

These 4 Behaviors Make Your Family Relationships Toxic

A half-hour drive northwest of Boston is a small town called Woburn. In the 1960s, water began to grow scarce there, so city officials decided to drill two new wells in the east side of town, which was predominantly industrial. They did so despite warnings that the water would be poor quality. Almost immediately, the residents of East Woburn complained that the water not only tasted bad but smelled bad as well. Tragically, the water was toxic resulting in a number of residents, mostly children, being diagnosed with leukemia. The issue led to multimillion-dollar lawsuits by the families against the companies: W.R. Grace, Beatrice Foods and Unifirst Corp. The suits gained national attention. Eventually, a bestselling book called *A Civil Action* was written and a movie was made with the same title.

The sad reality is that these families thought they were getting something healthful and were instead ingesting something toxic. When it comes to our families, particularly children, we are in a position of strong influence. Our loved ones look to us to provide a nurturing, healthy and life-giving environment. We have the opportunity to be like fresh water or its opposite. Knowing the unhealthy behaviors and attitudes that make relationships toxic is the first step to cleaning things up. Here are four behaviors that lead to a toxic family.

1. Stick with the status quo, even if it's bad.

One of my favorite movies is *Pay It Forward*. In it the main character, a middle-school boy named Trevor says these words. "I think people are too scared or something to think things can be different. I guess it's hard for people that get so used to things the way they are, even if they're bad, to

change—and they kind of give up. And when they do—everyone—they kind of lose.”

If things are consistently bad, something is wrong with the cycle, and it has to be changed. Too many families fall back into the same dysfunction because it has become comfortable. You can't change other people, but you can change how you respond to them. Be prepared, though. When you respond in a way that is outside of the norm, they will try hard to get you to fall back in line. If they get under your skin and you respond by being unfazed, they will get more extreme. Stay focused and continue to break the cycle.

2. Blame as much as possible.

The people who have the healthiest relationships, deepest maturity and are the most self-assured tend to be quick in accepting responsibility. Even when they are one percent wrong and the other person is 99 percent wrong, they will take responsibility for their one percent first. Then they address the other person's errors. At the same time, people who blame often experience stagnated growth and a graveyard of former relationships. Take the lead by modeling what it looks like to be a person who accepts responsibility for wrongdoing, no matter what percentage is yours to own.

3. Hold grudges and don't forgive—or at least be slow to do so.

It may feel good, even right at times, but, in the end, it's relational poison. Holding onto grudges and anger is like inviting a couple of wild animals to live in your house. They are there, waiting, hoping to cause you to overreact to something minimal and create lasting strife and damage. The reward is a lower quality of life and a lot of energy spent. Forgive and let it go.

4. As much as possible, stay away from direct communication.

This includes triangulating, being passive-aggressive and being silent on a problem that needs confronting. Triangulating is when person A has a problem with person B. However, instead of talking to person B directly about it, person A just goes to person C and badmouths person B. It's a good way to promote dissension and bitterness. Being passive-aggressive is a tactic of undermining while posturing a position of understanding. All it produces is frustration, distrust and isolation. Finally, when there are relational problems that go uncontested, it causes the rift to become wider. Bad feelings get deeper. Good communication solves a world of problems.

What are some other behaviors and attitudes that lead to toxic family relationships? {eoa}

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This article originally appeared at .