

Living in and out of a toxic relationship

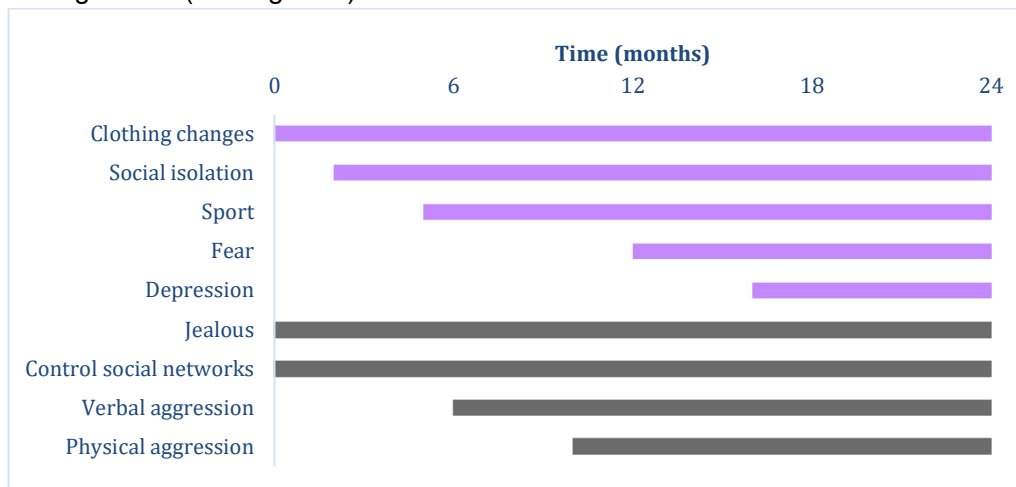
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I'm twenty-two years old and when I was eighteen I lived a very critical period. I had a very stable life at all levels, social, physical and emotional before I started a relation with a boy of my age. I was in the last year of high school, prepared my University exams, worked helping high school students, and practiced boxing. Shortly after meeting him, I suffered two years of complete emotional instability. My insecurity, fear of abandonment, lack of self-esteem and lack of social support brought me to accept a toxic relationship during 2 years.

A monogamous relationship can be defined as a complex dynamic system, in which two people with different characters, tastes, aspirations, motivations, etc., interact with the common goal of establishing a stable relationship.

The first months followed the pattern of a prototypical relationship: I felt important and loved by someone who was always attentive to me. However, the euphoria and love of the beginning was slowly changing without noticing it. Jealousy and possessiveness brought to dependence a toxic relationship. He was telling me how to dress, with whom I could talk or get together and imposed an excessive control on my life (for a full set of constraints affecting the stability of relationship see Figure 1).

Under these constraints my behavior changed in order to maintain the relationship stable. Over time my character and emotional state suffered a distress: I didn't dress the way I wanted to, I didn't talk to anyone, I didn't have friendships, I turned off, and had a constant feeling of fear (see Figure 1).



*Purple: girl, grey: boy.

Figure 1. Changes of behavior and emotions (the constraints affecting the stability of relationship) in the couple during the two years relationship.

Paradoxically, my changes increased his aggressive behavior (violence), my insecurity and self-confidence. This situation impaired further the relationship and neither me nor him felt satisfied. I was completely dependent on him, and felt emotionally and socially distressed due to his high demands on me (see Figure 2).

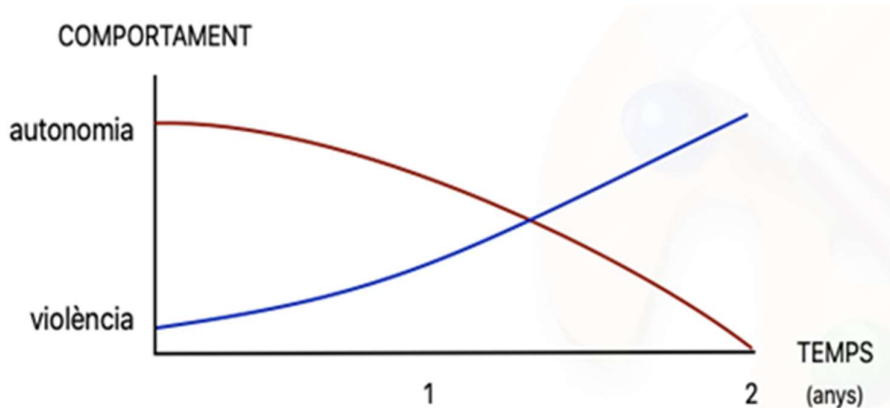


Figure 2. Constraints from Figure 1 may be compressed into two composite variables: Autonomy and Violence. These were the two control parameters which changed the stability of our relationship.

The positive emotional stability of the couple was lost, and the violence increased with insults, degenerative comments, threats, to the point of daily physical and psychological abuse. This was complemented by great reconciliations and all sorts of nice intentions that kept a metastable state. The alternation of positive and negative emotional states was stabilized for a period. After a negative one, a good one, even more rewarding, followed. (see. Figure 3), with no chance to keep the positive one longer.

When you feel well treated the positive emotional attractor stabilizes easily, but when it is the other way around, the negative emotional state makes you think that you are to blame for this situation and even, that you deserve it.

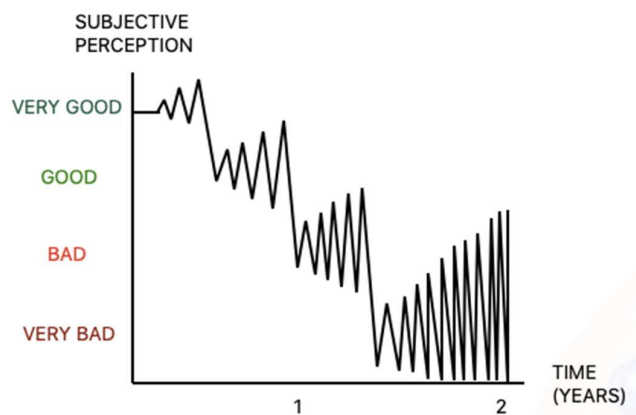


Figure 3. Dynamics of my emotional states and the stability of relationship. The positive emotional state (very good) after some fluctuations (ups and downs) gets destabilized and transits to a qualitatively new and lower emotional level. This cascade of stability losses is characterized by precursors of large emotional fluctuations (metaphorically called roller-coasters).

When he was no stable emotionally; I had no self-esteem. At social level I ran out of friends and I didn't feel good in any area of my life. On a physical level my body was no longer functioning as usual, I was losing weight for no reason and there was not a day that I didn't cry, I was in a depressed state without realizing it.

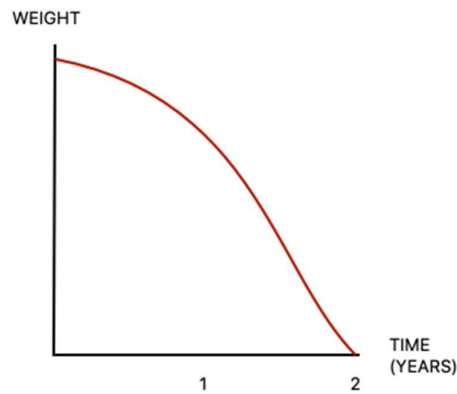


Figure 3. *Physical state dynamics. Loss of weight.*

When I felt weak and asked for help, he became self-confident and empowered pushing me to keep in this state. The feeling of having full control satisfied him. On the other hand, when after a reconciliation my mood improved he felt losing control and started to feel bad. This showed that his well-being was just connected to his feeling of control, not to common happiness, which could never come through my submission (see Figure 4).

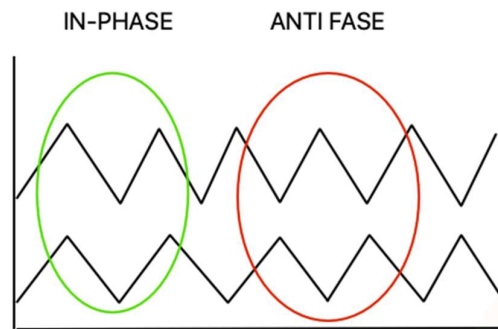
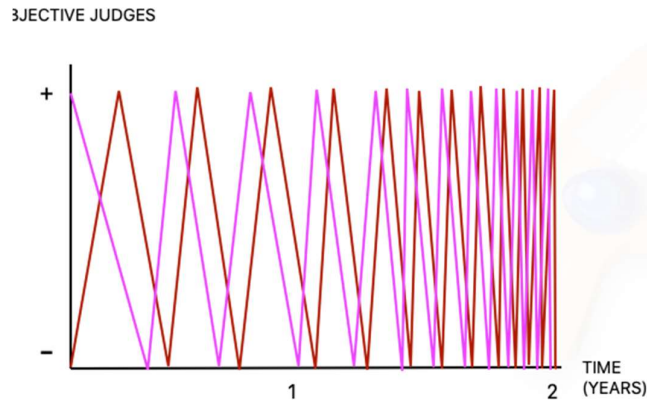


Figure 4. *Coupling of the emotional dimension. Transition from in-phase to antiphase state. The in-phase stable state is characterized by both of us feeling good or bad. The anti-phase state, on the contrary, is characterized by me feeling bad and him feeling good and vice versa.*

Anyone would ask: and why didn't you stop the relationship? If I could and it had been easy enough I wouldn't hesitate to do it, but the rigid bond of dependency was so strong that I felt neither with strength (diminished) nor prepared (by personal constraints) to find a more satisfactory solution for both. There was a normalization of the situation, self-deception.

The emotional ups and downs increased their frequency and finally occurred five times a day (see Figure 3 and 5). He could be very well and in five minutes he was having an anxiety attack, alive on a constant roller coaster. This roller coaster was the one that (pathologically) seemed to maintain the stability of the couple. However, it was eventually inevitably going to destabilize the relationship.



*Pink: behavior, red: emotion.

Figure 5. The dynamics of emotional and behavioral fluctuations.

I even thought that our separation was impossible, I felt being anyone without him, alone and without understanding and love. The only goal I had at the time was trying to make the relationship to work and hope that it could change if I was giving him everything he needed and treat him as best he could, since from the beginning we made many plans for the future and ending up in a failure was not an option.

Our families knew anything about it, I was scared that his family might separate me from him. Although my character changed, and with it also my joy, no one imagined the experience I was living through. There was only one thing that was not under his control, and that was my love for my family.

After many months of constant abuse, I decided to go to a psychologist because I reached the critical point of not wanting to live any longer if it had to be that way (see Figure 3 under very bad). At that time, he was also tired of the relationship, emotionally exhausted and non-focused on the work and professional life. However, he did not allow us to separate, insisting that without each other we could not survive.

Finally, a relative informed me about his infidelity with another woman. He automatically tried to manipulate the situation and put me against my family, the only social support I had left. That's when I had to choose between losing one thing or another and decided to end the relationship. This forced choice was the final perturbation that enabled the transition of separation. It wasn't an easy transition, as the other person was always trying to get me back because he felt I belonged to him. Still, it was the best decision and transition (change of state) I could have ever made. This is how I started to value the family the highest again, as during my childhood.

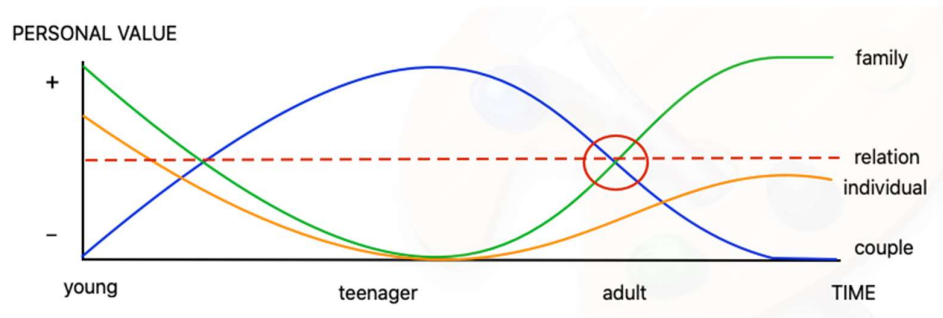


Figure 6. Long-term dynamics of my values with age.

Today, I feel that this experience has been a big lesson, promoting a massive personal growth (anti-fragility, linked to intelligent behavior) that has increased my self-esteem, the love for what I do and the people around me.