

Safe People

What's in it for me? Learn how to welcome safe people into your life.

If you've ever left a party, relationship, or phone call feeling worse than before it, you've probably already experienced being around unsafe people. Don't feel bad – it's an easy mistake to make. Unsafe people are everywhere – even within you! If you allow them to entrench themselves too deeply in your life or in your relationships, they can harm your emotional and spiritual health. The good news is that once you've learned how to identify these people, you can learn to spot the opposite – the safe ones who can enrich your life. Drawing on their personal experience and biblical guidance, Drs. Townsend and Cloud teach how to recognize “unsafe people” and guide you to a better life with safe people. In these blinks, you'll learn

how to give and accept forgiveness; why that college break-up might have been the best thing to happen to you; and why loving each other is the best way to love God.

Unsafe people can be destructive and lead to unhappiness.

You know that college girlfriend you can't stop thinking about? The one who broke your heart back in sophomore year? Or that work buddy who you thought was shaping up to be a best friend until you realized that he was overly critical of everyone? These are the unsafe people in your life, the ones who cause you more harm than good. The key message here is: Unsafe people can be destructive and lead to unhappiness. There are three different groups of unsafe people. First there are the abandoners. These are people who enthusiastically start relationships but rarely see them through. Let's say you begin dating an abandoner. Things may get off to a great start – long phone calls, restaurant reservations, flowers, and chocolates. But the impetus rarely lasts once you pass the first impressions stage and flaws begin to appear. Abandoners don't want true closeness, and when perfection isn't attainable, they leave. Then, there are the critics. If you want help solving a problem, your critical friend might be the ideal person to call. These people are excellent at analyzing situations and people. But, they're also more motivated by being judgmental and fixing mistakes than by showing compassion and truly helping others. Lastly, there's the third group, the ones who you can't count on to make or stick to a plan. We'll call them the irresponsibles. Think of that friend who you made dinner plans with weeks ago. You'd agreed to meet at 7:00 p.m., but she left you sitting alone at the table until she swept in half an hour late with no apologies. While irresponsibles are fun and spontaneous, you can't count on them. So what do all these groups have in common? An inability or lack of desire for true closeness, with each other and with God. Inviting these types of people into your life without truly analyzing their impact on you can make you unhappy. And in the long run, their presence can even be destructive. In the next blink, we'll learn about how to recognize unsafe people by their personality traits.

Recognizing unsafe people is a crucial first step in surrounding yourself with

safe ones.

Meeting a fellow Christian might seem like an excellent place to start when searching for safe people. But not so fast! Just because someone is a self-professed Christian doesn't mean they're safe. Unsafe people may appear to be highly moral but often tend to be religious rather than spiritual. Instead of allowing humanity to enter their decision-making, they rely on dogma and rules. The key message here is: Recognizing unsafe people is a crucial first step in surrounding yourself with safe ones. Unsafe people rarely admit weakness, so being in relationships with them often entails an imbalance. In time, if this isn't acknowledged and repaired, both parties become stuck in their role, with the "weak" one resenting the "strong" one. Unsafe people are often defensive and resist feedback. While they can easily see flaws in others, they rarely connect those criticisms to themselves. If you back them into a corner and force them to accept a mistake, they may say sorry, but don't truly repent. Apologies are only worthwhile if accompanied by a sincere desire to change. But unsafe people aren't interested in character growth. They're not humble enough to accept the hurt caused and fix it. In short, unsafe people think they're perfect and because they resist change and growth, they remain stagnant. If all of this sounds unpleasant and puts you off meeting anyone for good, take heart in the fact that the world isn't entirely populated by unsafe people. Nor are unsafe people incapable of change. For every person who denies their faults, there's someone who accepts theirs and is willing to work on them. Now that you can recognize the traits of unsafe people, you can use your knowledge to seek out the opposite - the safe people. But before you do that, you should examine your relationships. If you understand the interpersonal traits of unsafe people, you'll be able to recognize unsafe patterns in your own relationships.

Recognizing interpersonal traits of unsafe people can help you see if you're trapped in an unsafe relationship.

Let's say you've just learned an upsetting family secret and have to offload, so you call up your friend, Astrid, to chat. A week later, a mutual friend, Charles, calls. Not only does he want more details about your secret, but he's actually annoyed with you for not telling him personally. You're panicked, devastated, and most of all, betrayed. How could Astrid have shared your confidence? What you have on your hands is a classic scenario of triangulation. It's one of the interpersonal traits of unsafe people. The key message here is: Recognizing interpersonal traits of unsafe people can help you see if you're trapped in an unsafe relationship. The thing is, unsafe people are uncomfortable with true connection. In the triangulation scenario just described, Astrid might have acted to create a rift between you and Charles, or she might have talked to Charles because she was unable to openly share her reaction with you. Often, people like Astrid are truly ignorant about the pain they cause. Ask yourself the following questions about any relationship in your life: Do you feel guilty when you say no to this person? Does that person become angry and harsh when confronted - even gently - about a problem in your relationship? If you apologize for a mistake you made, are forgiveness and love withheld until you've been sufficiently punished? If you answered yes to any of the above, then you're enmeshed in an unsafe relationship. Not only are you constantly on tenterhooks, but you also find yourself constricted in your growth as the other person

tries to 'parent' you into only doing what he or she approves of. Unsafe people avoid closeness because they can't connect at an emotional level. Being in a conversation with one of these people feels like being the audience member of a one-act play in which the actor just talks about herself. Because unsafe people lack empathy, they only help you in order to feel good about themselves or because they want reciprocation later. Of course, not everyone is entirely safe or unsafe, which is why there's always hope for redemption and growth. This often starts with us. In the next blink, you'll learn how to recognize unsafe behavior inside yourself so that you can begin to transform.

Your past experiences can contribute to unsafe characteristics in your personality.

It's a cliché only because it's true: There are no perfect people. And that includes you. Just like the unsafe people, we all have aspects of ourselves that are either safe or unsafe. Some of us have accumulated so many psychological injuries that we've begun sliding down the perilous path of becoming unsafe people – incapable of true connection. But how did we lose our safety? The key message here is: Your past experiences can contribute to unsafe characteristics in your personality. There are four things that are destructive to safety: envy, the erroneous notion we're self-sufficient, entitlement, and transgression against God's laws. Envy is the result of coveting what others have and trying to equate those missing elements with love, rather than focusing on the giving and receiving of love itself. If we don't appreciate what we have or don't appreciate what others do for us because we think that we're too self-sufficient to rely on someone else, we're denying our emotional need for connection. Suffering as a result of hurts that have been inflicted on us by others, can cause us to exhibit unsafe behavior. For example, let's say you've been involved with someone who's inconsistent with you, frequently criticizes you, and finally abandons the relationship. This could result in you becoming withdrawn and adopting an attitude of defensive devaluation, saying "ah, love sucks anyway," which can result in long-term loss of joy and meaning in your life. A sense of entitlement might lead us to think we don't need the security that God's laws provide. This kind of thinking is one step away from deciding that we don't need anyone at all. Although we're taught to be self-sufficient, relational self-sufficiency isn't necessarily positive. Because, as human beings, we need each other. People who think they don't need love and are unable to express the need for comfort and support begin to accept isolation and do without true relationships. Whatever the source of the problem, refusing to reach out to others might be the ultimate unsafe behavior and a flagrant violation of God's love.

Close, safe relationships can make you healthier, while unsafe ones can make you physically ill.

Decades ago, tight-knit Italian immigrant families settled in Roseto, Pennsylvania. And their close relationships lasted generations. Between the 1930s and 1980s, the town caught the interest of researchers. They noticed that the residents lived an unusually

long life, despite having the same diet and lifestyle as the rest of the United States. But, when the town was studied again in the 1990s, many old families had moved, the new families weren't as close, and the life expectancy had declined to match the rest of the country. Turns out, close relationships actually helped the people of Roseto live longer. The key message here is: Close, safe relationships can make you healthier, while unsafe ones can make you physically ill. Do you have the Monday blues every day? Do you lack the energy to tackle your to-do list? The answer may lie in your social circle. Being around the wrong people can drain you mentally and spiritually, which can lead to physical issues such as headaches and backaches, digestive problems, lack of immunity, weight gain, and even cancer, all of which have been connected to mental health. So how can you tell if you're attracting the right people? One way is by taking a relationship inventory using both emotion and reason and keeping your values at the forefront. Are you doing all the giving or is there a good balance of give and take? Can you open up to the people in your life, see others as a source of support, and be intimate and vulnerable? Look for patterns: Do you avoid people because of your fear of confrontation? Do you romanticize people and see them as perfect? Do you feel a constant need to rescue others, or are you the one who can't make a decision? Sometimes, it's difficult to see unsafe behaviors in others and yourself. It can be tempting to hold on to an unsafe relationship, hoping things will improve. Another temptation is the merger wish, where you feel like another person will complete you because they have everything you lack. But don't let optimism get in the way of observing the patterns that guide your relationships with others. If a relationship is harming you, don't let fear of abandonment get in the way of confrontation, and if necessary, a clean break.

Bringing safe people into your life can help you develop safe and healthy relationships.

Let's do a little exercise. Rewind the reel of your life until you come to a time when you hurt someone. Pause there. Have you always felt a lingering regret for the way you behaved? Let's say you pick up the phone, call that person, and sincerely express your regret. Now, imagine that she tells you that she forgave you years ago. Can you imagine the relief? A whole-hearted act of forgiveness is one of the godliest acts a person can commit. When someone forgives you and accepts you with love despite your actions, that tells you they're exactly the type of safe person you want in your life. The key message here is: Bringing safe people into your life can help you develop safe and healthy relationships. We all want someone who accepts us, helps us grow, and makes us better. Safe people acknowledge that spiritual life isn't just a relationship with God but involves authentic relationships with each other. Relationships fuel us, teach us boundaries, heal us, and root us. Church, friendships, and support groups are all good places to find safe people. Here are six tips you can follow to create safe relationships: First, ask for help. This teaches you humility, shows you your needs, forces you to take initiative, and gives you an avenue to show grace. It might also get you the help you need! Second, acknowledge your needs but remain authentic to who you are. If you don't like too many hugs, for example, don't try and suddenly become physically demonstrative. Third, rebel against yourself! Identify and figure out why you're resisting closeness, then do the opposite. The fourth step might sound a little scary: Ask for truth from others about yourself. You might not always like to hear it, but the truth

can lead to love. The fifth step is two-pronged: Learn to give and receive forgiveness. Don't just say sorry - really empathize and admit fault without making excuses. When you accept forgiveness properly from a safe person, it's truly liberating. And this brings us to the final step. Once you've learned to take from safe people, you can start giving back. Seek out places and people in your community where you can take and receive safety. Read others' need signals; ask how you can help. Be present, listen, and tell the truth.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: True closeness with safe people can transform your life and bring you closer to God. Recognizing the characteristics of safe and unsafe people, in yourself as well as in others, can help you live a happier, healthier, and more Christian life. And here's some more actionable advice: Get rid of guilt trips. Does a particular friend make you feel guilty all the time? If so, ask yourself why you take the bait. Why do you hang off that "guilt hook" every time she dangles it? Ask yourself: am I at fault? If the answer is yes, fix the problem by changing your behavior. If the answer is no, then ask yourself why you feel guilty for no reason and fix the cause of that in yourself instead.