

# Releasing From Toxic Systems

Understanding what they are, spotting telltale signs and exploring response and recovery strategies



## What is a toxic system?

Within this context, a system refers to a group of people that come together for a purpose over a period of time. So, this could be within many contexts, including a business, institution, hobby, friendship circle or family.

When we explore what it means to thrive within a human system, it can be said that it is when we are able to be autonomous, aware, spontaneous and with a capacity for intimacy (Stewart and Joines, 2012).

However, a toxic system can be said to be where it isn't easy or possible to be ourselves without experiencing some type of psychological, emotional or physical dissonance.

"Within a toxic system, there may be consequences for being our true self."

Given this, we can often find ourselves in a position of focusing on survival.

## What are the causes of toxicity?

There may be multiple interwoven and enmeshed



causes behind such system dynamics. However, it can be argued that such toxicity can emerge when individuals with positions of power fail to act from their own adult ego state, thereby failing to draw upon all their resources and wisdom within the here and now.

"Individuals within positions of power may act out unresolved personal issues."

Such unanswered matters may be consciously or even unconsciously projected on to other individuals present within the system.

Pausing here a moment, a question may naturally surface 'have I ever inadvertently been toxic?'

Here it can be said that the only way to truly know is to ask the individuals in question.

Through our own personal development, we can continually hone our self-awareness. Here our self-view can reflect more closely other's view of us. Through this learning pursuit, we can hope to minimise any negative impact on others and foster joy and kindness as we walk our path.



## How do we know if we're in a toxic system?

You may think that this is a bit of a strange question to ask. However, experience suggests that sometimes toxic systems grow gently, almost imperceptibly. Furthermore, if we are tenacious, drawn to 'do the right thing' and have a mind-set of 'I'm not okay, you're okay' we may have a personal tendency to think that we are the one with the issue when things start to not work and feel uncomfortable.

"Sometimes it may take months and even years to spot that we are in a toxic system."

There are many behavioural, emotional and psychological telltale signs of toxic systems:

Seeing evidence of hypocrisy (people say one thing and do another)

Operating to an opposing value set to ourselves

Having situations where we are excluded or treated differently to others

Sensing that we can't trust others, they don't have our back

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Not feeling emotionally or psychologically safe

Being challenged repeatedly for being ourselves (words we say, how we dress and speak, etc.)

Being scapegoated

Our speaking out leads to unusual responses in others, including shouting, anger, tears, walking away from

Beginning to feel a range of emotions when in the system including anger, hurt, pain

Other people may see our distress and turn a blind eye (as it may jeopardise their power position in the system)

Feeling like the situation is hopeless and that we can't see a way through

Do any of these resonate with you? Which signals of toxic systems have you come across in your life experience? Moreover, these signals may begin to exaggerate when system stresses escalate, for example through commercial and wellbeing pressures and when neutralising individuals leave the system.

## Strategies for dealing with a toxic system

A first step is to understand and to begin to unearth the unique dynamics of the system in question. By doing this, we can begin to surface and externalise it, helping to bring it out into the light. Approaches that can enable this include, journaling, drawing images and talking it through with a safe colleague or trustworthy friend.

Building on this, it may be of value to educate yourself on particular psychological constructs which may play a

part in the toxic system dynamics. Such constructs may include: game-playing, drama triangle, scapegoating, narcissism, sociopathy.

Finally, it may be necessary to decide upon your own response strategy. As we know, toxic systems are part of the human world. This will be dependent upon your own circumstances:

**Leaving outright** – here we can design our own transition, where we slowly extricate ourselves, moving to a circumstance enabling us to thrive

**Partial leaving** – in other circumstances, our exit strategy may be more nuanced. Whilst we may still be a physical member of the system, we may withdraw our emotional and psychological involvement. Through a balance of distance and boundaries, our membership may be a more sustainable form. Here, rather than revealing our true self we may participate from the safer (and more protected) vantage point of our own personality

## Releasing from a toxic system

An important part of our recovery and ultimate release from toxic systems is prioritising our own healing:

**Separating** – when we are enmeshed in a toxic system, it can be hard to see the wood from the trees. So, separating ourselves from the system dynamics is important. This can be done through describing it in whatever way feels right: verbally, visually, through the written word

**Detaching** - when we meet and spend time with people, we sub-consciously build energetic

cords. When connections sour, it is important to release such connections, expectations along with offering forgiveness and love to all involved, including ourselves. By doing this, these individuals will no longer have the ability to 'push our buttons'

**Healing** – to reestablish our energetic flow and joyfulness, it is important to prioritise our own self-care and draw from a range of healing, for example reiki, acupuncture, PTSD counselling

### Top tip



If we want to find a counsellor for healing, here are two recommended professional networks:

[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk) (for a trained therapist)

[www.hcpc-uk.org](http://www.hcpc-uk.org) (for a full range of professional therapeutic practitioners)

Details of detaching out-of-date energetic cords can be found in: *Soul Speak – The Language of Your Body* by Julia Cannon



### About the writer

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