovery.

Let me make an educated guess: You likely find it hard to form deep, intimate, and meaningful connections with other people, frequently have serious arguments and conflicts with friends and family, and often struggle with feelings of anxiety, insecurity, hopelessness, depression, and frustration about your current life situation.

The way you've pieced together the puzzle will differ from person to person. I got my wake-up call after my girlfriend broke up with me out of nowhere, leaving me blindsided and flabbergasted. Maybe you had a shouting match with a sibling, and they yelled how you need to go into therapy, got humiliated at work by not getting the promotion you wanted because of your "relationship with other people and character," or looked back at the past dozen of interpersonal crises in your life and realized you are the common denominator.

You took an interest in my work because you have a hunch that you aren't exactly a "good person," which may be the primary reason your life is not going the way you wanted. "Toxic" can seem like a scary term, and I urge you not to take it as an attack on your character. I use the term "toxic" because it's a simple way to unite many types of behavior that are unhealthy and hurtful toward other people, like lying, gaslighting, manipulation, envy,

mockery, aggression, lack of ability to take accountability, and constant blaming of others, a deficit of empathy and compassion, among others. We are all guilty of being a bit rude, mean, and hard to deal with at times. But, there is a problem when those toxic behaviors begin to dominate most of your interactions with other people. Your case may not be serious to the point of having severe symptoms of a mental disorder, yet there exists a persistent problem that sabotages your relationships, happiness, and success in life.

One of the biggest problems with becoming a better person is that it's very painful, uncomfortable, and embarrassing to admit your behavior was wrong, especially if your previous actions ended up hurting other people. Unfortunately, the more we've hurt other people, the more defensive we tend to get, preferring to hide behind the notion that we are good and decent people because the truth is too much to bear. You must move slowly and gradually in the right direction to break this cycle. Thankfully, you've already made the first step by reading this book. Reading what I've written right now indicates that part of you is aware there is a problem, and you wish to improve. This may not seem much, but you are already doing more than half of the population on this planet that messes up but refuses to acknowledge there is a problem that needs fixing.

Trying to become a better person is like learning to swim. The problem is that most people get way too enthusiastic and jump into the ocean, begin to panic when they realize they can't swim, and become traumatized. When they almost drown, they stop trying altogether. You can think of this book as a kickboard or swimboard that will teach you the fundamentals needed to overcome your toxic behavior patterns without pushing you into the deep end before you are ready. The whole program is broken down into seven rules, which represent skills you can develop, habits and routines you can adopt, and unique ways of overcoming the obstacles and challenges you encounter along the way. Following those rules in your life will help you gain control over your mood, emotions, thoughts, and energy levels, deepen your relationships, and discover the best version of yourself.

All you need to do is read through the entire book, prepare a digital document or a dedicated journal to take notes to ensure you understand the core principles we will discuss, follow the exercises I've laid out in each action step, and slowly start incorporating

the strategies we will discuss into your everyday life. For almost all exercises and protocols, you will be working by yourself, so there's no stress or pressure to share with others what you are doing before you are ready.

I've created this plan after more than a decade of deeply challenging work on myself, starting with frequent and intense therapy sessions, group counseling, and lots of self-work. I've quit, regressed back to level zero, and eventually came back more than a dozen times and, in the process, completely transformed my life for the better. This blueprint is the guide I wish I had when I was at my lowest and needed guidance.

Throughout the book, you will get a theoretical foundation and an action step, which you can immediately do on the spot with minimum setup needed. For most action-step exercises, you will only need a dedicated digital document, a folder to store your notes, or a notebook you use solely for journalling and practice for this book. I suggest you go through the rules and action steps chronologically at first so you can become more aware of the areas where you need to work on the most. Then, you can follow the framework in the conclusion that will help you to create a personalized plan for action after your first reading.

Each step is part of our holistic plan for improving toxic behavior. The steps work synergistically, and combining them leads to a positive impact greater than the sum of each practice, exercise, and protocol under each rule. You can think of the process much like building multiple sources of income that all add money to your bank account toward a common goal, like saving for retirement, buying a house, or starting a business. No single money stream will get the job done alone, but combining them will get you over the line.

Following this structured plan will make the process simple and easy to follow, but that doesn't mean it will be easy to execute. In most cases, you will not see results immediately because there aren't many quick fixes, easy solutions, and low-hanging fruits to pick. It may take days, weeks, or even months to see tangible changes in how you control your inner world, carry yourself, communicate, and behave toward others. Despite all of that, looking back, I can assure you that the journey is worth it.

If you've opened this book, a strong part of yourself is not satisfied with how you are—a part that's craving personal growth and transformation, even if it comes with immense challenge and adversity. This part of you will clash with others inside of you who crave comfort, familiarity, and pleasure in the moment above all else. Those parts will tell you that change is impossible and weaponize insults and demeaning remarks you've received from people in the past as evidence that you will always remain the way you are, but none of this is true. Becoming better than you were yesterday will feel frightening, intimidating, and exhausting, but how you feel about the process shouldn't shape your beliefs. It is within our nature to change and adapt; otherwise, we wouldn't survive as a species.

It may feel impossible now because you are on the first few miles of a 100-mile marathon, so the amount of effort you ask can feel overwhelming, but I want you to remember the following—the future is just an abstract projection in your head. You are currently in the present, and in this very moment, all you need to do is take another step forward. Reading this book will give you the first few steps forward and the tools and momentum to keep going indefinitely after that.

So, if you are ready to start, let's take the first step in this journey together!

— *Biser Angelov*

Understand The Signs And Root Causes Of Toxicity

When I was 27, my long-term girlfriend broke up with me. I thought it came out of nowhere. She sat me down and, for two hours straight, explained that we weren't compatible with my current emotional maturity and development. Ironically, I didn't have the emotional control to accept the criticism, quickly got defensive, and eventually disassociated from the conversation until she stopped talking.

We were together for almost five years, so the loss hit me like a truck. My performance at work sank, my interest in socializing with people diminished, and I felt a deep emptiness no matter what I was doing. Desperate, I tried to remember what she had told me when we broke up. One word stood out from the blurry break-up conversation we had—toxic. I asked

close friends, then my family, and eventually reached out to a therapist to see if I was toxic. At first, I didn't get a straight answer. Eventually, after a few sessions, my therapist said there was "a lot to work on," which was a subtle way of confirming my suspicions.

Maybe you have similar suspicions about yourself. Perhaps your significant other didn't break up with you, but you've had another sort of crisis. It's usually life-altering events destroying the ground beneath us, which force us to reconsider everything we know about ourselves. This book can't definitively tell you whether you are toxic or not. However, you will learn to recognize and manage toxic patterns within yourself. Before we can get to the practical part, we first need to understand what toxicity means.

Manifestations Of Toxic Behavior In Everyday Life

Being toxic refers to negative actions and behaviors that harm the well-being of those around you. Toxic behavior can lead to burnout, mental exhaustion, immense emotional pain, decreases in self-esteem and confidence, and the development of trust issues and insecurities in the people close to you. Individual accidents happen to everyone, but frequent and repetitive harmful actions are a strong sign of toxicity.

The psychological and emotional harm caused by toxicity doesn't need to be intentional. In fact, many people can be defined as toxic without being aware of the damage their actions are causing. Since hurting someone can make you feel deeply guilty and morally conflicted, it's easier to do when you are blind to the weight of your words and actions. Still, we can't oversimplify and say one group of toxic people is totally unaware, and the other fully knows what they are doing. Many people will fall somewhere in the middle. They have glimmers of awareness and moments of retrospection and self-guessing but ultimately shut down their doubts by coming up with excuses and rationalizations for their harmful actions.

While harm is universally considered a symptom of toxic behavior, there are countless ways in which it can happen. Here is a non-exhaustive list of common signs and patterns of behavior that can be considered toxic:

- Envy

- Disrespect
- Gaslighting
- Manipulation
- Aggressiveness
- Constant criticism
- Controlling behavior
- Undermining of others
- Passive-aggressiveness
- Complete lack of empathy
- Chronic pessimism and excessive negativity
- Violation of clearly established boundaries
- Blaming others and avoiding accountability for mistakes
- Lying, twisting of the truth, and dishonesty

As you can see, there are many different ways in which toxic behavior can show up, and they will vary based on the circumstances and environment. The umbrella of toxic actions is very wide, so let's briefly explore the different places and relationships in which they show up.

Toxicity In Romantic Relationships

If you do a public survey on the street asking people what comes to mind when they hear the word "toxic," many of them will likely mention their ex. Unfortunately, nature doesn't equip us with a radar for red flags when dating. Those who have one end up developing it after a few traumatizing relationships that give them lessons for life. For the rest of us, starting with a person with toxic traits is intimate, making you feel intoxicated and more fulfilled than anything else. The cost of that is how you become vulnerable to any of the following toxic behaviors:

Withholding of love

This can include the intentional limiting of intimacy, physical touch, and emotional support unless your partner yields to specific demands and conditions. Withholding of love is often followed by episodes of love bombing where a toxic person compensates by overwhelming their partner with all kinds of love gestures. Hence, they avoid consequences for the prior behavior*.

Controlling behavior

This can mean demanding access to your partner's phone and location at all times, having the final say on how they dress, what they eat, and who they spend time with, and trying to micromanage the way they speak and what they say to others.

Guilt-tripping, blaming, and shaming

Toxic behavior can repeat itself and persist if there's no response and a lack of accountability after a harmful action. By shifting blame and giving justifications designed to create shame and guilt, toxic people can leave their partners wondering if they are to blame instead of seeking recourse.

On the surface, being toxic toward one's romantic partner sounds like an oxymoron because they are supposedly deeply in love.

Many people don't get that it's precisely the strength of your bond that can push some people toward toxic behavior. The more valuable someone is to you, the more you are willing to do anything in your power to keep them around. This drive toward toxic behavior as a way to preserve a relationship can be even more intense in times of conflict. If your romantic partner is your primary source of emotional support and socialization, then keeping them by your side at all costs seems reasonable. This type of controlling and manipulative behavior can be common in people who haven't been taught how to regulate their emotions and respond to their insecurities in a healthy way*.

Toxicity In Families

Families are the most common social unit across most cultures, but that doesn't mean what goes inside is perfect. Here are some of the most common toxic traits within families and

why they may happen:

Abuse

There is a power imbalance in most relationships between parents and children because kids are entirely dependent on their caregivers, so it's hard to fight back against physical, emotional, and verbal abuse*.

Excessive punishments

Many parents continue the cycle of harsh and draconian parenting that they experienced as children because it's the way of treating children they are most familiar with. Punishments have their time and place, but instantly and harshly responding like this in all circumstances can quickly turn toxic*.

Exploitation without accountability

Many societal norms encourage you to stick with, sacrifice, and forgive your family's mistakes no matter what. This can be exploited by some family members, allowing them to mistreat others without consequences.

Chronic in-fighting and arguments

Time apart is one of the best solutions when tensions rise, and conflicts occur, but that can hardly happen if you need to interact with your family daily. This can make arguments, passive-aggressiveness, and in-fighting chronic issues that worsen over time.

Finally, it's important to note that while parents have the final word and near absolute power while children are young, the dynamic can dramatically change with age. Many children who grow neglected and without sufficient support, care, and love can end up displaying the same behavior toward their old and frail parents by denying them care or taking advantage of their financial situation.

Toxicity In The Workplace

There isn't a single person on this planet who can't tell you at least a couple of stories about a toxic boss, manager, or coworker. Toxicity in the workplace often leads to two very

common scenarios:

Career advancement through dirty tactics

Mild cases include gossip behind your back or highly sarcastic and passive-aggressive comments with the goal of reducing your credibility and reputation across the company. More severe signs of toxic behavior can include bullying, active spreading of lies, and taking credit for the work of others. Many people spend a significant amount of time at work, so their job becomes a huge part of their identity, which can motivate them to lie, cheat, and manipulate to get ahead of others and feel accomplished*.

Overly controlling and exploitative behavior by managers and higher-ups

Some managers have trust issues and poor management skills, so they keep everyone on a leash because they haven't learned to supervise and delegate tasks properly. Furthermore, since many work environments are highly competitive, higher-ups may not ignore, dismiss, or not sufficiently reward hard work for fear of someone getting promoted and taking their spot. Finally, since lower-position workers are at the mercy of those on top of the company food chain, many toxic work environments normalize staying late after work hours, short or non-existent breaks, on-and-off work, and staying in touch during weekends, and lack of lenience toward sick leave, and vacation days.

Toxicity can creep into all work environments, but it's especially likely in companies that are understaffed, struggling with profitability, or highly dynamic start-ups with very stressful day-to-day operations that can give rise to tensions and conflicts due to the pressure.

Why Do People Develop Toxic Behavior

Anyone can develop toxic behavior, no matter their age, gender, background, work situation, and social surroundings.

Still, some people are more likely than others to become toxic if they regularly deal with mental health hardships, struggle in relationships, deal with chronic stress and burnout, and are going through a life crisis, like long-term unemployment, medical emergencies, poor health, etc. Such challenges can slowly turn someone into a more bitter, negative, and toxic

person, but specific life events can also serve as a powerful trigger that suddenly flips a switch and brings forth seemingly out-of-character actions. For instance, toxic responses can happen if somebody is under immense pressure, stressed about meeting expectations at a particular moment, or has had to deal with a conflict very recently. It's hard to identify with certainty what is the underlying cause of toxic behavior, but there are some prevalent factors that I've seen time and time again.

Dysfunctional Upbringing

Whether we like it or not, many of us are close copies of our parents. If they happen to be highly toxic people, then chances are some of their behavior has become a part of us as well.

It's only natural since every child begins as a blank slate that learns about the world and shapes its behavior based on what it can observe nearby. For most people, mom and dad are the people you see the most in your formative years, whether you like it or not, so you end up absorbing aspects of their behavior, mannerisms, and specific ways of responding to situations and treating others*.

This mimicking happens instinctively in our early years when we haven't fully developed the mental capacity and emotional awareness to examine and question our actions critically. As a result, children who are ridiculed verbally are more likely to repeat this behavior to their peers at school and friends. If one parent tries to manipulate, gaslight, and control the other parent, the child may see this as normal and acceptable, increasing the chance for the same behavior to be repeated in their romantic relationships as an adult.

Traumatic Events

A traumatic experience is an event or a series of repeating situations that make you feel hurt, unsafe, overwhelmed, and emotionally distressed*.

In deeply traumatized people, many toxic behaviors can be explained as coping mechanisms resulting from the psychological damage they've experienced. Let's quickly go

through a few examples:

- Chronic negativity and pessimism are the most common ways of thinking because you've seen the worst parts of human nature and find it hard to trust and have hope for others
- Abusing others through gaslighting, manipulation, and aggression may occur because traumatized victims want to feel mighty and powerful, like the people who hurt them
- Breaking of boundaries is common because traumatized people have gotten their boundaries broken over and over again, so it's easy to do the same toward others
- Controlling others is a way of regaining control over your life by making sure that other people are doing exactly what you want them to do
- Lying, deception, and dishonesty are normalized as means of protecting yourself by not letting others have sensitive information on you

Insecurity

A person who's insecure struggles with a lack of self-confidence, chronic feelings of shame and inadequacy, and regular doubt about their abilities and worth as a person. There are many ways in which insecurity can increase the likelihood of toxic behavior*. Some of those ways include the following:

- Envy, jealousy, and attempts to sabotage and take away from other people can stem from the insecurity of not liking how much better other people appear to be doing
- People struggling with insecurity may feel like other people are constantly judging them, which can be used as an excuse to treat others harshly and aggressively
- Insecure people often compare themselves to others, so putting other people down and hurting them can be a way to feel superior
- Lying, manipulation, and gaslighting can be tools to get reassurance and compliments from others to feel better about yourself

Mental Health Disorders

Many mental health disorders can cause behavior that can be considered toxic. For instance, bipolar disorder can lead to significant issues with emotional regulation, which can lead to aggression and verbal abuse*.

Narcissism causes inflated self-importance and extreme selfishness, which can encourage exploitative and manipulative behavior. Those struggling with antisocial personality disorder may experience issues with empathy and remorse, which can allow for toxic traits to develop. While most people will not have signs severe enough to be classified as symptoms of mental illness, it's important to keep the possibility in mind because professional help is essential in such situations*.

Peer Pressure

Toxic behavior doesn't always come from an intrinsic desire to harm, exploit, control, and take advantage of others, or from a misguided attempt to protect yourself. Many people bend down to social pressure and start performing harmful actions toward others as a way of fitting into a group.

Since we all crave acceptance, connection, and belonging, the desire to fit somewhere can override our moral code and allow us to perform acts that would be unthinkable if we were alone. Many friend groups consist of a few toxic individuals who pressure others to gossip, share personal information, and bully others. All of this is done to gain attention and status, but those dramatic and scandalous actions can endanger others.

The Influence Of Social Media

Most of us spend hours of our day on the phone because it's a highly accessible and convenient way of getting mentally stimulated. Unfortunately, the people who post on social media don't always do so with the intention of appearing mature and emotionally intelligent. Social media algorithms are designed to drive engagement, so the most recommended

gurus and influencers you see are those that create the most drama, scandals, and controversy.

Since people are strongly driven by anger and other negative emotions, in some cases, dramatic and controversial content is recommended because it makes you more likely to click and stay longer to see what the fuss is all about*.

The algorithm quickly adapts, so even a few clicks on such videos, articles, and content will quickly get you sucked into the rabbit hole with endless more recommendations of that nature. Even if you don't see people online as role models, spending hours a day seeing that type of behavior can normalize toxic traits to the point where it feels normal and popular to behave in a similar way in many situations*.

The Hidden Dangers Of Anonymity Online

The risks of internet use don't stop with regular consumption of content. For many people, interacting with others via online forums, streams, chatting platforms, and video games is a very easy way to engage with others, especially if they struggle with forming connections in real life. However, research has shown that anonymity can bring out the worst in us, like bullying, excessive aggression, and constant harassment of others. This is more likely to happen in virtual spaces because the cloak of anonymity protects you from consequences for being toxic. The worst that can happen is a negative reaction from others, but even that feels less powerful because it's not somebody you know, and your comments and behavior will not change how your life is going in the real world. Furthermore, adopting an online persona can make it easier to display abnormal behavior because you feel like a different person online, allowing for more anti-social, immature, and unregulated ways of interacting with others*.

Understanding toxicity will give you an essential reference point, allowing you to compare your behavior with those signs and be mindful of when, where, and how you display any of those toxic traits.

While some patterns of toxicity will be relatively easy to spot, others will require intentional retrospection and consistent practice. This is why we will now do a simple self-awareness exercise and dedicate the next chapter entirely to the skill of self-awareness, which you need to develop to analyze those traits effectively.

Action Steps

When you try to change, starting slow is crucial. We will start with a very simple journaling exercise.

1. Pick up a notebook or open a digital document.
2. Write down this question: "Are there any moments where I've acted in ways that could have hurt others?"
3. Spend 30 minutes writing about that now. Then 30 more minutes tomorrow and again the day after.

You can write more than 30 minutes in a session, but you need to do this exercise at least thrice to have a fresh look and perspective each day. While the minimum amount of time spent is mandatory, what and how much you write is entirely up to you. You can cover specific moments in-depth or try to recall as many instances as possible. The point is to softly critique yourself and expand your awareness in a safe environment without judgment.

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