

Things I Have Learned From Being in Unhealthy Connection

Most of the world is drowning in unhealthy relationship dynamics that make it incredibly challenging to stay in integrity. It requires courage from people who have integrity to shake this up.

I have gone through a huge process with this over the last decade and people who I have helped to do the same in their lives have said it has been paradigm-shifting. Here are some things I have learned from this process.

Navigating Relationship Challenges from the Heart States

When you are connected to the heart there is a background sense of benevolence, a desire for wellbeing, and care for self and other. Being open-hearted gets more challenging in connection with other's people's unprocessed shadows but it's possible. Here are how the heart states show up:

1. **Compassion:** inviting in challenging feelings from both sides to transform the connection; respecting the limits of a connection without blame
2. **Joy:** Appreciating the full potential and quirks of yourself, others and relationship dynamics; making space for wholeness from a place of your own fundamental connectedness
3. **Loving kindness:** saying the hard thing from a place of care and being willing to listen to feedback; not blaming people when things don't work out how you want
4. **Equanimity and inclusion:** Allowing space for the realness of a situation to show itself, without trying to manipulate it to be something it's not; actively making space for exiles

It's important to include these more holistic ways of relating from the heart if you want spiritual practice or connection to be grounded in realness and wholeness rather than being aspirational and idealistic.

Being in healthy interdependence, which is a core spiritual quality, requires maturing out of codependence and is quite a complex and challenging thing for people to do in connection with each other. I would like to write about the conditions that help support this. For now, here are the things I've learned from where this has failed.

What I Have Learned

Originally written as notes to myself that have been lightly edited for a wider audience.

What Healthy Interdependence Looks Like

1. Healthy interdependence looks like meaningful, nourishing human connection where the whole of you can be present, where you feel appreciated for who you are and where you appreciate the other person for who they are, including the quirks of all this. And being able to have healthy boundaries where this isn't naturally present.
2. Humility is a core quality that allows for this that most people don't naturally have a lot of.
3. Small steps and changes add up over a long period of time. Look for people where there is a genuine mutual sense of support towards each other's individuation journeys and any shared purpose you have.
4. In a healthy connection there is space for individuation even if it risks people growing apart.
5. 'You can be yourself' is one of the most healing messages someone can receive. In interdependence this naturally flows both ways.
6. You can make this explicit in connections and also do a practice with people where you both send it further back in time to each other at times when it was harder to see or feel.
7. Healthy self esteem wants you and others to be happy.
8. The underlying dynamic of a relationship and the essence of how you feel when you are hanging out with someone in person, doesn't often change that much. Energy speaks for itself.
9. Different relationships have different levels of trust, which are a natural expression of the closeness of the connection. You don't need to overwrite or force this to be more than it is.
10. Desiring really deep trust with and integrity from the people you want to be closest to is totally valid.
11. Intimacy is really scary for a lot of people. Don't rush people into it. It can be helpful to connect to a sense of innocence together.
12. Being entangled in unhealthy relationship dynamics exists around a gestalt of distrust, and finding natural trust in yourself, in your body, in your own sense making is the route to healthy connection.

Signs of Manipulation

13. Jumping to conclusions and things feeling urgent is a sign of acting from trauma. If a relationship has signs of manipulation, take time to feel into it, notice what is present and process which parts belong to you.
14. Don't use this as an excuse to not address things. Often to get unstuck you just have to say the difficult thing and see what happens.
15. You generally either want to be in connection with someone or you don't (and vice versa) and you'll feel that in your body and your heart. The feeling of being very torn or wanting to overwrite parts of yourself in some way, can be a red flag.
16. Being clear about people's intentions up front makes things easy. Anything that is important to you that you feel you can't say, for whatever reason, is likely to fester under the surface.
17. It's worth recognising that people who are sincere tend to project their sincerity onto others, and people who are performative tend to project their performativity onto others. It's a bit like entirely different realities with different rules that run adjacent to each other and aren't always visible to each other.
18. People often want the parts of you that benefit them without including the parts of you that are important to you. This may seem harmless but it causes you to fracture yourself and damages your self-esteem more than you realise at the time.
19. If someone is committed to not having a conversation with you about a certain topic, it doesn't matter how you bring it up. Unless you stage a full-scale intervention people can pretty easily avoid what they don't want to discuss. If people are willing to engage with you on something, you will feel it in their energy.
20. It is not a healthy environment in which a person who is telling the truth from a whole-hearted place is made out to be bad for doing that.
21. Dishonesty is always covering a shadow of some kind.
22. If things feel murky and unpindownable, that means there's some kind of manipulation.
23. If you feel that anything vulnerable you share will be used against you in some subtle way, that's not a very healthy connection.
24. The feeling of guilt in a connection is a sign that something is not flowing freely.
25. Notice if there is a feeling of constant background power struggle with someone. What are they trying to stop you from having or being?
26. Is everything that is a win for you seen as a loss for them? Are you constantly having to protect or uphold their ego?

27. Some people are committed to misunderstanding you, this usually says as much about them as you and you don't want to get stuck in a loop of desperation around trying to convince them of something or waiting for them to see you. This feeling itself is a red flag.
28. Some people are terrified of you having an experience or holding a perspective that exists outside of their frame, even when you're not trying to impose your frame.
29. The same people also generally can't bear to be in disagreement or have different perspectives from other people because it threatens their sense of control. They will say things like, "I think we have the same perspective underneath," when you feel like you don't.
30. Do you have the feeling that lots of things you think, feel, and experience are off limits to share in a sincere way?
31. Do you feel that when you share things that are important to you the other person engages with them in a meaningful way, at least some of the time? Or do they usually subtly shut you down or distort what you're saying?
32. How much are you filtering your truth when you're around someone? On a scale of 1 - 10 how much of you do you feel you need to leave out?
33. Feeling confused in a connection is usually a sign of some kind of frame control that is going on somewhere.
34. Notice if you feel drained after spending time with someone. See if you can stay in your body when you're around them and notice what that feels like.
35. When people see you or others as either 'with them or against them', that's a sign of narcissism happening somewhere in the gestalt.
36. Most people care more about protecting their status and social safety than integrity, honesty or truth.
37. Most human connections are messy and complicated and require time and space to unravel.
38. Don't use this as an excuse to not look at the challenges that are present in a connection. It can be hard to look at how much shadow is hidden in some relationships.
39. This includes that some shadows can't be faced, especially with people with cluster B personality disorders.
40. Compassion isn't about unconditional acceptance of poor treatment from people who are traumatised. It's recognising that most people are doing their best and then adjusting your boundaries to match the reality of a connection, without blaming others for their behaviour or taking on responsibility for their needs.

41. There are some relational shadows that you will spend the rest of your life living underneath if you aren't willing to break out of them. This restricts your life force and who you feel you have permission to be, not just in that connection but across your entire way of being.
42. The continuous feeling of being 'just around the corner' from something that is going to dramatically change things for the better in a connection is actually a red flag that you're dealing with someone who is either manipulating you or incompatible with you in a way that you can't see yet.
43. People seducing you into a reality is one of the most common types of manipulation. It can feel great but if it feels like a fairy tale in some way, it probably isn't.
44. Lots of continual drama that always needs to be processed with other people is the sign of an unhealthy connection.

Cluster B Personality Disorders

These traits happen under the surface and are different from the image that is being presented. To spot them, you need to be able to notice what is happening, rather than the person's narrative about what is happening.

Having some of these traits some of the time doesn't mean someone has a personality disorder, but it's definitely worth recognising if someone is just enacting these behaviours all the time with no level of self-reflection or intention to change.

45. Self energy is mostly exiled. Anything shared from realness is seen as a threat and will trigger control, avoidance or anger.
46. They can never just be present and enjoy things. Something is always wrong.
47. There is a continual stream of drama.
48. There is a big disconnect between what is felt inside and what is presented outside.
49. They can't do wholeness. Fake concern and saying things that sound caring or supportive are often used to avoid intimacy with wholeness and what's real.
50. Everything is a strategy. Even sincerity or vulnerability is used as a way of getting what they want.
51. People who have a closed heart don't really have the layer for implicit learning or feeling impact. You get a strange uncanny valley feeling of people just going through the motions and not really caring about the real impact of things. They think that saying the words is equal to doing the thing.

52. People with a closed heart don't care what impact they're having, they just care what people think about them, so their entire personality is a perception control management system.
53. They're bad at setting boundaries with other people and often get angry or petulant with others.
54. They don't care about the truth, they care about not looking or feeling bad.
55. They are often drawn to things that sound or look impressive on the surface and aren't concerned with the substance behind it, or what it takes to do it well.
56. They see other people as resources. They can't see you as a whole person and they get angry, disappointed in a condescending way or guilt you when you don't behave in the way that serves them.
57. They will make everything about them. They rarely ask you genuine questions or care about your reality.
58. If they feel like they can't be in control they will often disappear.
59. They will avoid relational practices or containers where they can't get away with being in control or playing power games.
60. They can be incredibly heartfelt and charismatic when it works in their favour and can also have a very high capacity for seeing you and connecting with you when they want to, which can make it really hard to leave.
61. They are seductive and get very good at this, whether it's sexually, intellectually, materially, spiritually or something else.
62. They use the implicit threat of narcissistic anger to control you and stop you from doing things they don't want you to do. This can be passive aggressive. You often feel like you are walking on eggshells around them.
63. They have a side of them that seems really young in a very fragile, vulnerable way, as if they are a child and in need of special treatment that protects them from being held accountable.
64. They pull on a sense of duty in others to create codependency and subservience.
65. They can dress control up as ethics, loyalty, moral superiority, and all sorts of things.
66. They will never update their self-view with anything negative or challenging.
67. They will do whatever it takes to avoid facing shadows in themselves. Don't underestimate what 'whatever it takes' means.
68. They will find a scapegoat to put all the bad things onto to avoid having to take any accountability.

69. When you stop being able to be controlled, there is a big risk that a person with an antisocial personality disorder will turn people against you by telling lies about you and picking out the thing they know they can get away with saying that will most damage your reputation.
70. They never give you a sense of closure.

Tools for Self-Reflection and Development

71. Often you fall for the manipulations in someone else that are the things you need to validate in yourself or give yourself grace around. What are you attracted to and why? How could this be an expression of your inner reality?
72. If you are drawn to someone, imagine being in their experience. What about it feels good or exciting? What feels shadowy or challenging for you to imagine being?
73. Don't jump to conclusions when you encounter a shadow, take time to explore the depths of what is yours to feel and what someone is trying to get you to take on.
74. If you are stuck in a connection out of guilt or fear, breaking out of codependency requires you to be brave. You've often got to feel something that you're exiling that's hard to feel or that you don't think you're allowed to feel.
75. Not having the resources to be independent exacerbates emotional codependency. What resources do you need to feel secure enough to be independent in this connection and to be honest with yourself about your own feelings rather than entangled in other people's.
76. If you struggle to set boundaries and fuse with people a lot, imagine a bubble around your reality that disconnects you from everyone else, your reality is totally different to everyone else's and that's safe to be and feel. What does it feel like to be you? What's in your bubble?
77. If you struggle to open up and connect with people, imagine a benevolent heart network that already connects you to all beings and that's safe and nourishing to feel. What does that feel like? How does it feel to be part of something bigger?
78. Honesty in connection means starting where you are. If you don't know where that is yet, you can start by sharing that. Look for something that feels real in your body.
79. If you're struggling to be real in connection, find a safe space to let yourself say out loud the first things that come to your mind. Or write them down. Sometimes you have to let the dirty water flow out of the tap first before you can sense what is real.

80. Be honest, if only with yourself, about how interacting with someone makes you feel. Write down how someone makes you feel without jumping to any conclusions about whether it's good or bad.
81. Can you parody the truth of the situation in a light hearted way? Where you represent all the issues at hand, without getting caught in the heaviness? This can be good for getting perspective.
82. Strong judgements are usually covering strong feelings that you are afraid of feeling, which could be either positive or negative. Take some time to be with the feelings in the body and see what happens when you stay connected at that level.
83. If you're at an important junction point with someone and you feel like you can't hold everything that you're carrying and you can't express your truth in a sane, grounded way yet, then you can just share that or ask for the time you need.
84. If you have the feeling that someone is playing games, take a step back and see if they come towards you in a genuine way.
85. Being willing to feel hurt and disappointed without blaming anyone is what allows you to honour freedom in connection.
86. What's the bad thing you're trying to avoid? Could you hold it if this was true? Can you entertain that the opposite could be true?
87. Desiring perfection is another form of narcissism to avoid feeling your own vulnerability and discomfort.
88. When someone's actions cause a strong reaction in you, as the first step, find some time in private to name or write down the feeling you get.
89. You already know when someone is unhealthy to be in connection with in some way, it's just often really hard to look at it.
90. A friendship style of safety is more real and healthy than a 'perfect parent' style safety. Friendship safety encourages you to be yourself and supports you to take risks, but doesn't promise to protect you from accountability or everything that is hard.
91. When someone wants 'perfect parent' levels of safety from you it's a red flag. I've noticed narcissists often use the phrase, 'you're not attuning to me' to guilt people they are in relationship with.
92. All adult human relationships are optional.
93. Mystical connections go deeper than this and are sometimes forcing you to dig deep and integrate something you wouldn't normally have to. This is about looking inside yourself rather than changing the other person or getting something from them.

94. Humans tend to be so entrenched in their views, they can't imagine that you exist outside of them and essentially block this information out even if you put it right in front of them. It's frustrating but it's just a fact of life and you also experience this.
95. Being in connection with the mystery is a really powerful counterforce to narcissism.

Healthy Boundaries

96. Being willing to lose a relationship, and either leaving or letting someone else leave without social punishment, is one of the foundations of a healthy connection.
97. Don't expect people who've never really shown up for you to suddenly start showing up for you, especially if you have asked them.
98. If someone isn't showing up for you in a way that feels good, you may be able to come up with a different way to ask people to connect with you or treat you that is good for both of you. This requires you being able to let go of the original need or desire.
99. A sign of healthy boundaries is that you can feel your body and also feel connected to someone at the same time.
100. A sign of unhealthy boundaries is that this feels so bad that you never want to do that.
101. People who care about you will care about how they make you feel.
102. Unless they are transgressing some clear ethical boundary, people aren't obligated to care about you.
103. If you have never had your needs met, it's very hard to know what a healthy boundary feels like.
104. Healthy boundaries are about alignment. Can each person express their natural yeses and nos, and allow the boundaries to fall where they naturally fall?
105. This is rarely 100% possible. Can you name the compromises you are making or are you hiding some things even from yourself? If this feels unclear, take some time to write down your yeses (what you ideally want), nos, and compromises that are present in connection with someone.
106. If you're confused about what someone wants you could ask someone to do this about their connection with you and to share it with you.
107. Relationship boundaries are not about blame, control or justice.
108. Some organisational or societal boundaries are about justice. Be clear with yourself about if there has been a boundary crossing that goes into this territory.

109. Healthy relationship boundaries are living, breathing, adaptable expressions of truth, rather than rigid rules. Healthy boundaries can flex to accommodate new information.
110. Boundaries, or your natural yeses and nos, are communicated on an implicit level before they become words. While this can require a lot of clarification and negotiation, someone pretending that they don't give or get those implicit messages at all can be a subtle form of gaslighting.
111. Boundary crossing is about trying to force people to do things they don't want to do or purposefully withholding things they need.
112. Things you need can include more ineffable things like respect, spaciousness, understanding, honesty, or to be seen for who you are. It can also include very practical resources.
113. You don't always know the thing you really need. What you think you need is often a trauma response if you aren't very used to getting your actual needs met.
114. Asking for what you need doesn't mean that someone is going to meet it. The boundary might reveal incompatibility and that's ok. It's better to know so that you can move on.
115. Asking for what you want or need from someone with a cluster B personality disorder is not going to get an honest response. They are likely to say whatever you want to hear to get you to do what they want.
116. Cluster B personality disorders are also likely to nit pick how or why you set boundaries to try and undermine your self-esteem.
117. Sometimes if there's a specific thing you need that will put you in conflict with a cluster B personality (and will therefore trigger all their anger and reactivity), it's worth picking your battle and doing what it takes from a place of integrity. Have very clear goals about the specifics of the thing you want or need. Make sure it doesn't include them changing who they are. Be willing to accept your fate of whether you succeed at this or not with grace. This will avoid you getting sucked into endless drama triangles.

Having Productive Arguments

118. A good argument can be one of the best things for clearing the air if you can focus on expressing how you feel and your desires, rather than judgements about or demands of the other person.
119. One of anger's powers is that it can force past the limits of fear, so that the suppressed truth can come out. This isn't always reasonable or tidy when it first emerges.
120. New information has the potential to radically reshape a connection. If you can hold that possibility without panicking during an argument it creates more space for honesty to come through.
121. Understanding arguments as an opportunity for the truth to come out in surprising and intense ways on all sides is one of things that makes them more productive.
122. Healthy conflict requires people to have a decent sense of Self, the capacity to take accountability, and the ability to include shadows without getting stuck in blaming or belittling people. It's a high bar that most people aren't capable of.
123. Being able to share your side from a vulnerable place without blaming while maintaining a regulated nervous system is one of the skills that will help you minimise the chance of a messy argument, without bypassing important truths.

Worldviews

124. People typically care most about one of three things — themselves, belonging or integrity — and this will shape their entire worldview.
125. If they care most about themselves they will naturally go into the drama triangle and Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim & Offender (DARVO) when there is any conflict.
126. If someone cares most about belonging they will go into us vs them.
127. In these situations, holding people accountable for their actions will probably backlash against you.
128. Some percent of people can learn to grow a greater sense of concern if it is modelled to them in a healthy way.
129. A healthy worldview allows problems to be looked at in the middle, without people trying to control the outcomes. There is rarely the capacity in a group of people to do this in a straightforward way. People need a lot of space-holding and coaching.
130. People who are always trying to be in control tend to think that if they aren't in control, someone else is. They don't have the embodied imprint of being in open connection with others.
131. Lots of people are compulsive liars, performers or attention seekers because they have never experienced wholeness and are just doing anything to avoid being in their heart and feeling bad.
132. Some people want to drop this and move towards something more real and some people don't.
133. Some people believe their own lies because it would be too painful or vulnerable for them to acknowledge the truth to themselves. They will also desperately want you to believe their lies and see it as threatening if you don't.
134. Spending too much time around people with narcissistic worldviews will make you feel crazy.
135. Holding people with power to account is a thorny issue that takes a long time and is usually a huge collective effort.
136. Building a better way of doing things can be more effective.
137. Needing other people to 'heal' or change to make yourself feel more comfortable is another form of control.
138. You're allowed to set the boundaries you want and to disappoint people.
139. Forgiveness practice towards self, other and world allows you to let go of the need for perfection. There's normally some grief hidden underneath this.

Some Final Notes on Narcissism

Narcissism isn't always bad. [Narcissistic leaders can be beneficial for people](#), especially when the follower is on the [uphill phase of their journey](#). And hierarchies and power structures often create social safety and positive impact.

It's mainly problematic when the narcissist is trapping people in connection with them in some way rather than being a step on people's journey. I have written more about [how subtle narcissism can be present, specifically in spiritual settings here](#).

The core dynamic of narcissism is that status masks the truth. This plays out differently in different contexts, and I find it helpful to look at this through the lens of [spiral dynamics](#). Here are some quick example summaries of narcissism at the different levels:

- a. Red, "The strongest person is in control. What they say, goes"
- b. Amber, "Don't ever question the authority of the person who is senior to you in the hierarchy"
- c. Orange, "I'm the best", or, "this person who I have a special connection with is the best"
- d. Green, "We have the best way of being," and, "no one is allowed to be special or different because we have found the best possible way that everyone should be"

Narcissists will have a way of punishing people who don't accept their frame and defer to their power, essentially shutting down the things that don't serve the narcissist or fit within their frame. The punishment also tends to match the stage of development. For example, in red it tends to be aggressive, whereas in green it tends to be about subtle social punishment.

People can get CPTSD from being stuck in connection with narcissists for a long time when their sense of survival depended upon it. They will have internalised the punishment messages. This can take some deep therapy or support to unravel and is about moving towards healthy connection rather than being a victim, blaming others, or avoiding accountability.

Narcissism also creates a black hole that will endlessly suck up more attention, power, goodwill, resources, or whatever the thing they want is and the black hole will never be satisfied.

Some Resources That Originally Helped Me With These Topics

[Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most](#)

[The One Minute Manager](#)

[Braving the Wilderness](#) and [other Brene Brown content](#)

[Dr Ramani's](#) YouTube about narcissism

[Reich's personality types](#) (inspired type) and [Laurence Heller's Survival Styles](#) (trust style)

[Quotes, illustrations and diagrams](#)

Working with a therapist through childhood trauma

An enormous amount of embodied shadow work

Working with lots of people to help them navigate these dynamics and incorporating their insight, experiences and feedback

Thanks to Jane Miller for feedback on this document.