



CORD OF 3

TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS GUIDE



CORD OF 3

Center for Training and Discipleship

TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS GUIDE

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CONTENTS

Identifying Toxic Relationships

Case Study	5
Relationship Inventory	6
Toxic Types	7
Subtle Signs of Toxic Relationships	8
Reflection	9
Toxic Relationship Chains	10
What are Your Signs of Toxic Stress?	11
Getting Along	13

Setting Boundaries

Weak and Strong Boundaries	14
Healthy and Unhealthy Boundaries	16
When Jesus Set Boundaries	18
Boundaries in Context	19
Reflection	20

Communication

Reflection	21
Communication Formula	22
Giving Up Control	24
Creating Choices	25
Boundaries for Toxic Types	26
A Word on Church Discipline	27

Resources

32



ABOUT CORD OF 3

Cord of Three is a professional mental health counseling agency offering comprehensive Christian clinical services. Our team of professional, experienced therapists works with families and individuals of all ages and backgrounds.

It is our belief that the best counseling is not based on steps or techniques in search of answers, but a process that helps identify where lies and false beliefs have dictated our choices and emotional responses to life events.

Our therapists, then, create a therapeutic process built on truth as defined by God, and walk alongside our clients in their emotional brokenness.





Identifying Toxic Relationships



Case Study

Jan was fighting back tears, but she let one fall down her cheek as she shoved her phone back into her purse. Her sister Lisa had just hung up on her for the third time this morning, but not before unleashing a tirade for what she called “jumping ship” last weekend. Jan had asked Lisa to finish up some housework at their mother’s house because her son needed her help at home. Jan and Lisa had spent all day pruning shrubs, scrubbing baseboards, polishing a hundred little knickknacks their mother had collected over the years. She was unable to do these things for herself, and her housekeepers kept quitting on her. So Jan and Lisa visited once a month to tidy up.

“You left me there to take that abuse by myself just because your son couldn’t manage to heat up some leftovers for super? He is twenty-seven years old. He can fend for himself. Meanwhile I had to rewash mom’s coffee mug four times because she swore up and down she could still see some dirt in the bottom. She doesn’t even drink coffee! You know she’s worse on me when you’re not there.” Jan recalled Lisa’s heated shouting on the phone. Maybe she had a point, Jan thought. When she had gotten home, her son John was on the couch playing an online game. She wondered if he had even moved since she left that morning. It was dinner time, but had he even eaten lunch? She noticed a few fast-food bags on the floor by John’s feet. “Did you girlfriend bring you some lunch, honey?” she asked. “Yeah,” John replied. “She quit her job today because of some drama. I don’t know, but she had some free time so she brought me food.”

That was last weekend. Since then, John’s girlfriend had somehow convinced Jan to let her move in for a little while until she could find her own place. Jan felt so sorry for her. That girl was always fighting with her parents, who had grown tired of her jumping from job to job. Was it her fault that all her bosses were jerks? The only time she seemed happy was when she was with John. “It’s only for a month,” Jan thought. Besides, it was nice to have another person around while her husband was on the road. She was a little concerned, though, that Karen, her neighbor, would have a fit if she figured out that John’s girlfriend was staying so many nights with them. Jan ran inside anytime she saw Karen walking up the driveway. Regardless, Karen would knock on the door and let her know every sinful thing she had observed that week. She could hear it now: “Jan, Sweetie, you’ve done the best you can to raise that boy right, bless your heart. I know Richard doesn’t make enough money for you to stay at home like God wants us mothers to do, so I can’t fault you if your boy acts out every now and then. But this is pure out wrong! They ought not to be living together before getting married, and under your roof of all places! Can you imagine what Sandra out at the Junior League is going to say about it? Everybody will know by Sunday!”

“Let them find out,” Jan imagined she would say resolutely, as if she could be so calm. Probably she would just cry and Karen would excuse herself. Any sign of emotion made her uncomfortable.

Jan was snapped out of her imagined conversation by a slammed door and stomping feet. “I’m quitting band!” Her youngest son announced his presence. He was home from school. “Mr. Dawson hates me, so they won’t miss me anyway.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s not true, honey,” Jan started. She noticed her phone lighting up on the counter. “One fire at a time,” she said softly to herself as she pulled out a pan to get started on dinner.



Are You in a Toxic Relationship?

Read the following questions and think about all the relationships you experience, both formal and informal, private and public, personal and impersonal.

Do you feel anxious when you see a particular name pop up on your phone?	YES or NO
Can you think of a relationship that drains you of energy and excitement?	YES or NO
Do you feel dread when you see a particular person?	YES or NO
Do you have a relationship in which you give more than you get?	YES or NO
Do you find yourself feeling insecure or second-guessing after you talk to a particular person?	YES or NO
Do you become more critical of yourself around certain people?	YES or NO
Does the thought of interacting with a particular person hinder your mental clarity or productivity?	YES or NO
Do you engage in unhealthy coping habits such as unnecessary eating, hair-pulling, etc, after interacting with a particular person?	YES or NO
Do you imagine or re-live conversations or arguments with a particular person?	YES or NO
Have you experienced more health problems since meeting or interacting with a particular person?	YES or NO
Do you feel resentful that a particular person treats others better than you?	YES or NO
Do you feel singled out for criticism or bullied by a particular person?	YES or NO
Have you considered avoidance behaviors such as quitting a job or changing your schedule in order to dodge a particular person?	YES or NO
Do you become more irritable around people you love after interacting with a particular person?	YES or NO
Do you feel discouraged by efforts to improve your relationship with a particular person?	YES or NO

If you circled YES for more than 10 questions, you have at least one toxic relationship in your life!

Adapted from High Maintenance Relationships by Les Parrott III, PhD 1996



Toxic Types

Martyr

They don't want to hear about your problems; theirs are worse. You unintentionally hurt them all the time, but you don't usually hear about it until much later.

Critical Controller

They always have something for you to do, and they have all the answers. But even if you do exactly what they say, you somehow got something wrong.

Motor Mouth

Nothing is sacred to them. They'll gossip to you, and they'll gossip about you. You'll feel so special when they share others' secrets with you, but you're not their only listening ear.

Perpetual Pessimist

Everything is terrible! You walk away from conversations feeling like all hope is lost. You'll go breathless trying to cheer them up.

Ghost

They're here one minute and gone the next. Maybe they're working their life away and only check in during holidays or emergencies. Maybe they're on the couch watching TV, reading your texts, and not responding to them. Who knows?

Tornado

No drama is ever small. Sometimes you can see it coming; sometimes you can't. Regardless, there is going to be chaos, and you will be left to pick up the pieces.

Steam Roller

They're not exactly mean. They're just totally oblivious to how anyone else feels or thinks. They will cut you down and have no clue they've done it. You won't hear them trying to lift your spirits very often.

Mooch

They're all take and no give. Maybe they're appreciative of what you have to offer, but they're not adding anything to the relationship except more expectations.



Subtle Signs of Toxic Relationships



Feeling hyper-critical or hyper-defensive just before, during or right after an encounter.

Physical signs of stress such as jaw-clenching, muscle tension, unsettled stomach, headache, sweating, shallow breathing, increased heart rate, etc.

Avoidance behaviors such as ignoring or delaying phone calls and texts, cancelling appointments, sending other people to take your place.

Instant hostility either internally or externally during interactions.

Constantly thinking about interactions that have happened or are about to happen.

Frequent fear of losing the relationship or doing something wrong.

Not being sure where you stand.





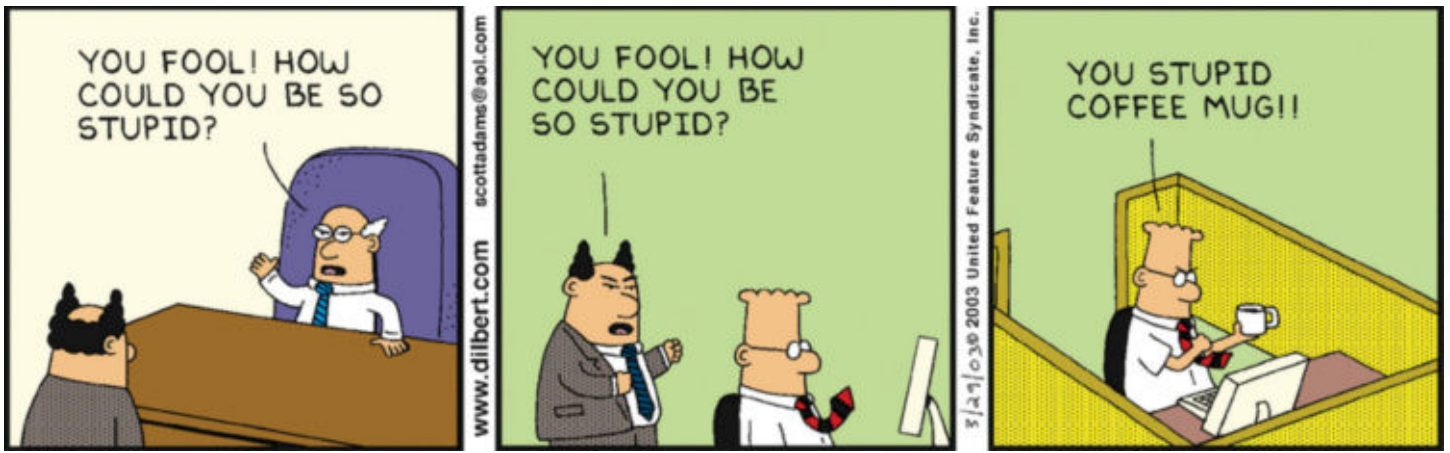
Reflection

Did you find your answers to the survey surprising? Why or why not?

Which toxic type(s) do you see the most in your life?

Have you been the toxic person in a relationship? If so, which one do you tend to be?





A Few Toxic Relationship Chains

Boss > You > Wife/Husband

Supervisor > You > Employees

Mother > You > Husband/Wife

Husband/Wife > You > Kids

Friends > You > Husband/Wife

Adult Kids > You > Husband/Wife

Reflection

Is anyone affected by the trickle-down effects of toxic relationships in your life? How so?

How are you affected by others' toxic relationships?



Who is Affected by Your Toxic Relationship?

- ☐ Spouse
- ☐ Kids
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Co-workers
- ☐ Employees
- ☐ Students
- ☐ My Internal Thoughts & Feelings

What is Affected by Your Toxic Relationship?

- ☐ My Time
- ☐ My Money
- ☐ My Attention
- ☐ My School/Work Performance
- ☐ My Other Relationships
- ☐ My Spiritual Health
- ☐ My Emotional Health
- ☐ My Mental Health



What Are Your Signs of Toxic Relationship Stress?

Biological

- ☐ Muscle Tension
- ☐ Shortness of Breath
- ☐ Clenched Jaw
- ☐ Hair Pulling
- ☐ Headache
- ☐ Skin Picking/
Nail Biting
- ☐ Nausea/
Upset Stomach
- ☐ Over-eating/
Under-eating
- ☐ Chest Pain/
Rapid Heartbeat
- ☐ Exhaustion

Social

- ☐ Zoning Out
- ☐ People-Pleasing
- ☐ Being Hyper-Critical
- ☐ Fear of Others
- ☐ Aggression/
Short Temper
- ☐ Constant Fighting
- ☐ Avoidance Behaviors
- ☐ Passive Aggression

Psychological

- ☐ Feeling Worthless
- ☐ Self-doubt/
Low Self Esteem
- ☐ Feeling Numb
- ☐ Ruminating/
Rehearsing
- ☐ Worrying
- ☐ Losing Track of Time
- ☐ Crying Spells
- ☐ Anxiety

Spiritual

- ☐ Hopelessness
- ☐ Shortness of Breath
- ☐ Lack of Faith
- ☐ Hair Pulling
- ☐ Service Burn-out
- ☐ Skin Picking/
Nail Biting
- ☐ Salvation Anxiety
- ☐ Over-eating/
Under-eating
- ☐ Guilt/Shame
- ☐ Exhaustion





“

If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

-Romans 12:18

Getting Along

Scripture speaks a lot about getting along with each other, loving one another, and meeting each other's needs. Because of this, we can make the mistake of letting people take advantage of us. This does more than just make us angry. It renders us unable to serve them well. How can we show love and compassion to someone we resent? It can also cause harm to the other person. When addiction is present, we often call this **codependence** and **enabling**. If you are the enabler in such a relationship, you are feeding the addiction along with the other person. In that case, Scripture has much to say about leading others astray, causing them to stumble, and endorsing sinful patterns of behavior.

We are encouraged to be around each other, to outdo one another in showing love, and to stir one another up towards love and good works. If this is not happening in our relationships, especially with other believers, we need to seriously re-evaluate what needs to change.

“

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

-Hebrews 10:24-25



[illegible]



Setting Boundaries





Without

Imagine living in a house on the side of a steep and dangerous cliff. You live there with young children who want to play and run around all the time. You are busy and it is hard to keep an eye on them at all times.

Would you let your kids go play in the back yard by themselves without any supervision? If you can't supervise, would you even let them out at all?

Of course you wouldn't, but why not? There is too great a risk that they will go too far and get seriously hurt or worse. Without any boundaries there to keep them safe, you can assume that they are in danger at all times.

You may decide the safest thing to do is to keep them inside and rule out the backyard all together.

With

Now imagine the same house, the same very active children, and the same busy lifestyle. This time, however, include a tall, sturdy fence just before the edge of the cliff. It is a solid piece of work that will not budge, even if you drove a truck into it.

Would you let them into the back yard now?

We often think boundaries are only about restrictions, telling someone what is not allowed. But in this case, having a firm boundary gave these children a freedom they did not have before the fence was built. The boundary kept them safe so they could enjoy the space fully. The cliff was taking away all the fun of a backyard, but the fence kept that at bay.

What is standing in the way of the joy your relationships can bring?



Weak Boundaries

It may not be the case that you have zero boundaries, but it may feel like you have none if those boundaries are not strong. A fence does no good if it can easily be pushed down. Have you found yourself having the same conversation about boundaries or expectations over and over again? Do you keep finding exceptions to the ground rules you've laid down? This could be a sign that your boundaries are either weak--there are no consequences if they're broken--or they are not the best fencing for your relationship. Perhaps there are some areas they don't address, or the expectations are not realistic in some way.

With whom do you have weak boundaries? Why?

Strong Boundaries

A strong boundary is like a solid wall. It doesn't argue, and it doesn't budge. In a given situation, no means no and it always means that, no matter what else is going on. Think of it like the first computers, which were operated by lines of code typed in by the user. No voice commands or point-and-click magic. You had to get it exactly right, or you didn't get the result you wanted. You can bet that anyone wanting to use a computer took the time to learn how to do it right. Those who didn't care enough to learn moved on with their lives.

With whom do you have strong boundaries? Why?



Unhealthy Boundaries

Just because you have a boundary does not mean it is a healthy one. In fact, many toxic relationships may already have unspoken boundaries in place, but they do not build healthy relationships. A critical controller, for example, may be very clear about expectations for you, but those standards are impossible or not based on mutual interests. Someone in a romantic relationship may have set some boundaries about sexual contact, but they may not go far enough or possibly even too far. Often, shame from legalistic expectations is a symptom of unhealthy boundaries. As Jesus said to the Pharisees, you "strain out a gnat but swallow a camel."

What are some unhealthy boundaries you have noticed in your life?

Healthy Boundaries

A healthy boundary brings life and joy to everyone affected by the relationship. Remember, boundaries are as much about what you are free to do as they are about what you may not do. Sexual boundaries, for example, are not to kill the fun of a budding relationship. Rather, they save the joy and increase it, letting it build in worth until the day of consummation. Being firm about what you will and won't talk about at work frees you up to connect with coworkers in ways that do not leave you feeling resentful or wanting to avoid them all together.

What are some healthy boundaries you have or want to have?



When Jesus Set Boundaries

Friends and Family

Jesus took time to himself when he needed it. He did not apologize for taking his time, or even taking a nap.

Mark 4:38; John 6:15; John 11:5-6

Jesus let His friends know when He needed them.

Matthew 26:36-38

He didn't let His family interfere with His ministry.

Matthew 12:46-50

He corrected His friends when they crossed the line.

Matthew 16:23

Jesus set the terms concerning when His friends would join Him.

John 13:36

Ministry

Various potential followers had first come to terms with Jesus' expectations, including being homeless, leaving a father to die, and even selling all their possessions.

Matthew 8:19-22; 19:16-21

Jesus did not get caught in traps or emotionally-charged questions. He said what He wanted to say, no more and no less. He also did not feel the need to protect others from looking foolish if they were being manipulative.

Matthew 5:37; 21:23-27, 22:15-22; Luke 23:8-9

Jesus did was not obligated to heal or perform other miracles. He reserved the right to withhold them.

Matthew 13:58

He took strong action when necessary to put a stop to people taking advantage of others.

John 2:12-17

Sacrifice

Even in being wrongfully accused, arrested, and killed--ultimately to atone for sins He did not commit - **Jesus did not lose His boundaries.**

"Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment received I from my Father."

John 10:17-18



Boundaries in Context

Boundaries in Love

- We will only go on dates in public or in groups before we're engaged.
- I won't text you after 11pm.
- We will have a date night away from the kids at least once per month.
- We need some time apart/alone time once in a while.
- I will not have sex with you before we are married.

Boundaries at Home

- You are responsible for cleaning your space, and we share responsibility in cleaning shared spaces.
- If you are old enough to use the machine, you will wash your own clothes.
- You can eat what I cook, or you can make yourself a sandwich.
- Kids' bedroom doors stay open unless they are getting dressed.
- Everyone will be home together at least one weekend per month.

Boundaries at Work

- I will do the tasks that are written in my job description, but additional expectations must be discussed and agreed upon beforehand.
- I am not available by phone or email once I have left the office/am off the clock.
- I will respond to emails and run errands for you during my paid hours.
- If reimbursement takes longer than a month, I will no longer use my personal funds for work purchases.
- I will not discuss personal matters with coworkers if I do not feel comfortable doing so.

Boundaries with Friends

- We should get together at least once per month, even if it's just for lunch.
- There needs to be a balance between talking about your life and talking about my life.
- You are important to me, but my family takes priority.
- I will not gossip about our other friends.
- When you come over to our house, we need to be done by 10pm.



Reflection

What are some non-negotiable boundaries you have set or want to set with the following people?

Your Spouse

Your Kids

Your Friends

Your Family

Your Boss

Your Coworkers/ Employees/Students



[illegible]



Communication

Reflection

Describe a time when someone set a boundary with you.

How did that make you feel? Did the other person explain why the boundary was needed?

How did this affect your relationship?



Communication Formula

AVOID

- Starting with “you”
- Saying always
- Saying never
- Thoughts disguised as feelings
- Emotionally charged questions

REMEMBER

- To keep your voice calm
- Why this is a problem
- Why you have a relationship with this person
- To listen after you share

I feel _____ when you _____

I want / I hope that _____

FEELINGS

abandoned
abused
accused
afraid
aggravated
angry
annoyed
anxious
ashamed
awkward
baffled
betrayed
bitter
bored
bothered
burned up
cautious
cheated
concerned
confused
crazy

criticized
crushed
dazed
deceived
defeated
defenseless
defiant
depressed
determined
disappointed
discouraged
disgusted
disorganized
disoriented
dissatisfied
distracted
distressed
disturbed
embarrassed
enraged
envious

exhausted
fearful
foolish
fragile
frightened
frustrated
furious
guilty
harassed
hateful
helpless
hesitant
hopeless
horrible
horrified
hurt
ignored
impatient
inadequate
insecure
intimidated

irritated
jealous
jumpy
let-down
lonely
lost
manipulated
miserable
misunderstood
mixed up
neglected
nervous
outraged
overwhelmed
pained
possessive
panicked
paralyzed
powerless
provoked
pushed

puzzled
rejected
remorseful
resentful
robbed
run-down
shy
sick
sore
sorry
stuck
stunned
stupid
surprised
suspicious
tense
terrified
threatened
timid
tired
torn

trapped
uncertain
uncomfortable
uneasy
unhappy
unheard
unloved
unnoticed
unimportant
unsure
used
used-up
useless
vulnerable
weak
worn out
worried
wounded





“

See, I have set before thee this day
life and good, and death and evil.

-Deuteronomy 30:15

Giving Up Control

When we are involved in toxic relationships, it can be hard to let them go. Our unhealthy patterns of relating - enabling, becoming a doormat, rushing to fix every problem - are actually attempts to control, even when it seems like we are the ones being controlled. We do this because we imagine the alternative: he might leave me, she will stop talking to me, he will spiral into a depression. Then we do whatever we have to do to keep that from happening. The Enemy whispers lies to us in the heated conflicts or the desperate loneliness of those broken relationships. We come to believe that we can fix it, if only we answer the phone one more time. We can fix *them*.

In truth, we cannot fix them because we cannot control them. We cannot reach into their brains and change the way they see the world, the way they see us, or the things they choose to do. It is not our place to do so. How's that for a boundary? What we can control, however, is what we choose to do. Making a difference choice sounds scary, though. In fact, it can feel like death--the end of life as we know it. So we have a choice: we can choose to let our fear keep us in unhealthy patterns, or we can decide that our misery is too great to stay as we are. When misery is greater than fear, change will occur.

MISERY > FEAR = CHANGE



Creating Choices

Read the following examples, then create your own set of choices to enforce a boundary that is important to you.

IF YOU

Talk negatively about my spouse on the phone

THEN I WILL

End the conversation and hang up the phone

IF YOU

Talk about things that are relevant and kind

THEN I WILL

Continue the conversation as long as I have time

IF YOU

THEN I WILL

IF YOU

THEN I WILL



Boundaries for Toxic Types

Martyr

"I feel depressed when you spend the whole conversation talking about your hardships. I hope we can find a balance. I want to listen and help, but I have problems I want to talk about, too."

Critical Controller

"I feel unappreciated when you correct me so many times in a row. I want to help you, but if my help is not up to your standards, you will need to find another helper."

Motor Mouth

"It isn't healthy for me to gossip with you like this. I want to know how you are doing. Is there anything you need?"

Perpetual Pessimist

"I feel frustrated when you complain so often. I want to cheer you up, but I cannot do that every time. Please let me know when you'd like some advice. Otherwise, I will just assume you are letting off steam, and I won't respond."

Ghost

"I feel neglected when you take overtime without asking me. I need some quality time with you. If you'll take a weekend off, we can plan it together."

Tornado

"I feel overwhelmed every time we talk. I want to help, but I wonder if I'm really being helpful sometimes. We need to agree on some ground rules before I go any further."

Steam Roller

"I felt really hurt when you gave me advice about my marriage. I think you were trying to help, but it actually made me feel worse. In the future, I would rather us not talk about my personal life."

Mooch

"I feel drained and resentful when you ask me to run errands for you every day. I don't mind if it's on my way home, but you'll have to send me the money first."



A Word on Church Discipline



Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

-Matthew 18:15-20

Scripture gives us a guide for confronting toxic relationships. We call it Church Discipline, but it is good advice even for people who may not share a pew with you on Sunday mornings. If followed correctly, this process could address unhealthy relational patterns before they've even had a chance to take root. Notice that Jesus commands us to go "if your brother sins against you." He does not say "when you've finally had enough."

Also notice that it's okay to have backup. It is actually commanded after a point. Some people simply will not listen when it's just the two of you. You may have a hard time keeping that boundary yourself if you don't have someone else to hold you to it. The Church is a body, and every member works together to keep the whole body well. Don't be afraid to call on brothers and sisters when you are being hurt by someone else's sin.

If your worst fear is realized and that relationship has to be cut off, you will need the support of healthy relationships as you walk through it. There's no shame in grieving that loss. Let the Church minister to you as you heal, and remember that this may only be for a season, or it may be for the rest of your life. Regardless, God is working. He will comfort you, and *"God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth."* (2 Timothy 2:25)



Resources

Boundaries: When To Say Yes, How To Say No To Take Control Of Your Life

Henry Cloud-John Townsend - Zondervan - 2017

High-maintenance Relationships: How To Handle Impossible People

Les Parrott - Tyndale House Publishers - 1996

Break Through: When To Give In, How To Push Back

Timothy Clinton-Pat Sprinkle - Worthy Publishing - 2012

The Subtle Power Of Spiritual Abuse

David Johnson-Jeffrey VanVonderen - Bethany House Publishers - 2008

The Relationship Cure: a Five-step Guide To Strengthening Your Marriage, Family, and Friendships

John GottmanJoan DeClaire - Harmony Books - 2002

The Five Love Languages: How To Express Heartfelt Commitment To Your Mate

Gary Chapman - Manjul Pub. - 2010

Families Where Grace Is in Place: Building a Home Free Of Manipulation, Legalism, and Shame

Jeffrey VanVonderen - Bethany House - 2010

Co-parenting with a Toxic Ex: What To Do When Your Exspouse Tries To Turn the Kids Against You

Amy Baker-Paul Fine - New Harbinger Publications - 2014

Have a New Kid By Friday: How To Change Your Child's Attitude, Behavior & Character in 5 Days

Kevin Leman - Revell - 2012

