



The Hero's Guide to

# Protection Against Harmful Relationships

Beth E Peterson



6 Steps to Building  
Interpersonal Safety



Cattails Publishing LLC  
Martinsburg, WV  
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Beth E. Peterson

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Author's Note: This book will be most helpful if used in conjunction with its companion workbook, *The Hero's Workbook to Protection Against Harmful Relationships*.

All stories presented in this work are composites of many people and their experiences. Any resemblance to any single person or event, past or present, is coincidental.

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We are all heroes. I am the hero of my own life story; you are the hero of your life story. Our first tendency is always, inevitably, to see ourselves as the protagonist in our lives. It is an intrinsic way that we humans view ourselves. This is not to say that you as hero cannot be hurt or even overwhelmed. Heroes in real life, as well as stories, have that happen to them all the time. This is not to say that you as hero cannot make bad decisions, or even take dysfunctional roads in your life's journey. That again happens in real life just as in stories. We choose to be healthy heroes...or unhealthy heroes.

Some of those choices – in fact quite a few of them – concern your choices in regards to your relationships with others. Heroes do not live in vacuums. You live in a rich social tapestry filled with intersecting threads bringing your life in contact with others. Some of those threads are twined about your own thread: your intimate and close relationships.

Those other people's threads may be the finest quality silk, wool, or cotton. They might be average. Or they may not truly be threads at all.... They may be

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disguised barbed wire, chain, or even elongated hacksaw blades. These later psuedo-threads can cause you untold damage, especially because they often look just like a good-quality thread at first. These are harmful relationships.

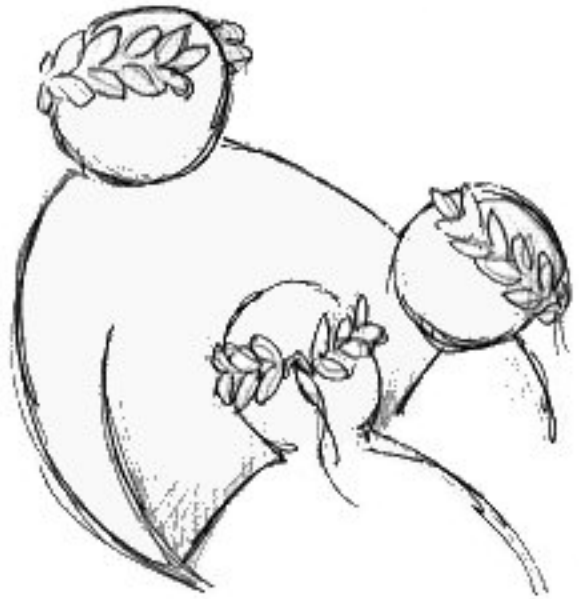
Harmful relationships can be found all around us; we may even be in one of them, or one of our children may have been drawn into one. These types of relationships rely on deception, manipulation, and ultimately, control. Harmful relationships are endemic, and it appears that the occurrence of these negative and potentially dangerous relationships is on the rise.

Aaron was a man in his late twenties, doing well in his profession and with strong relationships with his family and several close friends. One day during his lunch break, he met a woman at a local café and had been quite attracted to her. She was fun to be with; she made everything exciting. They continued to meet occasionally at the cafe, and eventually began serious dating. There was never a dull moment. Every time it seemed life would settle down for her some new turn of events would keep the energy level high. Some of these events were fun things that Tina thought of for them to do...often on the spur of the moment. But to one degree or another most were crisis events.

Aaron found himself drawn into her high-energy world, helping her more and more frequently with the latest crisis in her life. At first, every time he helped her, Tina would shower him with thanks and affection. As time slipped past, the thanks and affection became more and more perfunctory. Her high-energy life-style began sucking the energy out of his life. Without being aware of the change, Aaron stopped seeing his old friends and hadn't talked with his family for weeks...all of his time was wrapped up in Tina and Tina's life. Soon, the continued energy-drain affected his work to the point that his boss called him in to address the decline.

The changes were gradual, but in time it was clear to Aaron's family and friends that something was drastically wrong. His relationship with this woman was slowly destroying everything he had built for himself, and was keeping him from reaching the goals they all knew he had so clearly delineated for himself. He was changing, too. "Withdrawn," "confused," "defensive," and "depressed" had never been adjectives anyone who had known him would have ever used to describe him, but now these were exactly the words that came to mind. Because Aaron had never heard of real-life manipulative relationships he had no defense against Tina's progressive campaign to gain control over him and his life.

So how do you protect yourself from harmful, manipulative relationships? What should you teach your children, teenagers, and other loved ones so that they can protect themselves as well?



**Knowledge of a problem is the first step to solving that problem, or even keeping it from occurring at all.** That is the purpose of this book and its companion workbook: to give you the knowledge that the problem of harmful, manipulative relationships exists and is widespread within our society at this time, and then to offer you the tools to counteract your own and your loved ones' vulnerability to manipulative relationships.

Parents should consciously teach their children and teenagers about manipulative relationships and how to avoid being caught up in one. In the past few years of counseling I have become more and more aware of just how prevalent manipulative relationships are in our schools and among our children and teens. In certain circles, it is so commonplace that even *highly* manipulative relationships are accepted as normal.

Protect your Self by taking these five steps. Protect your loved ones by teaching them these five steps.



## Step 1

### Not Everyone Is Good

For each of us, the first step in recognizing the dangers of manipulative relationships is to recognize that not everyone is good at heart. Not everyone has your wellbeing in mind. Sometimes that is hard for you to fully grasp deep down in the foundations of your worldview, especially if you grew up in a stable household with an emphasis on being a good person...a home in which personal boundaries were generally respected. “Bad people” existed as characters in films, television, and books. They probably won't seem real to the person who has never observed, never experienced, the reality of truly “bad person” behavior.

#### Food for thought...



People who grow up in stable households that emphasized being a good person but in which personal boundaries were not consistently respected are much more vulnerable to manipulation.

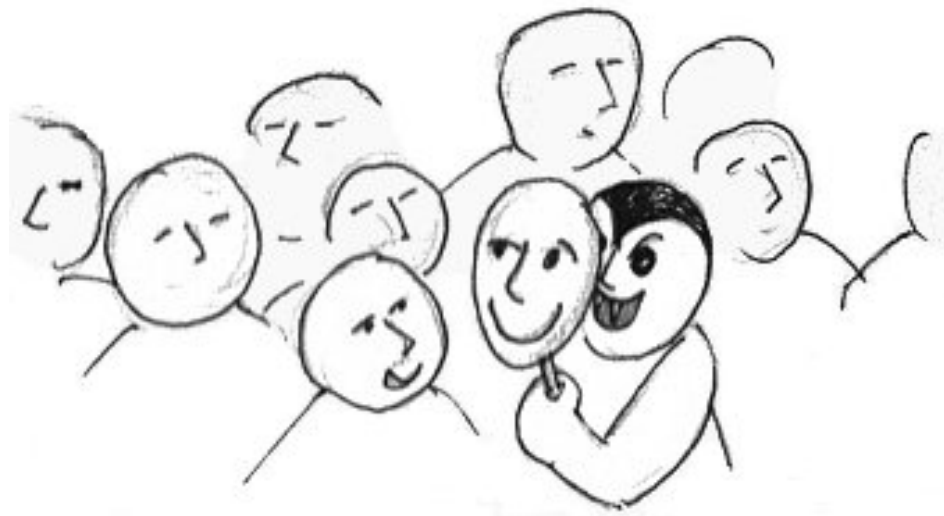


- There are two reasons for this increased vulnerability:
- 1) they lack recognition of the reality of “bad people”, and
  - 2) they have not learned to recognize when someone is telling them something about themselves (or about that other person) that is untrue.



When I say "bad person," I am referring to those who will use others with little or no thought given to what such conduct will mean to the other person, or who discount any ill effects to others, and who will also have little or no actual remorse for their actions. In their own eyes, such people hold themselves justified in whatever they do, no matter how it affects others. In many circumstances, these people may not even be consciously aware of their usage of others – it has become such an ingrained and unquestioned aspect of their personality.

People who use manipulation in their interpersonal exchanges and relationships are not all the same. They fall into a range that grows from the occasional manipulation for single, isolated goals, through mild and moderate levels of consistent manipulation, to those who use extreme levels of manipulation. Reasons for such manipulation can be in order to boost self-image, in order to maintain the illusion that they are in control, and occasionally in order to indulge in cruelty.



## Food for thought...



According to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision* (DSM-IV-TR), fourteen percent of our population has Cluster B type personality disorders. One of the hallmarks of all personality disorders is that the person with one has severe, persistent difficulty forming or maintaining interpersonal relationships. In almost all circumstances, a person who has one of these types of personality disorders will use manipulation in their social interchanges to one degree or another. In other words, if at this moment you were in a room of twenty-five people drawn from a cross-section of your community, at least three of them are almost certain to engage in enduring patterns of interpersonal manipulation.



## ***Trust Must Be Earned, Not Given Unconditionally***

Certain societal and religious schools of thought have taught us that we are to love one another and that this love is to be given unconditionally. We are especially to love our children unconditionally.

One of the problems we encounter with this belief is that there is a strong tendency to subconsciously equate love with trust. If you love someone you must trust them, right?

We must differentiate between love, which is an emotion, and trust, which is a decision. It is a decision based on expectation...hopefully thought-out, reasonable and objective expectation. Learning that trust is a decision, and then learning how to make the decision to trust in the best way possible, is critical to you when you are learning to defend against manipulation and harmful relationships.

Trust must be based, in part, on an evaluation of limitations. For example, you may love your spouse completely – no conditions – but that does not mean you should trust them to cook the rice for dinner when you already know that they can't cook. You need to recognize that they have a limit; limits may be limits in education (never having been taught to cook), limits in experience (never having learned through do-it-yourself), limits in native ability (it just doesn't sink in and stay), limits in interest (they don't like to cook), and so on.

Trust must also be based on an objective evaluation of how well you know the other person. You cannot know all of a person quickly; we humans are simply too complex to know in an instant, or even several instants strung together. You can live with a person for years and may still not know everything about them.

You need to be aware that your own knowledge of the other person may be limited *even though you love them deeply*. It is imperative that you accept that your knowledge is likely to be limited, and to objectively evaluate your level of knowledge of the other as well as their multiple limitations.

It is difficult to come to grips with the reality of ordinary-looking or even beautiful evil. We expect evil to always be ugly, to always be visibly disturbing. We forget the reality that those who deceive are among the finest actors in the world. Dick Francis summed it up well in one of his novels: "Like most law-abiding citizens, she had not grasped that a criminal mind didn't show, that an endearing social manner could coexist with fraud and murder." (Francis, 1967, p.165)

If you have never seen a person cook, how can you accurately judge how well they prepare food? If you have never seen a specific person in a crisis situation, how can you accurately judge how they will react in a crisis situation?

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Certainly you could take their word for their own level of expertise or probable reactions and actions, but if a person is manipulating, how likely are they to tell you the truth about themselves? Giving trust before you have seen objective evidence that the person is reliable and deserves trust is, quite simply, dangerous.

Christa, a young woman in her junior year of high school, was a bright, vivacious and outgoing person. She had a stable, happy home life, had a large number of acquaintances, several close friends, a job after school, a number of extracurricular activities that she enjoyed, and she was an Honor Roll student maintaining a strong B+ grade average.

Within a few weeks of beginning to date a new boyfriend, her parents and friends noticed a change. Christa no longer hung out with any of her friends, her grades were slipping, and her supervisor at the store where she clerked was beginning to complain about her job performance. Christa had always had a good relationship with her parents, but now she was sullen when in their presence and had begun skipping meals in order not to eat with the family. When her younger sister found Christa crying in the bathroom one day, she begged her older sister to tell her what was wrong. Christa venomously blurted, "Mom and Dad are so pathetic! I hate them! They make my skin crawl!"



What had happened? What had suddenly transformed this sociable, happy young woman into an isolated, moody, and angry person? What had so drastically changed her attitudes, behavior, and opinions?

Because Christa felt she loved this boyfriend, she automatically assumed she could and should trust him. When he told her things that challenged her old life, she listened. When he gave her a new way to interpret events and situations, she listened. When he ridiculed her old relationships with family and friends, she listened. Her trust did not automatically mean that she immediately changed her viewpoints, but it did open a door she had no means of closing.

## ***Recognize Cultural Mythologies***

We have all heard certain sayings, heard certain attitudes and concepts, expressed as we grew up that are really actually nothing more than cultural mythologies. There are innumerable sets of these cultural mythologies; the myths about "love" are the ones most likely to be encountered in the majority of harmful, manipulative relationships.

Examples of "love" mythologies include "love will conquer all," which can be used to overthrow even the most rational of reasons why a relationship is harmful to; "love hurts," which has been used for time immemorial to excuse emotional and even physical battering; and the romanticized image of the person being jealous due to their love. Jealousy has even been purported to be the "natural" result of a really deep love. (Jealousy is actually a direct result of insecurity; it has nothing to do with love.) Other love-oriented cultural myths include the concept that attraction is the same as love; that sexuality is the same as love and lovability; and that love is something that can develop "at first sight" or very nearly instantaneously. A subtle love-oriented myth is an underlying assumption that the love is the complete and only necessary foundation for a healthy intimate relationship. This myth cavalierly dismisses the vast number of remaining aspects that makes you you, your potential partner themselves, and the styles of interaction that build a relationship between the two of you.

Love, to a manipulator, does not mean strong affection, caring and closeness. Love, to many manipulators, means possession, control, or the fulfillment of the manipulators' desires (without thought given to the other person's needs or desires other than as tools and doorways to manipulation). But words are easy to a manipulator; they latch onto and use the myths of your culture in order to build and maintain the relationship, without compunction or even thought given to truthfulness.

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Worse still, they may not even recognize that they are lying. The most extreme manipulators have such a warped sense of reality that they in all actuality do not recognize the difference between a lie and the truth. Because of this they are able to project themselves as utterly sincere; they are very, very believable. And they become even more so when they are invoking a mythology **you** have already been subconsciously taught and bought into, even if only mildly....

Cultural mythologies are not limited to ones about love, however. In fact, this entire section is in response to one such mythology: the "everyone is good at heart" mythology. Believe me, as one who has been face to face with a serial murderer and a "regular" murderer, who has worked as a psychologist with sex offenders, and who has delved into recesses of the human psyche where the light does not shine. Take it from me: **not** everyone has a core of goodness. This is a cultural myth.

Other mythologies center on the trustworthiness of authority figures such as police, firefighters, preachers, teachers, etc. While yet another set of mythologies center on the exact opposite: the untrustworthiness of figures of authority, including parents. Other mythologies include "bad things do not happen to good people," and its' relative, "if I only work hard enough good things will happen to me." Without realizing it you have probably accepted that "good-looking people are more intelligent" and these just are a few. Manipulators can easily use these and other mythology lines as an opening to begin the manipulative attack on their target. If you don't believe this just listen to the popular music of practically any group in this country and you will find many cultural mythologies bound up in their lyrics. The same is true for many of the stories you will end up watching, whether at the movies or on television, or your favorite books or magazines.





## **Step 2**

# **Recognize the Manipulative Process and Manipulative People**

### ***The Process***

You must recognize the existence of those who manipulate others as a matter of course. You also need to recognize the manipulative process. It does not start off as something easily recognized as being abnormal or harmful. Most manipulative relationships begin slowly, with a buildup of trust, a progression of asking for compliance to normal, small requests moving toward more and more requests involving larger issues.

The following six stages can occur in any form of manipulative relationship, including battering marriages such as the one between Mickey and Francine Hughes, splinter groups such as Charles Manson and his followers known as the Family, and abusive churches such as Jim Jones' Peoples Temple. (Peterson, 2003)

## Food for thought...

Manipulative relationships can go through up to six stages. The relationship may not always go through all six stages, however since some people are able to leave early while others never escape at all.

These six stages are:

1. Softening Up – the object of the manipulator is to build up good feelings in the subject in order to draw them further into a relationship.
2. Compliance – the objective of the manipulator is to get the targeted subject to comply with small requests, gradually building up in frequency and seriousness of the request.
3. Identification – at this point the objective is to get the target to replace their old identity with an identity of the manipulator's choosing.
4. Consolidation – this is the most damaging of the possible stages; in this stage the target's original personality, belief system, and behavior patterns have been completely replaced by the manipulator.
5. Disaffiliation – this occurs when the target breaks from the manipulator.
6. Recovery – manipulative relationships damage the targeted subject, including possible psychological, social, financial, employment-related damages, as well as damages in other areas of the target's life.

Eventually, not only will behavior change (through the escalating requests and other techniques), but also the targeted person's attitudes and beliefs will also change. Given a strong enough manipulator and enough time, the target can lose touch with everything they had done and had been before the relationship began. They have become mirrors of the persona the manipulator has created for them.

## ***They Exist, and In Your Space-Time Continuum***

We know about people who manipulate; we know about people who are willing and able to harm others, but somehow, we never embrace the knowledge that we could ever really meet one. It just seems too unreal... Those things only happen in books.

Don't they?

Preliminary surveys have shown that up to eighty-five percent of the United States' adult population has been directly or indirectly affected by harmful, manipulative relationships. That means that you and your loved ones will almost certainly be affected to one degree or another as well. Whether you yourself become enmeshed in such a relationship, or whether one of your loved ones becomes enmeshed, or whether someone else you know and care about is affected, the truth of the matter is that harmful, manipulative relationships are found all around you in real life. They are not just in books.

We fight against that knowledge, though. It is frightening to feel you are in a hostile world, a hostile environment. Yet, if you don't allow yourself to recognize your vulnerability and that of your loved ones, you are a sitting duck...and hunting season is in full swing.

Naomi was an intelligent and friendly young woman who everyone thought would do well in life. Naomi came from a good middle-class family in which education and church were both highly stressed. Her parents and church both emphasized being a good person, and that anyone could become a good person through belief in Jesus. She grew up during a time when there was much unrest in the world, but it was distant: images on a television screen and articles in magazines. Her personal life was stable and she had never met anyone firsthand who she recognized was actively preying upon other people.

Naomi had never had a cause to seriously distrust anyone; she had never had experience with a seriously chaotic, unstable, or pathologically self-serving person. To Naomi, everyone she met was trustworthy and basically good; to Naomi, "bad people" were simply interesting characters in stories – they were unreal.

She would often run into her next-door neighbor at his mailbox, which was beside hers on the road. She thought nothing of this, other than to think he had a really nice smile and seemed very kind and gentle. She did not realize that he had very deliberately been watching her, noting her habits, and had been at the mailboxes at the same time by his own design.

One particular day he seemed quite distressed. Naomi, concerned, asked what the problem was. Hesitantly (and thereby drawing Naomi in further by manipulating her into trying to reassure him, through which he strengthened her bond with him) he told her that he was having problems with his girlfriend. Naomi listened that day, and many days afterwards, feeling at first that she was helping him simply by providing a sympathetic ear for him to talk to. And he told her as much, time after time. His gratitude for her kind listening seemed heartfelt and genuine. Naomi felt more and more drawn to this gentle man whose girlfriend was so mean.

Naomi was totally unaware that this man was calculating each move, carefully playing on her emotions, and skillfully weaving a tapestry of lies and half-truths. All that seemed spontaneous and genuine was in truth deliberate and planned. His shyness at asking her out the first time, his surprise at her lack of a significant relationship, his belief in God, even all the things they apparently had in common...all these things and more were nothing but deftly acted portrayals of a male persona he had determined would attract her. Within a fairly short time, Naomi was drawn into a relationship that progressively became more and more controlling and eventually resulted in her being admitted into the hospital with three broken ribs, a broken wrist and a serious concussion.

## ***Looking For the Motivation Behind the Words (& Actions)***

Remember: Trust must be earned, not given as the default. Learn to look for conscious and unconscious motivations, on both your part and the other person's part.

First, let's talk about you. Any desire, and recognize that it is your desires that motivate you, any desire no matter what it is, can be used as a toehold to open the door to manipulation. One of the desires most frequently latched onto is the desire for close or romantic relationships. For example, let's say that you are actively or subconsciously looking for "Mr. or Ms. Right." The sheer presence of this desire on your part can be acted upon and exploited by a manipulator.

Now, this is not to say never go looking for a relationship! Hardly! But what I am urging you to do is to be very aware, first that this is what you are doing, and secondly that you are more vulnerable because of your desire to find a close or romantic relationship.

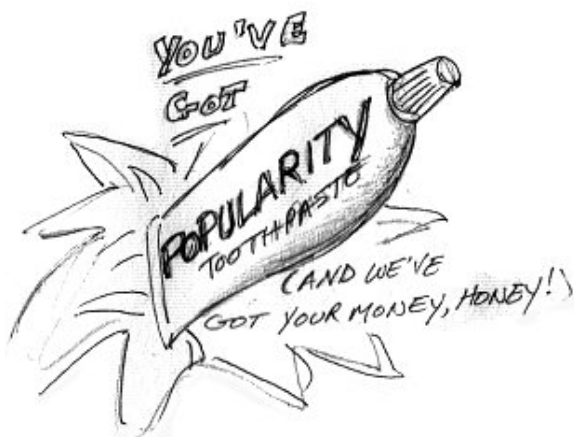
If you are not aware that you even have this desire, or perhaps you don't want to have this desire and are trying to deny it exists, you are driving down the road of Life blind. Blindness is not going to keep you from running into the obstacles, however. Obviously the truth is just the opposite. When you are not aware, or choose to ignore parts of yourself, including your motivations and desires, you are much more likely to run into problems as you go through life. You just won't even see them lurking in your path.

The same is true of manipulators. If they're around, they will see you coming, but you won't see them. It won't dawn on you that you can be manipulated through a desire you don't know exists, or a desire you refuse to acknowledge...after all, how can you be attacked through something that isn't there? (Except, of course, that it really *is* there; you are just blind to it.)

## Protection From Harmful Relationships

So, honest self-awareness is essential. So too is the recognition that your desire in an area makes you more vulnerable to manipulation in that area. Just by being more aware of yourself and your vulnerability to manipulation in that area you become harder to deceive. Your "eyes" are sharpened and able to spot trouble faster. Think of it as if you were driving down a dirt road. You anticipate that there may be potholes ahead; because you were already aware and on the lookout for potential problems, you are able to spot the potholes easier and avoid them with much less stress.

Advertisers use a lot of persuasive techniques that manipulators adapt and use, too. To sharpen your skills at learning to look for and dodge persuasive or manipulative "potholes," identify a desire you have...perhaps to have more sex appeal...and take a look at how advertisers play on that desire in order to get you to purchase their product. Begin dissecting ads. All advertisements are directed at some desire. Identify the desire(s) played upon, and note how you react to their persuasion.



And, please take careful note that your desire and the advertiser's desire **are not the same!** You may want to be more attractive, but the advertiser simply wants to make more money.

This brings us to evaluating the motivations of others. When you have acknowledged and brought your own desires under conscious monitoring and control, it becomes easier to spot other people's motivations and desires. The more you practice doing this, the more effortless and automatic it becomes.

Remember, not everyone has the same desires that you have, not everyone has the same motivations. Heroes come in all sorts and shapes...be careful that you don't inadvertently ascribe a motivation to someone else that really is only a mirror of your own way of being, your own viewpoint, or your own understanding of life. And also remember, just as there are healthy heroes, there are unhealthy heroes...including heroes who build their sense of heroism through the control of others.

Those who are good at manipulating others are also good at hiding their motivations. They don't want you to know that their real goal is to get you to bolster their self-image, to make them feel powerful, to supply them with money, and to get you to take responsibility for their behavior or feelings.

### ***Continue to Evaluate and Assess***

We often think in a sort of shorthand; we simply don't have the time or energy to critically evaluate every single decision we make, such as which foot to step forward with first. Similarly, we also tend to rely on our first impressions and evaluations, without taking the time and thought to reassess our relationships and experiences. This is actually something you do, however, need to make the effort to do.

Decide what is important; do you need to critically examine the decision to brush your teeth each morning? Probably not. That is a decision that can be made once and then ride. However, not all decisions are able to be done only once; decisions regarding the environment which you surround yourself with should be revisited fairly often. People can and do change, especially when circumstances change. A person, for example, may make a great friend but may make a lousy lover or spouse. Another example would be the person who is

## Protection From Harmful Relationships

gracious and sweet when everything is going their way, only to reveal a harridan when something goes wrong.

Your relationships should never be allowed to become rote or habit. Continuing to evaluate your friendships and intimate relationships helps to keep them alive if they are good (it also helps you remember just what a great thing you've got). Continuing to evaluate and assess also helps you to determine when a relationship is slipping or has slipped into something uncomfortable, overly demanding, or downright dangerous.





## Step 3

### Build Conscious Limits of Tolerance

Not having limits in essence equals chaos. No rules or guidelines. No method of evaluating incoming data and experiences. No way to determine if you are in a healthy relationship or a harmful one. This is not a good way to live. It is certainly never a good way to build or maintain your autonomy and self-determination. It is definitely a horrible foundation upon which to try and build solid, healthy, and fulfilling relationships.

#### *Limits of Tolerance*

In order to have the best possible – the healthiest possible – relationships, you must determine your limits of tolerance. What will you tolerate in a relationship? What **won't** you tolerate in a relationship? For example, will you tolerate jealousy?

## Protection From Harmful Relationships

Are you flattered when another person becomes jealous about sharing you or your time with others? Many people are, believing that jealousy demonstrates depth of affection, caring, and even love. ***But be warned!*** This is one of those cultural myths we discussed before. The roots of jealousy are not in affection, caring, love, or even concern for the other person – the "object of affection." Hardly! The real roots of jealousy are insecurity and an inability to see or accept that other people have a right to determine their own lives. To the jealous person, you are not a person in your own right; you are a possession. They fight to protect, not **you**, but their **possession of you**. The jealous person will try to take control of your time and any other relationships...and ergo to take control of you. That control helps them alleviate the feeling of insecurity...but only for a time, and only in a very superficial way. The jealous need for control will often escalate through time.

And remember: jealous people may not even recognize their own level of jealousy and insecurity. Very often they hide themselves away from such knowledge. After all, unhealthy heroes still see themselves as the hero of their own story and will view themselves in such a way as to allow them to maintain that sense of herohood. In many cases, this means that the unhealthy hero is as adept at lying to themselves as they are in lying to others.

Again, you must think about and set your limits. Will you tolerate being lied to in a relationship? Where exactly will you draw the line? Will you tolerate dishonesty? How much honesty will you demand or tolerate? Will you tolerate being cared for or having your surroundings being cared for? What level of care-taking is too much? What level of privacy do you require in a relationship? (Hint: healthy relationships do take into account the fact that people do need varying levels of privacy, and all of us need *some*.)

## Food for thought...

"Mickey introduced the threat of physical violence. The first instance of this threat occurred just prior to their marriage. Francine, whether consciously or not, attempted to expand the relationship between Mickey and herself. She wanted to include friendship and playfulness. Unfortunately, this attempt backfired. Francine, who did not have a driver's license, had taken Mickey's car without permission as a joke. He was furious. When he caught her, he grabbed her blouse so hard that the buttons burst off. The rage in his eyes frightened her, but she saw that she had been wrong to take his car in the first place. She apologized, after which Mickey calmed down and kissed her.

"After this first instance, Mickey tested his limits with Francine. He found that she did not know how to protect herself at all from threats of physical violence. He added these threats to his bag of manipulative techniques." (Peterson, 2003, p.126)

Those who want to control you and the relationship you have with them will often be very sensitive to where you have set no limits of tolerance, then test those limits repeatedly, continually expanding what you will allow.

However, there is more to this "limits of tolerance" concept than setting limits on the outside world. To help protect yourself from harmful, manipulative relationships and their consequences, it is also good to develop limits of what you will tolerate in your own behavior. This is true because manipulators work to change your behavior, as well as your attitudes and beliefs. It is easier to recognize changes in behavior as opposed to beliefs and attitudes, however. Behavior is, after all, an outward action and is truly observable, whereas the others are not. If you have already put a limit on what behaviors you will and will not tolerate from yourself, it becomes much easier to spot when someone is manipulating you past that limit.

### ***All Things in Moderation***

Even "good" things need to be limited. Many attributes that we consider to be very positive can actually be very detrimental to your own and others' mental, emotional and social well-being. For example, caring for others is considered to be very worthwhile. It is considered to be the attribute of a good person. However, caring can go horribly awry. Caretakers often are called upon to make decisions for those for whom they care. In making these decisions, it is easy for caretaker to cross the line and begin making decisions which have a negative impact on the person's autonomy, self-reliance, and ability to grow.

Caretakers come in many shapes and sizes. A person can be a caretaker even when it does not appear that they are in such a position. Spouses can be caretakers for their partners. Of course, parents act as caretakers of their children. Teachers can be caretakers of their students; preachers can be caretakers of their congregation. Boyfriends may take on the characteristics of a caretaker- protector, while girlfriends can take on the characteristics of a caretaker - nurturer.

Caretaking is only one example, but it is a good example of how even positive attributes can become detrimental and even harmful to one's self or to another person. In order that these positive attributes do not override your own or another person's boundaries, their right to autonomy, you have to put limits in place. Using our example of caretaking, if you are the caretaker, you must be careful not to overstep the limit and begin to take the other person's autonomy or right for self-determination away. If you are the one being cared for, you must set the limit so that you do not lose your self-determination.

How do you know where these limits belong? The answer is through learning and accepting your own limitations and your own abilities. The answer is by learning and accepting the other person's limitations and their abilities. For example, allowing a child to struggle to tie their shoe, even though you can do it

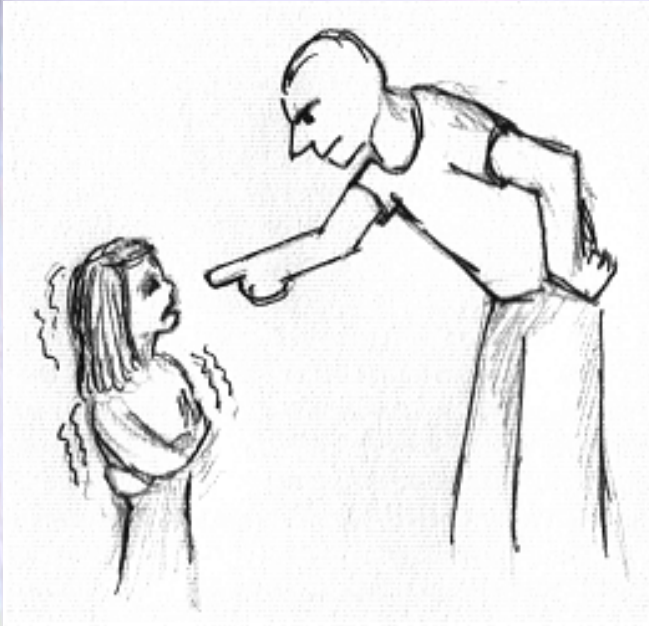
faster. By allowing them to struggle you do not limit them to ignorance; you do not limit their ability to grow. Rather, by allowing them to struggle you allow them the opportunity to learn and to gain abilities and skills.

### ***Good Fences Make Good Relationships***

We need boundaries; you need to recognize and respect where "I" end and where "You" begin. Without those boundaries you become extremely vulnerable to having your sense of identity, and through your sense of identity your actions and attitudes, changed by another person. This is all too common in harmful, manipulative relationships.

Your boundaries can be compromised in two ways. The first is when another person tells you things about yourself that are actually not true of you. When this happens often enough, you begin to believe falsehoods about who you are, what you experience, how you interact with others, and so on. You begin to believe the lies about yourself and in doing so you lose your true sense of identity. Your sense of identity becomes clouded and, like all lies that we tell ourselves (deliberately or not), they'll eventually weaken you and make you more vulnerable to psychological harm.

Carol grew up in a household where her father continually made statements to her about herself which were untrue. For example, if she stated she was cold, he would scoff and tell her that it was plenty warm and that she was not cold. When she would tell him that she was hungry, he would scold her and tell her that she couldn't possibly be hungry...that they had just eaten a few hours before. Any time that Carol said anything about her state of being, she would almost always have her own evaluation of her self contradicted and overturned by her father's desire or assumption of "what she should be."

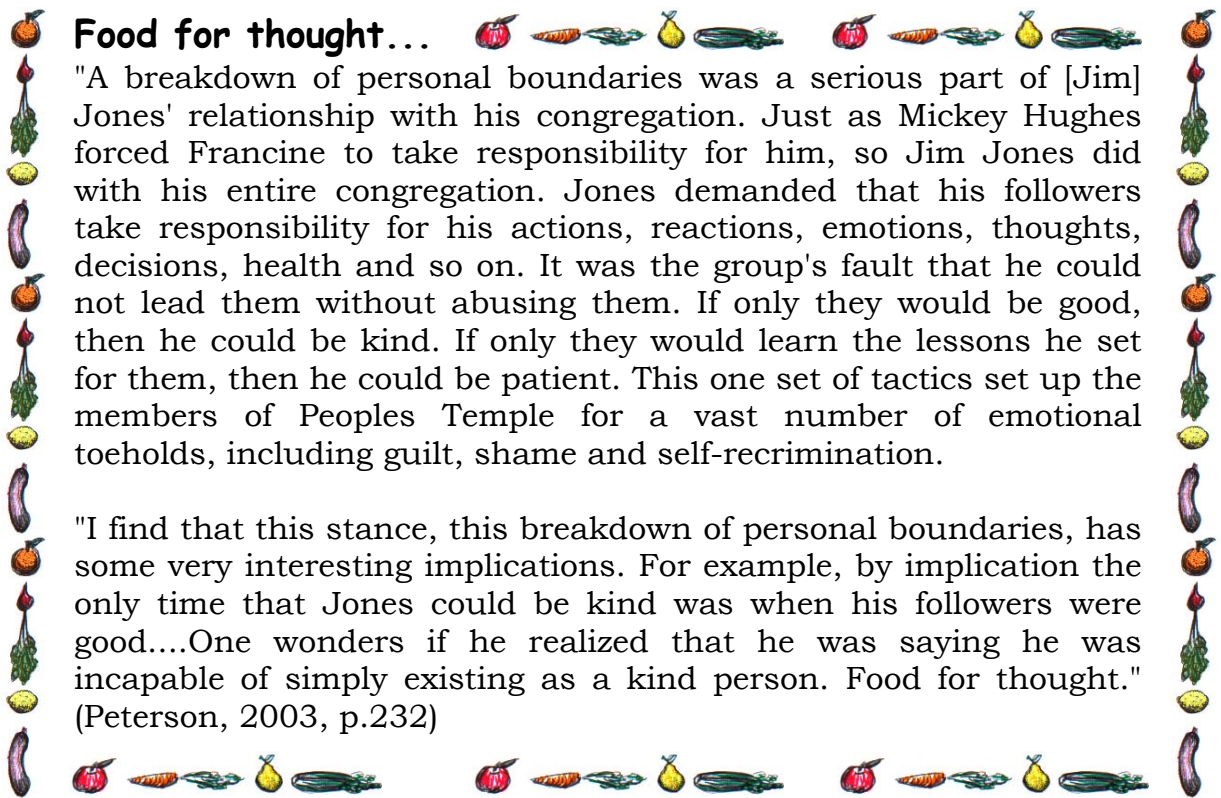


Beyond just physical states, her father would also misinterpret how Carol was emotionally feeling or what she was thinking at a given moment and demand that she, at least outwardly, capitulate to his evaluation of how she felt and who she was. For example, there were times when Carol would be sitting quietly in the family's living room, pleasantly engaged in her own thoughts, and her father would demand that she stop sulking. Over the years she heard accusatory edicts like, "I know what you're thinking" thousands of times.

This compromise of Carol's personal boundaries undermined her sense of identity and reality. She became disconnected from her own state of being, and was unable to access much of her own physical sensations. She had, after all, been taught that her own evaluation of her state of being was false...damaged. She had a very similar disconnection occur in regards to her emotions. She could not trust that what she felt was true and real, so she disregarded her own emotional responses. Carol quite honestly did not know who she really was. The strain between the evaluations she received from others outside of herself and some deeply-buried understanding of the truth of herself caused Carol much anguish, as well as landing her in a series of unhealthy, harmful relationships.

But the story doesn't end there. After a particularly bad break-up, Carol took the advice of a friend and enrolled in assertiveness training. Through these classes, she learned that she was indeed the qualified person able to evaluate her own state of being. She learned that those people outside of herself were outside, and could not know her the way she was able to know herself. She learned to build her personal boundaries (and that it was okay to have them), and through that process became a much happier person in general as well as having increasingly healthier relationships with others.

The second way in which your boundaries can be compromised is when another person tells you that you are responsible for their state of being. They are, in essence, telling you things about both your own self and their self that are not true. Logically, it makes no sense whatsoever to believe that you are able to control the actions, attitudes, and decisions of another person. It's like saying you possess some supernatural remote control apparatus and that the other person is nothing more than a remote controlled vehicle, with no thoughts, no will, and no feelings of their own. Yes, you can influence other people, but they are not empty automatons fated to blindly, unthinkingly follow outside directions.

 **Food for thought...**

"A breakdown of personal boundaries was a serious part of [Jim] Jones' relationship with his congregation. Just as Mickey Hughes forced Francine to take responsibility for him, so Jim Jones did with his entire congregation. Jones demanded that his followers take responsibility for his actions, reactions, emotions, thoughts, decisions, health and so on. It was the group's fault that he could not lead them without abusing them. If only they would be good, then he could be kind. If only they would learn the lessons he set for them, then he could be patient. This one set of tactics set up the members of Peoples Temple for a vast number of emotional toeholds, including guilt, shame and self-recrimination.

"I find that this stance, this breakdown of personal boundaries, has some very interesting implications. For example, by implication the only time that Jones could be kind was when his followers were good....One wonders if he realized that he was saying he was incapable of simply existing as a kind person. Food for thought."  
(Peterson, 2003, p.232)

### ***Just Say No to Excuses***

Excuse-making is something manipulators will teach and encourage in their victims. This is usually directed toward you making excuses for the manipulator

## Protection From Harmful Relationships

(e.g. *he only did that because he had a really hard day at work and I should have been more supportive*). Please note that this instance of excuse-making has a second part: that of you taking responsibility, or at least partial responsibility, for whatever "his" actions were. We have already seen that this is part and parcel of the need for maintaining healthy boundaries between "Me" and "You." However, even if the second part of this particular excuse was not said, excusing the behavior (or attitude or decisions) of another person works to destroy your needed limits of tolerance.

I would like to differentiate here between excuses and reasons. Excuses try to lay the blame somewhere other than on the shoulders of the person who is truly responsible. To use the above example, even if "he had a really hard day at work," he is still responsible for his actions. On the other hand, you can explain the reasons for your actions, while still taking responsibility for them. You can expect and require those who are in intimate relationships with you to also have reasons for their actions, beliefs, thoughts, etc.... and yes, take responsibility for the aftermath of those actions.

If someone isn't willing to be mature enough, honest enough and ethical enough to own their own responsibilities, they are not worthy of maintaining a close relationship with you. And on your part, accepting a relationship with a person who isn't ready to take part in a mature, close relationship is only asking to be hurt.

Think through what you need and require in a relationship. Choose your limits. Stick to your guns.





## **Step 4**

### **Build Decision-Making Skills**

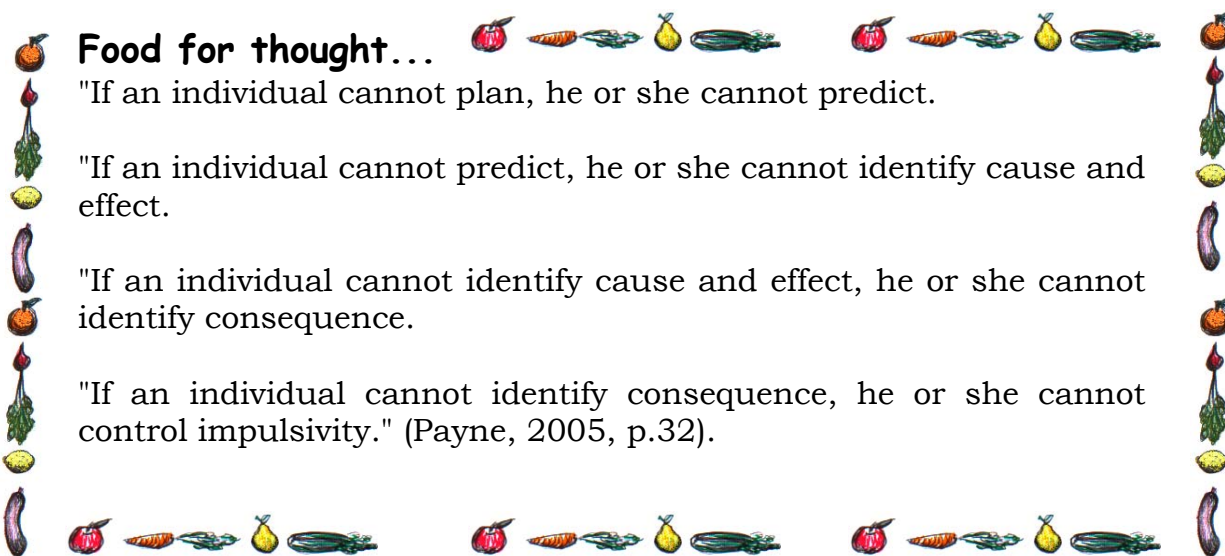
Independence cannot occur until you are able to make viable, well-reasoned decisions for yourself. You were not born with an ability to plan, or to see cause and effect. These are learned patterns of thought. If you are not taught that your actions have consequences, you may very well never see the connections between your actions or reactions and the events and situations that emerge from them.

#### ***Hone Your Ability to Forecast***

In order to have the ability to make a well-based decision, you must build your ability to forecast probable outcomes. You must make the link between cause and effect.

This concept of cause and effect is crucial. Prior to learning this concept, the structure of our memories tends toward a random, episodic story structure. The ability to learn, itself, is impaired. The person's environment will be much more likely to be perceived as being unpredictable, unstable, and possibly dangerous.

Without the concept of cause and effect, we cannot learn to plan, nor can we learn to predict.

 **Food for thought...**

"If an individual cannot plan, he or she cannot predict.

"If an individual cannot predict, he or she cannot identify cause and effect.

"If an individual cannot identify cause and effect, he or she cannot identify consequence.

"If an individual cannot identify consequence, he or she cannot control impulsivity." (Payne, 2005, p.32).

Such a person lives in the present, without the ability to direct their choices to desired outcomes in the future. Such a person is continually a victim to their own or others' impulses and spur-of-the-moment ideas. They have not decided their own direction, and so are at the mercy of the winds. They are prime targets for manipulative and harmful relationships.

***Thought, Not Emotion, Impulse, or Imagination***

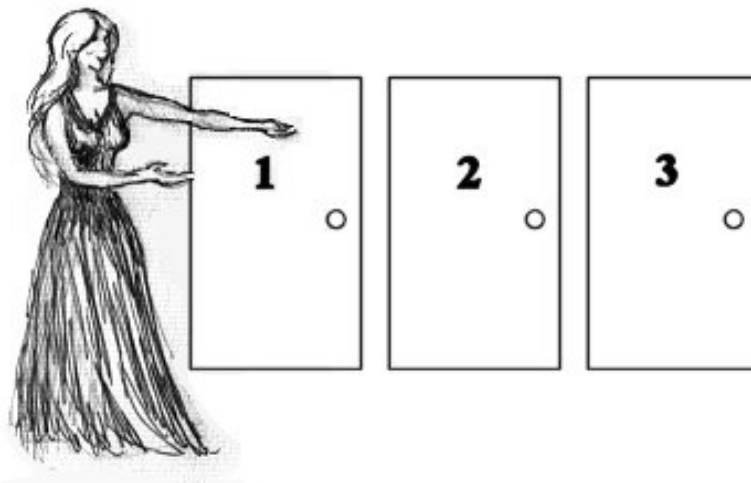
We often use emotion or imagination to make our decisions. Advertisers especially want you to make decisions based on an emotional response rather than a rational, reasoned response. They push your buttons hoping that you'll buy on impulse, without taking the time to assess and think about the purchase.

Manipulators are even more likely to push for impulsive, emotion- and imagination-based decisions from their targets. Thought, especially critical thought, is the antithesis of manipulation. Critical thinking is like an antidote to its poison.

Critical thought does not mean being judgmental, finding fault, or being harsh. In this case, "critical" is referring to undertaking an in-depth analysis and evaluation. It means to look at both the negative and positive aspects of the subject in question, objectively weighing all factors. It is derived from the ancient Greek for "skillful judging/decision-making".

Those who are attempting to draw you into a harmful relationship will often try to keep you from critical thought. They will keep you busy; they won't allow you privacy or peace to think things through on your own. One of the best ways to counteract this pressure is to have already made your decisions about important aspects of your life, your belief-systems, and your expectations of yourself and others.

### *Option One Is Rarely the Best Option*



Many of us default to the first answer that comes along. You have so much to do, it is simply easier to say "sure," rather than look for the best answer. When the question is of relative unimportance (do you want a soft drink, coffee or tea with lunch) taking the first option to present itself in your mind isn't going to do you much damage. However, when you are faced with an important or even a

crucial decision, you must get into the habit of actively searching for as many options as possible before you weigh each one for its effectiveness, applicability, and do-ability. You must weight each option in light of your own beliefs, abilities, and ethics.

### ***Experience Is the Best (And Sometimes the Only) Teacher***

One of the things I have grown very aware of over the years is the need to meet each situation, especially the difficult ones, as teaching tools. I have found that Experience is indeed a great teacher; through experiencing stressful circumstances, I have been able to identify places within my own selfhood that needed more work. I have also seen how much strength – strength of purpose, of emotional stability, of critical thought processes – I have gained through meeting the challenges Life continues to present to me. The same will be true for you, as well.

It is through Experience that you will find your most needful, your greatest lessons. Use each of your experiences. Lessons in growing yourself to be your very best can be found in all of the darkest places, if you are dogged enough and honest enough to dig within the deepest recesses of your own psyche.

In a different vein, let me add something else. Just as you accept and glean from the lessons Life presents as it challenges you, accept that you may suggest the “best choice” from your perspective to a loved one, especially if they are your child, but that they will also learn better if they are allowed to make “bad” choices. They must be allowed to make mistakes, too. Just as you want to protect your own autonomy and independence, you must allow others to have their independence as well. Support and guidance are the keys; not control.





## Step 5

### Make Those Internal Decisions

Once you have learned how to make decisions, it is time to make the most important decisions of all; the decisions that lead to the "who" of who you are. Unfortunately, many of us drift along without even considering making such decisions. We assume that we are who we are and that there aren't any decisions to make. We often don't even recognize the existence of the decision to know ourselves...to find out who we already are at this very moment...to discover the why's of what we do, we think, we believe and we feel.

The truth of the matter is the less you know yourself the more likely it becomes that you will fall into harmful relationships. The more you try and hide things about yourself even from yourself...those things that you find hard to admit to others or to acknowledge about you...the more likely you are to be caught up in a harmful relationship.

**In order to help protect yourself, you must do four things:**

\* **Know who you are:** Knowing yourself demands utmost honesty and a willingness to dig into the depths of your psyche, even when it becomes uncomfortable. There are almost always parts of your inner being that you would prefer not to know about. For example, I know I have a tendency toward impatience in certain situations.

\* **Understand who you are and why you are the way you are:** Knowing and understanding are two separate things. Understanding means you have dug around enough within your self that you can answer why you have a particular trait. For example, I understand that my impatience is an expression of frustration when confronted with situations in which I feel I should be able to accomplish more than I am actually able to do. My impatience is the result of an overly optimistic evaluation, whether of my own abilities, the willingness of another to hear what I have to say, or the conduciveness of the environment to the plans I have laid.

\* **Accept who you are, even the things about yourself you don't like much:** This can be a very difficult thing for some people, especially because acceptance often gets confused with approval. When I say to you to accept yourself, this simply means you need to accept the truth, the reality, of all parts of yourself. Even those parts you may not care for very much. Following the example from above, I have had to accept the reality that I can become impatient...very impatient at times. Now, this is hardly something I like about myself. Not in the least. But I cannot change what I refuse to acknowledge. Before you can begin to work on something, you must swallow the bitter pill and accept that it exists in the first place.

\* **Work to change or modify those aspects of yourself that you determine need improvement:** Once you accept the existence of all your varied parts then comes the decision, and let's admit it the sheer hard work, to

change those aspects of yourselves that you aren't comfortable with. These aspects could be attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, thought patterns, emotional responses, and so on. Through your understanding of where that aspect came from (such as my own tendency toward nonobjective evaluation resulting in frustration which in turn led to impatience in the above example) you will grow to understand the steps you need to take in order to modify or even discontinue it. For myself, I needed to examine the validity of my own expectations – those false evaluations – that resulted in impatience. Once I began to objectively, rationally study those expectations, I began to realize how...well...\*sheepish sigh\*...how foolish they were. At that point those expectations became pretty easy to get rid of, although some of them had become actual habits of thought. But like any bad habit, replace it with a good habit for forty days and you're well on the way to success.

The point is, by knowing the cause of a particular aspect, you can modify that cause and thereby modify the effect, or in other words modify the aspect you are trying to change. And let's face it. You are on a hero's journey...the journey of your life. All the most interesting, the strongest heroes from the stories are the ones who learn more about their inner self, as well as more about the outer world, during the story's journey. Think of story heroes as disparate as Luke Skywalker and Ebenezer Scrooge. And yet both learned that down deep, below their everyday facades, they were in actuality quite different from what they had believed themselves to be. They learned about their inner selves. You can, too.

### ***Deciding Your Deep-Down Definitions***

A great deal of learning about yourself is actually the process of deciding who you will be. Consciously deciding, not just drifting from circumstance to circumstance. When you drift that way, you are operating on assumptions of who you are, not on actual decisions you have made about who you are. As such, you are much more vulnerable than you realize to having someone else

begin to make decisions about who you are and who you should be. And the hardcore reality is that decisions are almost always stronger than assumptions.

Accordingly, to reduce your vulnerability to its lowest level, you need to replace assumptions with decisions. And not just an off-hand decision, either. The more thought-through your decisions are, the more you have delved into your inner being and found out the “why's” as well as the “how's” of how you operate as a person, the stronger those decisions become. The harder they are for a manipulator to overwrite them. It begins with knowing and understanding your inner self...your core concepts that guide your steps along the path of your life.

How you define your core concepts greatly effects who you determine yourself to be, and also reduces your vulnerability. Your core concepts will include the way in which you look at the people and world around you, your attitudes, your dreams and desires, your spiritual beliefs, your ethics, even the thoughts associated with your memories. This also includes what you believe is needed for a good relationship: those things that you decide you must have in a friend, and those things you decide you must have in an intimate partner. These are things that you need to define and make a firm, fully conscious decision upon.

### ***Self-Determination as a Choice***

One of those decisions will need to be the decision on whether or not you wish to be self-determined...to reach for autonomy...to be guided by your own volition, not driven by subconscious baggage or the will of others. Once you have made the decision for autonomy, you need to begin working on gaining it. Learning to be self-determined is just that: self-determination is a learned behavior. It is a matter of learning that you can control your actions and reactions, but otherwise, there is very little you can truly control. The outside world is just that: outside your self, outside your boundaries, outside your control. You can influence your environment and the people around you,

certainly, but ultimately you cannot truly control any of it. Again, you can only control your own actions and reactions.

"What do the people do when it snows in Montreal?" The old woman cocked her head and waited with sparrow-bright eyes for the young girl's answer. The girl thought for a moment, and then brightly answered, "They put on their coats!"

"Ha!" cried the old woman. "They stay indoors! So, tell me. What do the people do in Montreal when it snows?"

"They stay indoors."

"Ha-ha!" the old woman chortled. "They go skiing! So, now tell me what the people do when it snows in Montreal?"

"Uh, they stay indoors at the ski lodge?"

The old woman gave a rich throaty chuckle. "Silly goose. They shovel their sidewalks." She winked at the young girl. "So tell me, little one. What do they do in Montreal when it snows?"

The young girl frowned and stomped her foot. "They get mad!"

The old woman's head bridled in mock surprise. "Ho-ho little girl. And what good would it do anyone to get mad at the snow? The snow is only being itself, after all, and it is inevitable that it will snow in Montreal." The old woman shook her head. "Oh no, the people in Montreal are not so foolish as to get mad at something so far out of their control."

The girl harrumphed. "Well, then, they move to Florida," she asserted.

The old woman burst into delighted laughter. "And is Montreal deserted, then? Is it a ghost town?" The woman looked at the girl with warm affection dancing in her eyes. "No, people live there still. So what do the people in Montreal do when it snows?"

The girl's face crinkled up. "I don't know."

The old woman wrapped her arm around the child and held her close. "Why, little bird, they learn to deal with it."

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A large part of being able to maintain self-determination is to recognize your personal limitations and also to continue to respect your own and others' personal boundaries. Perfection is an ideal, and as such is unattainable. Personal growth, however, is always within your grasp. It is up to you to decide whether you will grow, stagnate, or dwindle.





## **Step 6**

### **Examine How You Relate to Relationships**

You have now discovered and decided many of those critical aspects of who you are and who you are determined to grow yourself to be. Now it is time to focus on one of those aspects to an even deeper degree: how you relate to relationships.

#### ***Your Relationship With Yourself***

Did you know you a relationship with yourself? How you think about yourself, what you tell yourself about yourself, how you imagine yourself to be, and how you feel about yourself are all aspects of your relationship with yourself.

Self-concept and self-image are two related ideas, but ones that have very distinct influences in regards to your relationship with yourself. Most people use these two terms interchangeably, and yet there is a critical difference between them. Self-concept is based in thought. The best, healthiest self-concepts are based on a deep understanding of who you are and why you are

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that way. Healthy self-concepts are based on objective-as-possible evaluations you do of yourself. Healthy self-concepts acknowledge your limitations and faults as well as your strengths and abilities. Healthy self-concepts are the result of being honest with yourself. Healthy self-concepts allow you to be honest with others.

Self-images, on the other hand, are based in your imagination; a self-image is a created picture you present to yourself about who you are. It is nothing more than an imaginary construct. Where a self-image exists it will be unhealthy for the person holding it. Self-images are created in order for the person to avoid certain truths about themselves that they don't want to face and don't want others to know. A self-image is a set of comfortable or even aggrandizing falsehoods that the person tells themselves.

In some cases, the person will consciously know that they are lying to themselves; in other cases the person will have buried the truth so far under denial that they do not consciously remember that their idea of who they are is a fabrication. In either case, the discrepancies between the truth and the image will cause the person distress...this can take the form of anxiety, stress, physical symptoms, insecurity, a volatile temper, and so on.

In terms of harmful relationships, self-images are deadly. Because self-images are based on imagination, they can be very fluid. It is easy for a manipulative person to maneuver you into modifying or completely changing your self-image. It is also very easy for a manipulative person to play to your self-image in order to get you to do what they want. In addition, when you have a self-image as opposed to a true self-concept, you are already lying to yourself and others. This makes it much, much harder to evaluate the truthfulness of others. In other words, you are more vulnerable to being lied to and easily fooled.

Take the time to look over Step Five again. Look at your internal decisions. Are they based on an objective and fully truthful self-concept, or are they based, in whole or part, on a more palatable self-image. Decisions that are based on self-image and self-deceit will not be able to withstand outside attacks from a manipulator, nor will those decisions be as likely to be able to stand under the internal stress that crisis situations in life can cause.

The good news is, however, that decisions based on objective evaluations and true self-concepts are much, much stronger. Those decisions can help you avoid becoming too enmeshed in a harmful relationship and can weather much more aggressive attacks from a manipulator, as well as help you remain stable even when the world around you is not.

### ***Why Do You Seek Relationships***

Here's a question you may have never thought to ask yourself: Why do you want relationships with others? What are you seeking when you enter into or are in a relationship? Are you hoping that the relationship will fill a void or need? Are you expecting the relationship to provide you with a feeling of acceptance?

Let's get even deeper, more personal, and closer to home: Why do you want an intimate relationship with another? Are you assuming "the right one" will fulfill your need to be loved? Do you want your partner to take care of you, to take responsibility for you? Do you expect them to give you everything you want?

Having underlying motivations, hopes, assumptions, or expectations sets you up for problems. At best, you will feel unfulfilled and disappointed in your relationships. At worse, you will be easy prey for a manipulative person to catch and use those hopes, dreams, expectations and assumptions against you. And somewhere in the middle, you are likely to find that your relationships may

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begin well, but over time will eventually dissolve into blaming, accusations, hurt feelings, hurtful actions, and generalized misery.

How do you avoid all these woes?

The first step to truly being a friend to someone else is to be a friend to yourself, first. Do you like you? If you met yourself walking down the street and started a conversation with you, would you like the person you were talking to? Would you enjoy being with you?

The first step to truly being able to give love to another is to be able to give love to yourself. Do you love you? Are you lovable? Are you comfortable with who you are? Are you able to be alone with yourself for extended periods of time?

By fulfilling your needs within yourself before you ever go looking for an outside relationship, you are able to give yourself fully within the relationship and receive fully as well. By fulfilling your needs within yourself, you are also closing the gaps that manipulative people instinctively (and sometimes intentionally) catch hold of to begin drawing you into a harmful relationship.

If you find it hard not to look outside yourself to fulfill your needs, pinpoint your weak areas. Identify your driving motives in regards to relationships. Examine the things about yourself that you don't care for. If you are looking for acceptance, work to accept yourself. Accept where you are now and accept the things you cannot change. (You may have to allow yourself to grieve before you will be able to accept. For example, you may need to grieve lost health or physical attractiveness. ) You may need to work to change or control the things that bother you about yourself, you may need to work to change your expectations of yourself, or you may need to work to change your inner definitions, especially when you have labeled aspects of yourself "good" and "bad".

For example, I used to think I had a "bad" temper, in that I could get very angry. I had to re-think my definition of "bad" in regards to anger. I had to realize that my ability to get angry was going to always be a part of me, and accept that fact. I also had to realize that anger, in and of itself, is neither bad nor good. It simply exists. What I do with my anger is what is important! Do I use my anger to protect myself and others? Or do I use my anger to abuse myself and others? Do I encourage myself to be an angry person, to allow my anger to stew and grow, or do I track down the cause and rectify the problem, thereby returning myself to a state of peace? Do I recognize that anger does not make me a stronger person? It is high energy, but a high level of energy is not at all the same as strength.

Just through the above example, I hope you have been able to see that there are many questions to ask. Some are asked at the surface level, but many more are asked in order to dig through the surface to the underlying ideas, concepts, assumptions, and expectations that fuel so much of what we do and feel. This process is especially important as you examine how you relate to relationships.

### ***Prerequisites for Healthy Relationships***

Full and truly healthy relationships cannot occur until some basic prerequisites are fulfilled:

You must be comfortable with yourself; you do not need another person to fulfill you or your life.

You recognize and accept that you are responsible for you -- for your thoughts, feelings, and actions.

You do not accept responsibility for another person – their thoughts, feelings or actions.

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You are honest with yourself, especially in regards to who you are.

You have consciously set limits of tolerance on what you will accept from others in your relationships with them, and from yourself.

You must be yourself and allow the other person to know who you truly are. It is easy to get caught up in a "put the best foot forward" style of interaction when you meet someone you think you may connect with; be careful that this doesn't inadvertently give them the wrong impression of who you really are, day to day.

You must be ready and willing to wait; be choosy. Wait for the person who likes, respects, and appreciates you for who you truly are.

Remember that being friendly and being a friend are two separate things.

### ***The Healthy Hero Within***

We all see ourselves as the hero of our own story, our own lives. This is just as it should be: we should feel that we are meant to be in control of our own self...our actions, attitudes, and beliefs. It is up to you to decide to accept and, yes, even embrace your herohood. This is a large and important part of your relationship with yourself.

You already are a hero. It is inevitable. It is a foundation we humans all have in common, even though we are not conscious of it. Even people who are profoundly developmentally disabled have an active sense of their own herohood. You cannot decide to be a hero. That decision is out of your hands. All you can decide is what kind of hero you will be.

You see, there are a number of types of heroes. As far as the stories go, there are the ones we think of first, the knight-in-shining-armor, bigger-than-life style of heroism. And there are also anti-heroes: villains. Villains, or in our society's nomenclature criminals and miscreants, continue to see themselves as heroes, even if by general standards their actions are quite un-heroic. They still see their self as the hero – the protagonist – of their own story. Then there are the failed heroes. Good people, well-intentioned, but ineffectual for one reason or another. The heroes that are not willing to answer the call to their own heroism; the people who are too afraid of what they will see in the mirror, and so never fully and truthfully face themselves.

Let me put it another way, though, past the ways that stories and storytellers look at heroes. Let me put it in terms of healthy versus unhealthy.

Healthy heroes strive for personal growth. They demand honesty from themselves. They accept who they are: both their gifts and abilities, but also their limitations. They do not hide from the knowledge of their own dark side, but learn to control it, to harness its energy to be the best hero, the most heroic hero, they can be. They respect who they are, and they also respect other people. They work to accentuate their own sense of heroism and self-determination without taking anything from another person's autonomy. That is the ideal healthy hero.

Unhealthy heroes, on the other hand, do not respect others. Oh, an unhealthy hero may proclaim that they do, but their actions and attitudes toward others will inevitably show that they don't truly respect others. They will break down personal boundaries rather than uphold them. They will hide the truth of their self from themselves or from others. They may either exaggerate or ignore their own abilities and limitations. Consciously or subconsciously, they will lie to themselves or to others.

## Protection From Harmful Relationships

Here is my challenge to you. Be the best hero you can be. Take up the challenge of learning about your self. Take up the challenge of accepting your self. Discover what makes you feel most heroic...what makes you feel best about yourself. Use that knowledge to enhance your herohood, while also recognizing that you must safeguard your herohood from manipulation. Set your feet on a deliberate, conscious path of herohood.

It is my wish for you that you do find healthy, fulfilling relationships as you travel your own hero's journey of life. Be proactive; build your shield against harmful relationships. Teach those you care about how to do the same. Doing so opens the door to the important relationship of all: the relationship you have with your own Self.

Hero to hero, I salute you.



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## About the Author

Beth Peterson is an unusual combination of visual artist and social scientist. Before pursuing her Master of Fine Art she became ensnared by an extreme manipulator. This experience, while extremely painful and difficult, provided the seed that led Beth into the social sciences.



Having gone through the crucible, Beth's goals shifted. She became driven to both understand what had happened to her and to help others understand and avoid similar experiences. With this in mind Beth returned to school and earned a Masters in psychology. As chief psychologist in a community mental health agency, she worked with some of the toughest clients, including sexual offenders and survivors of abuse. Currently, Beth works with developmentally disabled adults with histories of behavioral outbursts. This has opened another window of observation into the inner workings of people.

As both artist and psychologist Beth has been trained in the art of evaluative observation. Complex patterns fascinate her. This ability to recognize and work with patterns is part of what is often called "the artist's eye" and she has translated this ability from visual patterns to the patterns of the human psyche and human interactions.

In addition to this work Beth also wrote *People Who Play God: How Ultra-Authorities Enslave the Hearts, Minds, and Souls of Their Victims*, available at [www.xlibris.com/PeopleWhoPlayGod.html](http://www.xlibris.com/PeopleWhoPlayGod.html).

Beth continues speaking and writing on human interactions; she is also a peer counselor and informational source through her website, [www.beth-peterson.com](http://www.beth-peterson.com). And as always, Beth remains an active artist. Her art-related website is [www.wingedblue.com](http://www.wingedblue.com).