

Demystifying Toxic Romantic Relationships:
Identifying Behaviors and Post-Breakup Outcomes

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation demarks the start of an empirical study of toxic romantic relationships. Three primary tasks were undertaken: (1) uncover characteristics of toxic romantic relationships, (2) develop a Toxic Relationship Behaviors scale, and (3) determine how toxic relationship behaviors and coping behaviors associate with breakup distress and post-traumatic growth following breakup. For aim 1, an inductive qualitative analysis examined toxic romantic relationships behaviors mentioned in Reddit and Quora threads. Data ($n = 1,615$) were classified under 14 themes representing toxic relationship behaviors and indicated one partner predominantly engaged in toxic relationship behaviors, characterized by power, control, and self-centeredness. For aim 2, a survey was launched to develop a Toxic Relationship Behavior scale and investigate relationships among toxic relationship behaviors, breakup distress, post-breakup coping behaviors, and post-traumatic growth. Exploratory factor analysis showed six Toxic Relationship Behavior subscales: (1) isolating, (2) displaying righteous self-centeredness, (3) walking on eggshells, (4) criticizing and conveying contempt, (5) surveilling, and (6) engaging in intermittent reinforcement. For aim 3, a quantitative study ($n = 168$) was conducted using the Toxic Relationship Behaviors scale to determine how toxic relationship behaviors and coping behaviors associate with breakup distress and post-traumatic growth. Results indicated emotional breakup distress was positively associated with focusing on the ex and seeking social support. Cognitive breakup distress was positively associated with surveilling and displaying righteous self-centeredness, as well as coping by focusing on the ex, seeking social support, and solitude. Personal growth positively associated with intermittent reinforcement, walking on eggshells, and righteous self-centeredness, as well as the coping strategies positive distraction and seeking social support. Thus, the combination of displaying righteous self-centeredness, walking on eggshells, and productive coping associated with the highest levels of personal growth. Walking on eggshells and seeking social support also predicted heightened appreciation of relationships and increased sensitivity toward others after the breakup. Coping through positive distractions was also positively related to increased sensitivity to others. The final chapter discusses findings across both studies and outlines directions for future research on toxic relationship behaviors.

*This dissertation is dedicated to all
people—past, present, and future—who experience
toxic romantic relationships.*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

With a taste of your lips, I'm on a ride.

You're toxic, I'm slippin' under.

With a taste of a poison paradise...

I'm addicted to you,

don't you know that you're toxic?

-Britney Spears

Since the debut of Britney Spears's *Toxic* (2009), the word “toxic” has become a mainstream term to describe people who engage in hurtful and destructive behavior, as well as relationships that are unhealthy. In 2018, “toxic” was named “Word of the Year” (Steinmetz, 2018). Although the idea of toxic relationships has taken off in pop culture at least in the United State (and likely beyond), scholars have not yet embraced this concept. There is, however, considerable scholarly work on topics such as “dysfunctional” relationships (e.g., Larsen, 1982; Kaslow, 1996; Miller, 1999; Brenner et al., 2015) and the “dark side” of relational communication (e.g., Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998; Cupach & Spitzberg, 2007; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011), some of which could perhaps be unified under the idea of studying toxic relationships.

Moving from the Mainstream to Empirical Science

In the past, relationship scholars have explored concepts from popular culture to better understand them from a research perspective. For example, “on-again off-again” and “friends-with-benefits” relationships were hot topics in the popular press before they were studied empirically. Dailey and colleagues' (2009) work explained the complexities of on-again off-again (or cycling) relationships, describing how and why some couples often cycle through breakups and renewals. In doing so, they sought to develop a broad overview of on-again/off-again relationships and identify concepts, such as relational uncertainty and turbulence, that could help scholars and laypeople better understand these relationships (Dailey et al., 2009). Later, Dailey and colleagues (2013) interviewed college students about on-again/off-again relationships and

ultimately outlined five types of on-again/off-again relationships. Recently, Dailey and colleagues investigated on-again/off-again relationships in the context of sexual experiences (2020a) and relational dispositions—attachment, implicit beliefs, and communal orientation (2020b). Although not an explicit area of research prior to Dailey and colleagues (2009), it is now clear that on-again/off-again relationships are important relationships to investigate how people stagnate or grow from “off” times in these relationships.

Another type of relationship worthy of exploration is the friends-with-benefits relationship. When “hookups” became a more obvious part of the sexual scene, scholars began investigating different types of sexual relationships, such as friends with benefits relationships. Mongeau and colleagues (2013) explored friends with benefits relationships on the premise that these relationships differ from committed couple relationships because of the lack of strings (levels of romantic attachment). Additionally, these relationships differ from hook ups because of the nature of their friendships (how well they know one-another). To investigate these claims, Mongeau and colleagues (2013) asked college students to define friends with benefits relationships in their own words as well as report their experiences with friends with benefits relationships. Through open and axial coding, they identified, labeled, and defined seven types of friends with benefits relationships. Research on friends-with-benefits continues to expand, most recently looking at social support (Mongeau et al., 2019) and motivations for friends-with-benefits relationships (Stein et al., 2020).

Ghosting is another example of researchers explicating and adding contextual information to a concept that was first popularized in the media. On Urban Dictionary (n.d.), the top definition of ghosting is from 2016 with 2,436 upvotes:

When a person cuts off all communication with their friends or the person they're dating, with zero warning or notice before hand. You'll mostly see them avoiding friend's phone calls, social media, and avoiding them in public.

I haven't seen Tom in 3 months. I think he may be ghosting me.

An earlier definition from 2009 states “When a guy seems really into you then suddenly disappears. *I thought that he wanted to be my boyfriend, but it turns out that he was just ghosting me because he hasn't called in five days*” (Urban Dictionary, n.d.).

According to Merriam-Webster, the term “ghosting” in the context of romantic pursuits first emerged in 2006, with Merriam-Webster’s dictionary officially adding the definition of the term to their records in 2017 (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In 2007, Starks investigated the phenomena of ghosting in an academic journal with limited reach; however the academic community did not fully embrace the concept until the mid-to-late 2010s. A *Psychology Today* article, *Why Ghosting Hurts to Much*, cites popular online magazines like *Elle*, *Vice*, and *Thought Catalog* to describe ghosting (Vilhauer, 2015). Now there is a strong body of research about ghosting, looking at ghosting as a relational dissolution strategy (LeFebvre et al., 2017; LeFebvre et al., 2019), navigating the effects of being ghosted (LeFebvre, et al., 2020a; LeFebvre, et al., 2020b; Timmermans et al., 2021), beliefs around destiny and ghosting (Freedman et al., 2019), and even relationships between the dark triad and ghosting (Jonason et al., 2021).

Scholarly investigation into the topics presented above has increased understanding of the motivations, effects, and communication processes associated with on-again/off-again relationships, friends with benefits relationships, and ghosting. Given the paths of development for concepts such as on-again/off-again relationships, friends-with-benefits relationships, and ghosting, I propose *toxic romantic relationships* warrant similar investigation. As such, this dissertation focuses on better understanding what constitutes toxic communication in romantic relationships, as well as how toxic communication and coping behaviors associate with distress and post-traumatic growth after toxic romantic relationships end.

A Google Scholar search of the term “toxic relationships” yields few results. There is a scholarly book on toxic relationships between parents and their adult children (Dunham et al., 2011), a dissertation on toxic relationships between military service members (Gale, 2020), and an article on toxic relationships with managers (Lubit, 2004). There are also a limited number of books and articles referenced in Google Scholar on how to move on after being in a relationship with an abusive, exploitive, predatory, or narcissistic partner (e.g., Carnes, 2018; Carruthers,

2013; Dines, 2020; Harrison & Dixon, 2019; Houston, 2012). The two scholarly works that have focused on types or characteristics of toxic relationships have done so through the lens of a theological (McLemore, 2008) or policy intervention (Solferino & Tessitore, 2019) perspective.

A Google search¹ on Tuesday, November 24, 2020 of the term “toxic romantic relationship” revealed 17.9 million hits. Considering most people do not look beyond the first page of results (Shelton, 2017), I examined results on the first two pages. Of the 20 results, 14 results presented information based on research and clinical expertise (MFTs, LPCs, LCSWs, PsyDs, and PhDs). Additionally, I searched the term “toxic relationship.” After eliminating repeat-articles and YouTube videos, the search yielded three more articles, bringing the total number of “general search” articles to 17.

The *Psychology Today* website is not as “search-friendly” as research databases, so after some trial-and-error, the primary investigator searched the term “toxic relationship.”² After scouring through articles in reverse chronological order, 10 articles using the term “toxic” in the title relating to romantic relationships were identified for a one-year span (November 24, 2019 – November 24, 2020)³. Following this search, the primary investigator searched for the same term, “toxic relationship,” organized by relevance. Before topics began straying from toxic romantic relationships, the search yielded 30 results. From preliminary browsing, topics range from identifying toxic people and toxic romantic relationships as well as providing advice on how to leave toxic romantic relationships and heal following relational dissolution. For now, people turn to pop culture for information about toxic relationships.

Conceptualizations of Toxic Relationships in the Mainstream

An Amazon.com search of toxic relationships reveals numerous books on toxic relationships, several of which focus on learning how to set boundaries and heal (Campell, 2019; Howard, 2016; MacKenzie, 2019; Miller, 2020). Many of these books focus specifically on toxic

¹ Google is the most commonly used search engine, with more than 90% of searches conducted through Google (StatCounter, 2020).

² Including the word “romantic” yielded excessive results excluding the idea of toxicity and was thus eliminated from the search term.

³ Some other terms, like “toxic positivity” and “toxic shame” were present, as were titles with “toxic family.” Given the present investigation into toxic romantic relationships, the primary investigator included romantic relationship articles or articles that included romantic relationships as well as close interpersonal relationships.

relationships with people who have personality disorders (such as narcissism or borderline personality disorder) as well as relationships characterized by emotional abuse, manipulation and gaslighting, addiction, or codependency (e.g., Aston, 2020; Cohen, 2020; Kelley, 2020; Posey, 2019). One book specifically looks at toxic people but not toxic relationships (Glass, 1995). These books on toxic relationships range in terms of the qualifications of the authors and the quality of the information provided. The same is true for articles on toxic relationships on the Internet. However, when looking at articles produced by individuals with credentials as psychologists or social scientists, some of the same patterns emerge.

A comprehensive definitions of toxic relationships was offered by clinical psychologist Thomas L. Cory in an article on *Healthscope*, a health and wellness magazine. Cory juxtaposes toxic relationships with healthy relationships this way:

By definition, a toxic relationship is a relationship characterized by behaviors on the part of the toxic partner that are emotionally and, not infrequently, physically damaging to their partner. While a healthy relationship contributes to our self-esteem and emotional energy, a toxic relationship damages self-esteem and drains energy. A healthy relationship involves mutual caring, respect, and compassion, an interest in our partner's welfare and growth, an ability to share control and decision-making, in short, a shared desire for each other's happiness. A healthy relationship is a safe relationship, a relationship where we can be ourselves without fear, a place where we feel comfortable and secure. A toxic relationship, on the other hand, is not a safe place. A toxic relationship is characterized by insecurity, self-centeredness, dominance, control. We risk our very being by staying in such a relationship. To say a toxic relationship is dysfunctional is, at best, an understatement. (Cory, n.d., para. 4)

Although this definition is helpful to start conceptualizing toxic relationships and the communication that occurs within them, it operates on the assumption that only one of the relational partners is toxic. This may well be the case in many situations, such as when an individual is coping with a partner who has a personality disorder, but there are other situations where the interaction between two people is what makes a relationship toxic rather than one

partner's behavior. Cory's conceptualization also stresses emotional and physical abuse, which are elements that may not be present in all toxic romantic relationships. However, a few important notions can be garnered from this definition: toxic relationships damage self-esteem, drain the energy of the recipient of the toxic communication, and are characterized by self-centeredness and control. The extent to which these three characteristics are (or are not) central to toxic relationships has yet to be determined.

Anna Motz (2014), a clinical and forensic psychologist and psychoanalyst specializing in violence, offers an in-depth explanation of toxic couples that involve domestic violence in her book, *Toxic Couples: The Psychology of Domestic Violence*. In defining toxic couples, Motz (2014) makes an important distinction that is lacking in Cory's definition: the destructive dynamics of the *relationship* are toxic, not the individuals involved in the relationship. In other words, the interaction of the individuals results in the toxicity, not the individuals themselves. This is likely the case much, although not all, of the time. Even when one partner is responsible for most or all of the toxicity in a relationship, the other person may be playing a role by responding in an acquiescent manner. The extent to which toxicity is created and maintained by one or both partners may vary depending on the type of toxic relationship. Motz's book also focuses on domestic violence, a quality not necessarily present in toxic romantic relationships. Yet her conceptualization of toxic couples aligns with another conceptualization proposed in an article on *PsychAlive*. *PsychAlive* (2014) is a platform for clinical psychologists, licensed marriage and family therapists (MFT), and other relationship experts to provide helpful information and advice to laypersons in an easy-to-consume manner. The following is from a post about toxic relationships:

A toxic relationship is often characterized by repeated, mutually destructive modes of relating between a couple. These patterns can involve jealousy, possessiveness, dominance, manipulation, desperation, selfishness or rejection. However, one common theme in a toxic relationship involves the partners' intense draw toward each other, despite the pain they both cause one another. (PsychAlive, 2014, para. 2)

Again, the emphasis in this definition is the “modes of relating” and not the individuals themselves, although one person could be driving those patterns by acting in the ways described in this article (e.g., jealous, manipulative, desperate). Importantly, this definition outlines a crucial component of toxic relationships missing from the previous conceptualizations: the intense draw to one another despite the negative consequences of maintaining the relationship.

The conceptualizations posed by Cory (n.d.), Motz (2014), and PsychAlive (2014) function as a starting point in the systematic study of toxic relationships. Although the primary researchers is not yet attempting to develop a comprehensive definition of a toxic relationship, the aforementioned work aids in initial examinations of toxic relationships.

Aim of this Dissertation

This dissertation aims to connect popular culture ideas about toxic relationships—specifically toxic romantic relationships—with concepts studied in academia and relationship science. Overarching goals include (1) identify toxic relationship behaviors using a qualitative analysis, (2) develop toxic relationship behavior scales based on qualitative data, and (3) examine the relationship between toxic relationship behaviors and post-breakup outcomes. To begin this endeavor, the primary investigator located popular culture forums people turn to for relationship advice (i.e., Reddit and Quora). Data about toxic romantic relationships were extracted from one Reddit thread and one Quora thread. Toxic relationship behaviors emerged from the data through an inductive constant-comparative process outlined in Chapter 2. Following the identification and explication of toxic relationship behaviors, scales representing some of the key behaviors were created (see Chapter 3). Upon scale creation, a toxic romantic relationship survey was used to help assess the association(s) between toxic relationship behaviors, coping behaviors, and post-breakup outcomes (i.e., breakup distress, post-traumatic growth). The conceptual background and analytical process are delineated in Chapter 4. This dissertation concludes with Chapter 5, which includes a discussion of the qualitative and quantitative findings, how the findings relate to existing academic literature, main takeaways, and future directions for research on toxic romantic relationships.

CHAPTER 2
QUALITATIVE STUDY

You don't own me

I'm not just one of your many toys

-Lesley Gore (1963)

Although little direct scholarship exists on toxic romantic relationships, psychologists and relationship experts (and pop stars) have strong ideas about what constitutes a toxic romantic relationship. Moreover, relationship scholars in academia investigate phenomena likely present in toxic romantic relationships (see Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998; Cupach & Spitzberg, 2007; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011). Despite the dearth of academic research on toxic romantic relationships specifically, it appears that a few forces—particularly *control* and *relational bonds*—might influence why people stay in toxic romantic relationships. Control in toxic romantic relationships, defined as the ability to influence a relational partner's behaviors, is insidious. Behaviors enacted to control a partner may look innocent at first, such as a statement like, "Don't go out with friends tonight! Stay in with me instead!" Yet, those innocent requests can turn into expectations and demands that lead to one relational partner orchestrating the relationship.

The escalation of control over time may be related to relational bonds. Typically, relationships do not begin as toxic—building and maintaining a relational bond with someone must be enticing in some capacity, whether the aim is for affection, companionship, excitement, or resources. The perceived rewards of relational bonds can act as powerful motivators for people to acquiesce to partner demands. As the relational bond strengthens, partners enacting controlling behaviors may feel emboldened to accelerate their demands due to their partners' positive regard and commitment to the relationships. Although one partner may be predominantly engaging in controlling behaviors, the other partner's response contributes to the relationship dynamics (Motz, 2014).

Of importance, controlling behaviors may manifest for different reasons. Some people engage in controlling behaviors through the intentional manipulation of the people around them, whereas others engage in controlling behaviors due to a lack of romantic competence

(characterized by insight, mutuality, and emotion regulation; Davila et al., 2009; Davila et al., 2017). Moreover, controlling behaviors—intentional or otherwise—may also be rooted in certain personality disorders characterized by varying degrees of emotionality and manipulation. Whether the controlling behavior is due to intentional manipulation or lack of romantic competence, these behaviors result in toxicity in the relationship. Hence, understanding phenomena related to *control* and *relational bonds* provide a starting point to think about what characteristics might be most central to toxic romantic relationships. Thus, this chapter first outlines phenomena potentially linked to toxic romantic relationships, specifically relationship violence, trauma bonds, codependency, and patterns of behavior associated with cluster B personality disorders. Then, the research procedures are explicated. Following, results are discussed.

Phenomena Related to Toxic Romantic Relationships

Relationship Violence

Relationship experts reference relationship violence as a potential or central component of toxic relationships (Cory, n.d.; Motz, 2014). Violence in close interpersonal relationships is often referred to as domestic violence, intimate partner violence, dating violence, common couple violence, and domestic terrorism. Although these are all forms of relationship violence, there are differences in these forms of violence, and these differences likely reflect how toxic a relationship would be regarded. For example, intimate terrorism involves one partner using violence, usually along with intermittent reinforcement, as a method of controlling the other partner (Johnson et al., 2014). This seems more likely to be the type of violence that would characterize toxic romantic relationships as opposed to common couple violence that is reciprocal and occurs (often infrequently) in the context of a heated conflict (Johnson et al., 2014).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019), there are four overarching types of intimate partner violence behavior: physical violence (hitting, kicking, physical force), sexual violence (forcing, coercion, non-consent), stalking (pattern of repeated, unwanted attention that elicits fear), and psychological aggression (verbal and nonverbal communication used to mentally or emotionally harm someone or exert control). Thus, not all violence is physical, and psychological forms of abuse may be just as, or more central, to defining

toxic romantic relationships as physical forms of abuse. Importantly, regardless of the type of abuse, intimate partner violence varies in severity and frequency and can cause an abundance of adverse outcomes, including substance abuse, depression, anxiety, anti-social behaviors, and suicidal thoughts (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Foshee et al., 2013). Unfortunately, relationships wrought with violence follow a cycle.

Cycle of Abuse

In research on battered woman syndrome⁴, which began in the 1970s, Dr. Lenore Walker (2017) describes a cycle of violence—intermittent “good-bad” treatment⁵—present in abusive romantic relationships that keep targets of abuse in their relationships. The target observes the aggressor’s “good” behavior and believes the aggressor can change to engage in “good” behavior consistently. Walker (2017) outlines three phases: (I) tension-building; (II) acute battering incident; and (III) loving contrition.

After the “honeymoon” period of new relationships, when both relational partners have expressed some intention of commitment, phase I (tension-building) often begins. Phase I starts with a gradual escalation of “friction-causing” acts, such as name-calling and expression of relational dissatisfaction by the aggressor. In turn, the target placates and soothes the aggressor (Walker, 2017). Once tensions reach a boiling point, phase II (acute battering incident) occurs, with the aggressor engaging in explosive, harmful behavior toward the target. Notably, the severity of the event as well as its manifestation may vary from relationship-to-relationship; however, harmful behaviors do tend to escalate in severity over time. Following the explosive event, aggressors aim to mitigate the harm with phase III (loving contrition). Aggressors engage in reparative behaviors, such as apologizing profusely, asserting they will never say or do anything like that again, and/or showering the target with affection and gifts (Walker, 2017). The reparative behaviors act as positive reinforcement that renew hope in the target that the aggressor can change. “Good” behaviors may be short-lived or persist for some time, but the

⁴ Battered woman syndrome “as it was originally conceived, consisted of the pattern of the signs and symptoms that have been found to occur after a woman has been physically, sexually, and/or psychologically abused in an intimate relationship, when the partner (usually, but not always, a man) exerted power and control over the woman to coerce her into doing whatever he wanted, without regard for her rights or feelings” (Walker, 2017, p. 49).

⁵ The type and severity of “bad” behaviors vary (e.g., ignoring calls, destruction of property, bodily harm).

cycle continues with the inevitable escalation of friction between partners. The cycle of abuse may foster traumatic bonding.

Traumatic Bonding

Traumatic bonding occurs in relationships where (1) psychological aggression and/or physical abuse is present and (2) the target of the aggressor develops a strong attachment to the aggressor. Similar to toxic romantic relationships, elements of traumatic bonding are studied in scholarly work without the label of “traumatic bonding.” The key components of trauma bonds include power differentials and intermittent reinforcement⁶ (Dutton & Painter, 1993).

Power differentials or imbalances often “magnify so that each person’s sense of power or powerlessness feeds on itself” (Dutton & Painter, 1993, p. 107). The high-power partner is usually abusive and trying to control the low-power partner. The target of abuse (i.e., the low-power partner) begins to experience a decrease in both self-esteem and self-efficacy, which leads the target to depend more on the aggressor (i.e., the high-power partner). Paradoxically, though the aggressor is the person who makes the target feel bad, the target depends on the aggressor to make them feel better. At the same time, the aggressor depends on the target as a source of control, and thus engages in intermittent reinforcement. Intermittent reinforcement describes the phenomena of inconsistent good-bad treatment of an aggressor which, in turn, creates a strong emotional attachment from the target to the aggressor—a trauma bond⁷ (Dutton & Painter, 1993).

The power of a trauma bond may override a person’s desire to leave a relationship. Even though immediate fears for their well-being subside once they leave a relationship, their latent fears (e.g., being unlovable) emerge. Moreover, due to the emotional drain of the relationship and newfound vulnerability to latent fears, victims may impulsively go back to their partners (Dutton & Painter, 1993). The essence of the trauma bond is that the target has become conditioned to want the positive reinforcement they intermittently receive from the aggressor. Without hope of that reinforcement, targets become stressed and feel compelled to go back to the aggressor. In

⁶ Though originally grounded in physically abusive relationships, this also applies to emotionally abusive relationships.

⁷ Not all intermittent reinforcement leads to traumatic bonding.

sum, they see the source of their anxiety as the cure to it. Because trauma bonds and intermittent reinforcement often lead to targets feeling uncertainty and seeking approval from their aggressors, as well as aggressors seeking to control their partners, these behaviors may, in part, be related to codependency.

Codependency

Typically, people who are codependent have problematic aspects of their relationships. In romantic relationships, codependents are obsessive of their partners, reporting strong physical attraction, intense jealousy, and possessiveness (Springer et al., 1998). Codependency is:

A pattern of compulsive behaviors that is motivated by a dependence on another's approval and is designed to find a sense of safety, identity, and self-worth...[codependents] continually invest their self-esteem in the ability to control and influence behavior and feelings in others, as well as in themselves, even when faced with adverse consequences such as feelings of inadequacy after failure. (Springer et al., 1998)

As the initial queries into codependency, scholars have developed differing definitions of codependency. However, across definitions, the following general qualities characterize codependency: an external focus, self-sacrifice, interpersonal conflict and control, and emotional constraint (Dear et al., 2004 as cited in Bacon et al., 2018). In a phenomenological study of codependency, self-identified codependents acknowledged a lack of sense of self, feelings of abandonment in childhood, and emotional imbalance (Bacon et al., 2018). These ingredients seem to be a recipe for toxic romantic relationships and possibly indicative of cluster B personality disorders.

Characteristics Related to Cluster B Personality Disorders

People with personality disorders have enduring maladaptive ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that typically begin in adolescence or early adulthood and make interpersonal relationships difficult to develop and/or maintain (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013). According to the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (2013), there are three clusters of personality disorders: Cluster A, Cluster B, and Cluster C. People with Cluster B

personality disorders—antisocial, borderline, histrionic, and narcissistic—are often characterized as overly-emotional, dramatic, or erratic⁸ (APA, 2013) and are especially likely to have problems in interpersonal relationships⁹. The patterns of communication associated with the Cluster B personality disorders are commonly mentioned in the mainstream literature on toxic relationships.

Individuals with Cluster B personality disorders exhibit problems with impulse control, relationships, and emotional regulation (Lay, 2019). Moreover, individuals with Cluster B personality disorders can be quite charming and adept at drawing people into relationships (Lay, 2019). In other words, individuals' maladaptive communication patterns and superficial charm align with conditions to make a relationship toxic because they are enticing to others and foster strong initial attraction. Importantly, relationships can be toxic without either partner having a personality disorder. People without personality disorders can engage in some of the same destructive behaviors as people with personality disorders, though they are unlikely to exhibit as strong a pattern of these behaviors as people with personality disorders. Cluster B personality disorders and associated behaviors are outlined next.

Antisocial Personality Disorder

People diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder (APD)¹⁰ exhibit a pattern of “disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others” (APA, 2013, p. 659) with no remorse, empathy, or genuine intimate bonding (Lay, 2019). Moreover, people with APD may have “cold empathy,” a term used to describe the cognitive capacity to understand what another person is going through but without prosocial emotions—the knowledge is used in deceit, manipulation, and exploitation for personal gain and pleasure (Lay, 2019). Thus, when people with APD enter a relationship, it may be difficult for their partners to extricate themselves due to the predatory behavior of the person with APD, who also tends to be highly combative (Kraus & Reynolds, 2001). Common behaviors someone with APD may exhibit align with the abusive and controlling

⁸ Cluster B personality disorders often co-occur and are often comorbid with depressive disorders, bipolar disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders (APA, 2013).

⁹ Personality disorders lie on a spectrum from mild to severe.

¹⁰ The pattern present in APD is commonly referred to as psychopathy, sociopathy, or dyssocial personality disorder (APA, 2013)

behaviors noted above. In fact, several studies indicate a link between ADP or psychopathy¹¹ and intimate partner violence (Gomez et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2019). The exploitation of others for personal gain is also a quality of narcissistic personality disorder.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder

People diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) exhibit a “pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy” (APA, 2013, p. 669). People with NPD feel entitled to the best of everything and are prone to interpersonally exploitative behavior—people with NPD view themselves as the center of the world (APA, 2013; Lay, 2019). This self-centeredness and lack of empathy manifest with people with NPD appearing “boastful, self-centered, and domineering in conversation. They may act in a pompous or exhibitionistic manner, always seeking attention and admiration in an arrogant or even bossy fashion, or, at times, in an eccentric, larger-than-life show of entitlement” (Lay, 2019, p. 310). Interestingly, people with NPD have fragile self-esteem, which is why they are attention- and praise-seekers (APA, 2013; Lay, 2019). Nevertheless, people with NPD will engage in behaviors that benefit themselves with no regard of the consequences for other people, including overt and covert displays of rage (e.g., yelling, screaming, throwing objects) as well as contemptuous behaviors (e.g., name-calling, rolling eyes, mocking) (APA, 2013). This lack of regard for others can turn relationships toxic. Narcissist individuals also use people as a kind of “supply” to prop themselves up, make them feel better about themselves, and make them look better to other people. Ultimately, their relationships are about their needs rather than the needs of their partner.

Borderline Personality Disorder

People with borderline personality disorder (BPD) exhibit a “pattern of instability in interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity” (APA, 2013, p. 645). They tend to lack a sense of self, experience difficulty with emotion regulation, and have an intense fear of abandonment. People with BPD fluctuate between extremes, which is particularly

¹¹ Psychopathy is not an official diagnosis in the DSM-V, but the DSM-V does include psychopathy as a “specifier” of ADP. However, forensic psychologists and criminologists, based on more than 40 years of empirical research, suggest psychopathy should be included in clinical diagnoses separate from ADP (Hare & Neumann, 2008).

salient in personal relationships. They tend to form intense relationships quickly, yet experience paradoxical instability, which is the rapid shifting between partner idealization and partner devaluation (APA, 2013; Kraus & Reynolds, 2001; Lay, 2019). In other words, people with BPD may quite literally one minute be showering their partner with affection and the next telling their partner how worthless they are (i.e., splitting). In part, this may be due to the uncompromising, impulsive cognitive style people with BPD have, which leads them to view others in a “dichotomous manner (all good or all bad) depending on internal interpretations of external circumstances” (Lay, 2019, p. 308).

A rigid cognitive style does not work well with nuanced situations. This rigidity can lead to the rejection of certain aspects of oneself (e.g., BPD: *I am a good partner. The kiss was an accident. I did not cheat*) and ultimately to projection (e.g., BPD to partner: *Are you cheating on me? I can tell you are cheating*) (Kraus & Reynolds, 2001; Lay, 2019). Unfortunately, people with BPD sometimes engage in (or threaten) self-harm or suicidal behavior (APA, 2013). A relationship with someone with BPD is also likely to be characterized by glorious highs and agonizing lows as they rapidly switch from engaging in loving to hateful behavior. This can leave partners confused and can also foster trauma bonding.

Histrionic Personality Disorder

People diagnosed with histrionic personality disorder (HPD) exhibit a pattern of excessive emotionality and attention-seeking behavior (APA, 2013). People with HPD are adamant about being the center of attention and will engage in dramatic behaviors to draw attention to themselves. Often, people with HPD engage in unwanted, inappropriate sexually provocative behaviors toward others (APA, 2013; Kraus & Reynolds, 2001). They tend to engage in excessive reassurance-seeking and are interpersonally demanding (i.e., needy and dependent). The emotionality of people with HPD leads them to have overblown and explosive reactions (e.g., sobbing uncontrollably, throwing temper tantrums) as well as a low tolerance for frustration (Kraus & Reynolds, 2001).

Extreme emotionality may cause people to walk on eggshells to prevent (often unsuccessfully) upsetting their partners with HPD. The same is true for partners of people with

BPD—people in relationships with either of these types often feel that they are in an emotional minefield. Their partners' intense and changing emotions put them on edge and uncertain about what will happen next, yet they may still be drawn to the positive aspects of their emotionality. The highs of a relationship with a person with HPD or BPD can be intoxicating because of the intense emotionality.

Collective Cluster B Communication Behaviors

As the preceding sections suggest, there is overlap in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns of people with Cluster B personality disorders overlap. For example, self-centeredness, attention-seeking behaviors, low self-esteem, hot-and-cold behavior, and the tendency to devalue one's partner are present to a greater or lesser extent in these personality types. These maladaptive ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving lead to toxic relationships. People with Cluster B personality disorders also have issues with emotions and empathy, with these differing based on the disorder (i.e., narcissist individuals tend to experience little emotion and empathy; borderline individuals tend to have intense emotions and limited empathy). Regardless of the presence of a personality disorder, these issues may be central in many toxic relationships.

Similarly, many of the behaviors that characterize people with Cluster B personality disorders are mentioned in the mainstream literature on toxic relationships. Some authors even equate being in a toxic relationship with having a partner with one of these personality disorders (Harrison & Dixon, 2019; Kelley, 2020). However, a careful read suggests that it is the *behaviors* that are associated with toxicity and that many people in these relationships are presumed to have some type of personality disorder when they may actually just be exhibiting some negative behaviors in-line with Cluster B personality disorders. Some of these negative behaviors (e.g., selfish behavior, attention-seeking, intermittent reinforcement, emotional abuse) have already been discussed, but there are other behaviors that could be common in toxic relationships.

Gaslighting. Gaslighting is defined as a psychological manipulation and deceit technique aimed at making the target question the legitimacy of their own thoughts, feelings, and reality (Lay, 2019), leading to lowered self-esteem and self-efficacy. For people with APD, the distress

and confusion their partner feels about their own reality provides pleasure for the partner with APD. Thus, people with APD “engage in manipulative or abusive cycles repetitively and compulsively in order to experience feelings of exhilaration and contempt (which has been termed contemptuous delight)” (Lay, 2019, p. 309). People with BPD may engage in gaslighting to morph their reality to an acceptable (dichotomous) state or protect their relationships from falling apart, stemming from their intense fear of abandonment. People diagnosed with HPD may engage in gaslighting for attention-seeking purposes or attempts at relational enhancement. People with narcissistic personality disorder must maintain their grandiose view of themselves, so they use gaslighting as a tool to force their reality on to the people around them (Lay, 2019).

Love-bombing and narcissistic abuse. Another common communication behavior rooted in manipulation and control is *love-bombing*. Love-bombing is the first stage of a toxic cycle common for people with NPD¹², often referred to as narcissistic abuse. There are three stages in this cycle: idealization, devaluation, and discarding (Howard, 2019).

During the idealization stage, the love-bombing occurs—a target is showered with love and affection in a short period of time, receiving excessive praise and sentiments of admiration. The person who engages in love-bombing also gives a false presentation of the self, sometimes weaving a narrative of mistreatment in the past. The second stage, devaluation, is characterized by removing the target of love-bombing from their pedestal and commencing criticism of the target. The discarding stage—relational termination—involves a slew of aversive behaviors, including gaslighting, lying, exploitative behaviors, and convincing members outside the dyad that the target (i.e., victim) is the one engaging in aversive behaviors, thus encouraging extradyadic members to further abuse the target (Howard, 2019).

The love-bombing cycle is especially common among people diagnosed with NPD (Howard, 2019) and BPD. Based on the Cluster B personality disorder descriptions, it appears love-bombing with NPD is for manipulation, whereas love-bombing with BPD is due to obsession and fear of abandonment. In some cases, there is a fourth stage, hoovering, which occurs when

¹² It is important to remember that Cluster B personality disorders are often comorbid (APA, 2013).

the individual with the personality disorder, particularly NPD, tries to “suck” their partner back in (Gaba, 2021), sometimes by engaging in love-bombing again¹³. Of course, this cycle can be much more complicated. For example, individuals with Cluster B personality disorders can go back and forth between discarding, love-bombing, and devaluing, leading to very unstable relationships.

Connecting Concepts to Toxic Romantic Relationships

Although the characteristics discussed above are often cited in the popular press as associated with toxic relationships, there has yet to be an empirical examination of what characteristics are most prominent in relationships that people define as toxic. It is likely that some of the concepts discussed above, such as manipulation, obsession, and intermittent reinforcement, will be part of people’s conceptions of toxic relationships. However, other characteristics could also emerge. To that end, the first aim of this dissertation is to identify what types of behavior people describe when referring to toxic romantic relationships using an inductive method that lets behaviors emerge from the data rather than forcing it to fit into a predetermined template.

Method

Data Preparation

Qualitative data were extracted from two threads—one on Reddit and one on Quora—that focused on toxic relationship characteristics (April 2021)¹⁴. On Reddit, the question asked was: “What are early signs of a toxic relationship?” This thread included 13.7K upvotes and 2.9K comments. The Reddit thread was copied into a Word document (264 pages in 12 pt. font) for extraction. On Quora, multiple questions on toxic relationships were presented in one thread. This thread started with the question “How do you know if you are in a healthy or toxic relationship?” Overall, there were 904 answers, with Quora responses longer and more detailed than Reddit responses. The Quora thread was cut and pasted into a Word document that was originally 286 pages long (12 pt. font). In Quora threads, several related questions were collapsed under one

¹³ Notably, this is reminiscent of the “loving contrition” described in the cycle of abuse outlined by Walker (2017).

¹⁴ This study (STUDY00013762) received IRB exemption (see Appendix A) before analysis.

location within the overall larger thread. At the top of each post, it indicated which initial question the Quora user had responded to. If the question did not include the word “toxic,” the post was omitted from analysis. In addition, all images were deleted from the files.

The process of analyzing such a substantial amount of organic data involved several iterations, starting with data preparation by the primary investigator, followed by data extraction by a team of two (a graduate student and an undergraduate student), and then several rounds of coding by a team of five undergraduate honors students. The primary investigator and her advisor conducted the final cleaning of the coding system. Each of these steps is described following the positionality statement.

Positionality Statement

The primary investigator identifies as a white, U.S. American, demisexual, cisgender woman. She has been pursuing her PhD in communication at a large university in the southwest United States. She has direct experience with toxic romantic relationships as well as familiarity with the literature on phenomena related to toxic romantic relationships. She enlisted two individuals to extract the data and five individuals to help code the data. All data extractors and coders are pursuing degrees at a large university in the southwest U.S. where they reside¹⁵.

Data extractor one identifies as a white, U.S. American, heterosexual, cisgender woman. She is an undergraduate pursuing a degree in psychology and aims to attain her PhD in clinical psychology. Data extractor two identifies as a white, Dutch, heterosexual, cisgender woman. She is a PhD student in communication studies. Neither coder expressed direct experience with toxic romantic relationships.

Coder one identifies as a white, U.S. American, demisexual, cisgender woman. She is an undergraduate pursuing a degree in communication. Coder two identifies as a white, U.S. American, bisexual, cisgender woman. She is an undergraduate pursuing degrees in both communication and political science. Coder three identifies as an Indian-American, heterosexual, cisgender woman. She is an undergraduate pursuing a degree in supply chain management.

¹⁵ Positionality statements reflect how the individuals identified during their time working on this project.

Coder four identifies as a white, U.S. American, heterosexual, cisgender woman. She is an undergraduate pursuing degrees in both communication and English. Coder five identifies as a white, U.S. American, heterosexual, cisgender woman. She is an undergraduate pursuing a degree in communication. None of the coders have direct experience with toxic romantic relationships, although coder three mentioned observing her friends experience them.

Data Extraction

The two-person extraction team independently isolated sections of the Reddit and Quora threads that described characteristics present in toxic romantic relationships. Toxic characteristics were initially defined as any behaviors, emotions, or cognitions that were mentioned within the context of a toxic romantic relationship being discussed on the threads. Data extractors were told to include all mentions of behaviors, cognitions, and emotions, whether they were described as an individual-level characteristic or a characteristic of the relationship. The goal was to extract broadly in the first iteration, to review the extractions, and then make decisions about if and how to further refine the data. Extraction involved copying the exact phrasing and/or description of the characteristic and placing it in an Excel spreadsheet. Data extractors were also told to omit comments or words that did not fit the description of toxic characteristics, including: replies such as “agreed” or “that’s crazy;” advice like “get out” or “don’t waste your time;” and comments by trash-talking trolls who wrote comments such as “sounds like you deserved what you got.”

The process for the extraction involved breaking threads written by individual posters into segments based on similarities to aid in the constant-comparison process (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) following extraction. Thus, if more than one characteristic was mentioned in the same post, each characteristic was extracted separately as its own data point. For example, one poster wrote:

they seem too good to be true, go out of their way to make dramatic romantic gestures, talk seriously about marriage after only a few weeks, and you feel like you lucked into a fairytale storybook romance you don't deserve, you're getting love bombed by a narcissist, RUN.

This was extracted as follows:

they seem too good to be true

go out of their way to make dramatic romantic gestures
talk seriously about marriage after only a few weeks
you feel like you lucked into a fairy tale story romance you don't deserve
getting love bombed by a narcissist

Notice the word "run" was not extracted: it is advice, not a characteristic of the relationship itself.

If the same characteristic (defined as the same or similar words or phrases) was repeated in a thread that part of the post was extracted as a single data point. For example, one person posted: "When you forget what it means to be loved, uplifted, and cherished." This was retained as a single data point since loved, uplifted, and cherished are similar sentiments. Two other examples of words/phrases that were kept together in a single data unit are: "You will always feel inferior, insecure and low" and "lack of honesty about inner feelings. Not expressing how you feel." The themes across the words/phrases in these posts were similar and, therefore, were not separated into different data units.

Sometimes posters simply listed characteristics of toxic relationships, which makes sense given that some questions asked them to do so. For example, one Redditor earned 5.3K upvotes and 10 awards for the following comment:

Trying to control you.
Giving you silent treatment.
Trying to alienate you from your friends.
Making you choose between them and your family/career/passion
Trying to police your social media.
Pressuring you into sexual activities.

As shown above, the poster listed the six characteristics individually, which made it easy for the data extractors to count each as a separate data point.

For this first iteration, the data extractors also marked whether toxic behaviors were being reported by the person engaging in the behavior (the "toxic" partner) or the target. In addition, the extractors noted in the Excel sheet if a thread included upvotes and/or other commentary specific

to the forums used. For example, Reddit allows users to give awards to posts. To give awards, users have to spend real-world money to purchase virtual Reddit coins. Then, users can use these coins to purchase awards. A Redditor wrote, “When every argument is your fault and you have to be the one to apologize every time.” This post received 8.2K upvotes and 10 awards. Awards and upvotes were collected to assess how specific posts resonated with Redditors. In Quora, users can list their expertise or occupation. For example, some have professional training (e.g. licensed counselors and therapists, PhDs) whereas others rely on their observations of the world (e.g. “armchair sociologist and observer of trends”) or personal experiences (e.g. “been in a few relationships, toxic and non-toxic”). Importantly, the research team also tracked whether the user identified as a “toxic person” in the relationship¹⁶.

After two hours of extracting data, the extractors met with the primary investigator and her advisor to discuss any issues they encountered. The team also cross-checked the extractions that had been completed. If extractors disagreed about how data in a particular post should be extracted, the team discussed the post until consensus was achieved. Although the extractors mostly agreed, when disagreement occurred (which was especially likely in some of the lengthy Quora threads), the data unitizing process was reviewed and refined.

Several decision rules also were developed after the initial meeting. First, the team decided to eliminate posts that referred to toxic relationships other than toxic romantic relationships (e.g., toxic friendships, parent-child relationships). Second, the primary investigator and her advisor decided to omit idiosyncratic posts (i.e., very specific events or behaviors unlikely to fit into a category with other extracted items). Third, the team noted if the poster (a) identified as a toxic partner, (b) described general characteristics of the relationship, and (c) indicated the interaction between the two people, rather than one person’s behavior, created the toxicity. The vast majority of posts were made by targets and focused on one partner’s toxic behavior. However, sometimes this information was indeterminable, especially if the poster simply listed characteristics. The team decided to continue including all of the characteristics mentioned

¹⁶ People indicated they were the toxic partners by using I-language (e.g., I gaslight my partner) or explicitly stating they were the toxic partners (e.g., I was most certainly toxic).

whether posts were made by the target of toxic behaviors or the person engaging in toxic behavior, and whether they were about one person or the relationship in general. Finally, a decision was made to omit any data that focused solely on emotion or cognition without mention of behavior, given the inability to determine context. For example, one Quora poster wrote “You walk on eggshells afraid to do or say the wrong thing.” Given this project’s focus on communication, it was agreed that it was important to hone in focus on behaviors rather than including words and phrases that referenced intrapersonal processes. This led to a revision of some of the earlier extractions. For instance, in one of the examples from earlier, the following data points were initially extracted:

This was extracted as follows:

they seem too good to be true
go out of their way to make dramatic romantic gestures
talk seriously about marriage after only a few weeks
you feel like you lucked into a fairy tale story romance you don’t deserve
getting love bombed by a narcissist

When the new rule was applied, the data points “they seem too good to be true” and “you feel like you lucked into a fairy tale story romance you don’t deserve” were deleted, while the rest of the data points were retained because they included references to behavior.

After these decisions were made, the data extractors reviewed the data they had extracted to make these corrections and then continued extracting additional data. Before completing data extraction, each of the extractors sent 50 pages of newly extracted data to the primary investigator for a spot check. The primary investigator looked for discrepancies between her extraction versus how it had been extracted. She then highlighted in red any items that she would have omitted and marked in green any items she would have included or parsed differently. Following this, a close match existed between the extractors’ and the primary investigator’s elimination and inclusion of data. Disagreements were discussed so the extractors had a clear understanding of what was expected. After this discussion, they independently extracted the rest of the data. Each of the extractors then worked on half of the Quora threads

and half of the Reddit threads so that data were extracted from all threads. The extracted data consisted of 2,773 units.

Data Analysis

A new team of five undergraduate students helped code the extracted data into themes that emerged from the data. This team met with the author and her adviser twice before coding to discuss how to engage in initial, in-vivo coding—an emergent coding process aimed at identifying overarching concepts (initial) by using the language people used in the data as codes (in-vivo) (Corbin & Strauss, 2014)¹⁷. For the first step in this process, coders were told to independently read through all the threads and write down any emergent themes they noted. After doing so, the team met to compare notes and create a list of preliminary themes. These included: (1) monopolizing time, possessiveness, and jealousy; (2) isolation; (3) love-bombing; (4) intermittent reinforcement, (5) walking on eggshells, (6) deception; (7) sexual manipulation and coercion; (8) non-sexual physical abuse, (9) gaslighting, non-apologies, and playing the victim; (10) direct blame; (11) explosive escalating conflict, (12) personal targeted criticism; and (13) guilt-tripping. The first theme included three sub-themes that the team perceived to be related to control and surveillance broadly. The 12th theme included behaviors that were inconsistent with reality as the poster saw it. For each of these 13 categories, team members nominated data units that they felt best represented the category. The team discussed these and then placed the three that they believed best exemplified each category.

Practice coding then commenced, with each coder independently coding the same 100 Reddit units of data and 100 Quora units of data. They were instructed to use constant comparison¹⁸ by comparing data units to the exemplars as well as to the data units previously coded into each theme. They were told that if at some point during the comparison process a coded item seemed like it no longer fit the original theme, they could remove it and place it in a different theme or in the “other” category. Additionally, coders were told if a data unit fit more than

¹⁷ Notably, the aim of this dissertation is not to develop a grounded theory of toxic romantic relationships but use a grounded approach to identify the types of behaviors people discuss pertaining to toxic romantic relationships.

¹⁸ Constant comparison is crucial to ensure grounded, emergent themes (Hallberg, 2006).

one theme, they could assign the data unit more than one code (simultaneous coding). The primary investigator emphasized they should not try to force-fit or extrapolate information from the data units so an item would fit a category; if an item did not clearly fit any categories, they were told to code it as “other.”

After practice coding was complete, all coded data units were placed into one spreadsheet to compare how data units were coded. The data units coded “other” were separated so two coders could examine those for any emergent themes. The remaining data items, which had been grouped based on the practice codes, were examined to ensure data units were related to each code in a coherent manner. The names of some of the themes were updated to reflect this discussion. The two coders who examined the “other” category uncovered an additional theme the team called overt selfishness in action. This process led to the following 13 themes: (1) monopolizing and isolation; (2) overt selfishness in action; (3) love-bombing; (4) intermittent reinforcement; (5) walking on eggshells; (6) deception/misrepresenting themselves; (7) sexual manipulation/coercion; (8) nonsexual physical abuse; (9) blame and re-direction of blame; (10) explosive negativity; (11) criticism; and (12) miscellaneous manipulation tactics (i.e., gaslighting, non-apologies, playing the victim, and guilt-tripping); (13) inequity and double standards.

To provide an agreed upon understanding of the themes, the primary researcher created a document with theme definitions with examples culled from the data. The number of examples varied based on the theme. For example, numerous items fell under the monopolizing and isolation theme, so 11 examples representing various monopolizing and controlling behaviors were pulled from the data (e.g., “checks your phone frequently, asks for personal information like passwords of social media accounts, or invades your privacy in any way;” “get jealous that I have other friends;” “they set strict rules on your body: ex. What you can and can't wear, you can't take your bra off in your own house unless you're in your room, you can't eat off of anyone's fork even if they're family. These were rules I literally had to follow!”). For other categories, such as intermittent reinforcement, the bandwidth was smaller so only three examples were culled from the data (e.g., “Some days things are wonderful, and you start to feel cared about and safe, but

on other days you are anxious and agonizing;” “uncertainty after a few days of non-communication, and when he actually did call or show up, my sensation of relief was at the level of what I imagine a junkie would feel with a fix”).

Four coders were divided into teams of two. One team coded Reddit units (coders three and four) and the other coded Quora units (coders one and two). Coder five coded all of the Reddit units and half of the Quora units. Coder four also coded the second half of the Quora units to ensure at least three coders examined each data unit. Each team member independently coded a quarter of their assigned data then met for a “code-check.” They assessed agreement and discussed the data units they coded differently until consensus was reached. After their code-check, the entire team (all undergraduate coders, the primary investigator, and her advisor) met through Zoom. The primary investigator and her advisor selected a segment of the Reddit and Quora data units (100 units total) to assess general levels of agreement among coders. The coders independently coded the units off-screen during the Zoom meeting and then reconvened as a group. Codes were nearly unanimous with coder one showing a more divergent pattern and extrapolating information from the comments. For that reason, the primary investigator periodically spot-checked that coder’s work and contacted the coder to discuss the core qualities that characterized each theme.

Following the meeting, team members continued coding assigned data independently. Once all the data were coded, the primary investigator compiled the coders’ work into one spreadsheet. In constructing the penultimate coding system, a “majority rule” was put in place such that if all three coders did not code an item similarly, but two coders coded the data unit in the same way, the data unit was assigned to the majority code. The primary investigator also checked the codes for face validity and made the final judgment call.

The research team reviewed the data to determine if any double-coded data points appeared frequently. Two sets of double-coded combinations did: (1) Code 2 overt selfishness-in-action with Code 13 inequity and double standards; and (2) Code 9 blame and redirection of blame with Code 12 miscellaneous manipulation tactics. These sets of double-coded data units were placed into a separate document for further analysis. Other double-coded

combinations of codes appeared, but not with enough frequency ($n < 5$) to warrant further examination. Data points with three different codes were placed into a separate document and ultimately omitted from analyses.

The final step of the coding process was to examine the double-coded data units described above (Code 2 with Code 13; Code 9 with Code 12). Coder 5 did a preliminary examination of the double-coded data and grouped similar data points together. Following, the primary investigator and her advisor examined the double-coded data to see if any new distinct themes emerged.

Two distinct themes emerged from the double-coded covert selfishness in action and inequity and double standards. The first theme focused on imbalances (e.g., “You want constant attention, but you ‘too busy’ when it’s the other way around;” “You are putting more effort into making the relationship work than your partner”) and the second focused on disregarding one’s partner (e.g., “They don’t take your opinions or feelings into consideration;” “One partner has a total disregard for the other partner.”) The first theme, relationship imbalances, focused on one person getting or giving more than the other in a relationship. The other theme, disregarding partner, focused more on one partner ignoring the other’s needs.

For the double-coded data units blame and redirection of blame with miscellaneous manipulation tactics, data units were re-grouped under the themes of denying responsibility and deflecting blame (e.g., “I wouldn’t be angry if you texted me/been nicer;” “arguing and refusing to accept that they’re wrong”) and gaslighting (e.g., “makes you feel like the crazy or problematic one for bringing up an issue you had with them;” “You bring things up that they have clearly said and you’re made to believe you’re crazy etc. for reacting to their bullshit”). Notably, though denying responsibility and deflecting blame can be a tactic for gaslighting, gaslighting specifically involves making someone feel like they are crazy and cannot trust their own perceptions. For that reason, the gaslighting theme only included data units indicating doubt in their lived experiences.

Results

The aforementioned process resulted in 14 themes (see Table 1) into which the remaining extracted data ($n = 1,615$) were coded: (1) controlling to possess and isolate; (2) creating relationship imbalances; (3) denying responsibility and deflecting blame; (4) criticizing and conveying contempt; (5) deceiving and misrepresenting the self; (6) walking on eggshells; (7) disregarding partner; (8) gaslighting; (9) love-bombing; (10) using physical violence; (11) exploding with negativity; (12) coercing and controlling through sex; (13) displaying signs of obsession and codependency; and (14) engaging in intermittent reinforcement.

Table 1.

Toxic Relationship Behavior Codes Comprising the Qualitative Themes

Controlling to Possess and Isolate (*n* = 430)

- Monitoring your behavior and conversations with others
- Insisting on checking your phone and social media constantly
- Not respecting your right to have "me time", friends, and hobbies
- Isolating you from family and friends
- Sabotaging relationships by starting fights or calling your friends "a bad influence"

Creating Relationship Imbalances (*n* = 186)

- Your needs are unimportant, but theirs are required to be met all of the time
- When the rules of a relationship only apply to you, but not to them
- The whole relationship revolves around him/her
- Heightened sense of entitlement, that they "deserve" certain things
- Self-centered, self-absorbed, and self-righteous

Denying Responsibility and Deflecting Blame (*n* = 141)

- This person can never admit they are wrong
- Always constructing a narrative that absolves them of responsibility in any issue
- They're always the victim: everything is your fault no matter the circumstance
- Nothing is ever their fault. They don't get angry. YOU make them angry.
- Tells you that YOU'RE bringing negative energy into their space

Criticizing and Conveying Contempt (*n* = 133)

- Conversations between partners are filled with sarcasm, criticism, or overt hostility
- You are repeatedly told how bad you are compared to others
- Openly criticizing you and insulting you
- Being talked down to or demeaned.
- Humiliates you in public

Table 1.

Toxic Relationship Behavior Codes Comprising the Qualitative Themes

Deceiving and Misrepresenting the Self (*n* = 126)

Casually drop white lies all the time

Fabricating entire stories

Lies by omission

Their talk and their actions are completely different.

When they act happy in front of the public and then terrorize you when you're alone

Walking on Eggshells (*n* = 118)

Feels like you are walking on eggshells not knowing what to say for the fear of a fight

You hold back engaging for fear of setting them off

You have to overthink and worry about everything all the time

Watching every single word because anything could set him off into a spiral

You have to mince your words and use euphemisms as to not upset them

Disregarding Partner (*n* = 83)

They don't care what you think and they don't respect you

They keep shooting down all your ideas or thoughts or problems

Don't regard your feelings as important

Taking no interest in what makes you happy

They glaze over when you say something about your achievements

Gaslighting (*n* = 77)

Keeping you off center and doubting yourself

Making you feel like you're crazy after an argument for just saying how you feel

Making a person doubt their observations and/or sensory input

Telling you that you said something that you know you didn't say

When you open up to them and they tell you it's not that bad or "it's in your head."

Table 1.

Toxic Relationship Behavior Codes Comprising the Qualitative Themes

Love-bombing (*n* = 77)

Super charming, overly complimentary towards you

They tell you how amazing you are and how lucky they are to have met you.

Over-the-top in their demonstrations of affection

The relationship starts fast and hot, all gas and no break

Saying "I love you" way too early

Using Physical Violence (*n* = 77)

Casually mentioning violence as a solution to a problem

Threats of violence

Breaking things

Your partner hits you, pushes you, or inflicts physical harm to you

You are being physically abused

Exploding with Negativity (*n* = 67)

Blowing up over the smallest things.

Lashing out for no reason

Rage attacks if things don't go their way

Screaming at you

Yelling and shouting obscenities

Coercing and Controlling through Sex (*n* = 37)

Tend to use their sexuality to get what they want

Denial of sex as a punishment or a weapon

Sex is used as a bargaining chip

Expects sex on demand.

Pressuring you into sexual activities

Table 1.

Toxic Relationship Behavior Codes Comprising the Qualitative Themes

Displaying Signs of Obsession and Codependency (*n* = 35)

They feel the need to include themselves in everything you do.

You are immediately the center of their world

Over clinginess

Being overly attached in a relationship

Codependency, to a fault

Engaging in Intermittent Reinforcement (*n* = 28)

One minute being all lovey-dovey, then being cold and distant.

Being their favorite person one minute to the target of all their hatred the next

Going cold on you, then coming back around like nothing ever happened.

Hot-and-cold dynamic where you're always kept guessing where you stand

Alternating wildly between incredible highs and lows in the relationship

Controlling to Possess and Isolate

Controlling to possess and isolate (*n* = 430) describes behavior aimed at influencing how relational partners spend their time, including surveilling and “checking-in on” partners, monopolizing partner free time, and keeping partners from their family and friends. In this theme, people impose themselves as puppeteers of their partners. Those who posted predominantly described their partners as engaging in *isolating* and *surveilling*, two sub-themes that were common within the larger theme. Many of the items in this theme fit into one of these subcategories, but the qualitative data also revealed that a number of posts that could be characterized into two (such as keeping me away from my friends and checking up on me when I went out with them). Many of the posts in this category were upvoted frequently. One post in particular resonated with Redditors, earning 5.3K upvotes and 10 awards: “Trying to control you. Trying to alienate you from your friends. Making you choose between them and your family/career/passion. Trying to police your social media.” This post was broken up into units

representing various forms of control that fall under this category. Other posts also referenced partners controlling aspects of the posters' bodies, including physical appearance (e.g., clothing, makeup, hair, accessories) and functions essential for surviving (e.g., eating, drinking, sleeping).

Creating Relationship Imbalances

Creating relationship imbalances ($n = 186$) explains the exceedingly different expectations people have for their own behaviors compared to that of their relational partners. Common behaviors that created relationship imbalances include creating double-standards, perceiving inequitable effort, displaying narcissistic behaviors (e.g., entitlement, inflated sense of self-importance, conveying that everything is about them), and prioritizing one's own needs while ignoring the partner's needs. The imbalance refers to the perpetrator's desire to get what they want without regard for what their partner wants or needs. It is also about the relationship being centered on one person. One Redditor received 123 up-votes for this comment:

Whatever they want, they get; whatever you want is up for negotiation. You're also most certainly paying for it too. Similarly, whatever it is they enjoy, you now have to enjoy, even if you hate it.

Many comments included the phrase "all take no give" with a Quora respondent noting "the whole relationship revolves around him/her" (153 upvotes).

Denying Responsibility and Deflecting Blame

Denying responsibility and deflecting blame ($n = 141$) describes how people engage in behaviors to shift culpability away from themselves. Common behaviors include turning it (the problem) back on their partners, blaming others, and playing the victim. A comment from a Redditor resonated with the readers, earning 11.6K upvotes and nine awards with "when they do something that makes you uncomfortable, and they get mad at you for expressing your discomfort." Similarly, one Redditor commented "nothing is ever their fault and always yours" (744 upvotes).

Criticizing and Conveying Contempt

Criticizing and conveying contempt ($n = 133$) refers to people critiquing perceived flaws and faults of their relational partners as well as expressing disdain (conveying contempt) for their

relational partners. Common forms of criticism and contempt include belittling a partner, humiliating a partner in public, and insulting a partner. One Redditor earned 1.0K upvotes for the following comment: “The subtle insults! Gentle teasing now and then is fine when it’s mutual. But when the jokes are always at one party’s expense- especially in front of other people, designed to belittle them- that’s a red flag.” Many comments echoed the sentiment that perpetrators of toxic relationship behaviors made “jokes” at a partner’s expense.

Deceiving and Misrepresenting Themselves

Deceiving and misrepresenting themselves ($n = 126$) includes behaviors such as lying, concealing information, projecting a facade, and making false promises. Numerous posters from both Reddit and Quora simply commented “lying.” One Quora user received 129 upvotes for the comment “they change their colors every minute,” and another shared “they are chameleons who project a façade that is totally different from who and what they really are.” Both Quora comments allude to self-misrepresentation.

Walking on Eggshells

Walking on eggshells ($n = 118$) describes how people hyper-monitor their own communication to prevent aversive responses from their partners. Part of walking on eggshells includes feeling tense, anxious, and on-edge; preplanning conversational approaches and responses; and the chilling effect (when relational partners refrain from expressing thoughts to their partners out of fear—or anticipation—of their partners’ reactions). With one misstep, their partner’s shell cracks, and chaos ensues. One Redditor’s comment, “feeling tense whenever you’re around them,” resonated with Redditors, earning 1.3K upvotes and two awards. A Quora user identified a slew of toxic relationship behaviors, earning 806 upvotes; the segment below denotes the behaviors related to walking on eggshells: “When you feel like you’re walking on eggshells with them. When you’re afraid that anything you say or do will upset them. When you stop talking to them about issues in the relationship out of fear.” Additionally, a Redditor earned 608 upvotes and one award for stating “When you have to map out regular conversations beforehand in your head to prevent an explosion.”

Disregarding Partner

Disregarding partner ($n = 83$) refers to relational partners dismissing, ignoring, and/or invalidating their partners' thoughts, feelings, needs, achievements, and/or interests. Some commenters noted the partner engaging in toxic relationship behavior's inattention to partner needs (e.g., physical, emotional), and others outlined how people intentionally engaged in behaviors their partners did not like or felt uncomfortable with. Many commenters noted a lack (and lack of care) of perspective-taking. One Quora user stated "When your partner doesn't try to even understand you & your situation" (21 upvotes). A Redditor noted the following: "Pay attention to how they react when you have positive news about your own life, like a promotion or an award, something that is just about you. Do they want to celebrate with you, or do they seem to almost resent it and sulk?" (85 upvotes).

Gaslighting

Gaslighting ($n = 77$) refers to a complex phenomenon encompassing myriad manipulative behaviors aimed at making relational partners doubt their own perceptions and realities (Lay, 2019). Several behaviors identified in the Reddit and Quora forums can be used as tools for gaslighting, such as denying responsibility and deflecting blame as well as deceiving and misrepresenting themselves. For example, a Redditor shared the following:

They lie about things you said/did and are so convincing you doubt your own sanity (example: they'll tell you that you called them an asshole yesterday, when you know you didn't, but remain so adamant about it you start to believe that maybe you did call them an asshole).

Another Redditor noted the insidious nature of gaslighting:

It's a long slow game being played that you don't realize you're a part of. The more isolated you are from your own friends means you don't have people to talk to that would support you or tell you the situation you are in is not normal or loving. You start to question your reality, and whether or not you're crazy and imagining things since they lie to you about your behavior and project negativity, twisting things to make you feel like the one who needs to apologize. (24 upvotes)

Love-bombing

Love-bombing ($n = 77$) refers to prosocial behaviors relational partners display toward their partners—expressions of love, affection, praise, admiration— to an excessive, overwhelming, too-good-to-be-true extent (Howard, 2019). One Redditor provided a comprehensive description of love-bombing, earning 1.3k upvotes and 12 awards:

Lovebombing is a classic emotional abuse tactic and the abuser often goes hard into it early in the relationship, to get you hooked. They'll also usually profess their affection for you often and kind of exaggerated. Lots of "no one else has ever made me feel like this" kinda stuff. That way you get attached quickly and form positive perceptions of this person, so that when the abuse starts you A: don't leave because you know they're "good" underneath it and B: they can weaponize it against you as a guilt trip.

Though love-bombing often occurs at the beginning of a toxic romantic relationship, partners may engage in love-bombing throughout the relationship, often to suck a partner back in (hoovering).

Using Physical Violence

Using physical violence ($n = 77$) occurs when partners use or threaten to use aggressive haptic displays toward partners, belongings, pets, objects, and structures. Aggressive haptic displays range in severity, with some mild forms (e.g., pinching, holding, squeezing) to severe forms (e.g., punching, hitting, beating), even escalating to the use of weapons (e.g., knives, guns, illicit substances). Many Redditors and Quora users noted the presence of physical violence/physical abuse indicates a toxic romantic relationship without providing specific behaviors; however, some Redditors shared detailed examples. One Redditor shared how their ex engaged in direct violence, posting “she used to cause pain to me by hitting me, biting me and scratching me, because she ‘loved the way I scream in pain.’” Another Redditor noted a sign of a toxic relationship is “when that person destroys your property (like when you build scale models as a hobby and that person destroys it because you don't give him/her "enough" attention)” (20 upvotes). In a mutually toxic romantic relationship where toxic behaviors were reciprocal, one Redditor shared, “He threatened to kill my cats. He did it anytime I made him mad.” Other Redditors noted punching walls, burning cigarette marks in their arms, and being shot.

Exploding with Negativity

Exploding with negativity ($n = 67$) refers to the highly volatile reactions relational partners exhibit toward their partners. Many commenters noted screaming, yelling, and “blowing up” over “the smallest things.” A Quora user who engaged in toxic relationship behaviors recalled “lots of name calling and screaming matches, calling each other multiple times in a row after hanging up on each other. It brought out some very very ugly behavior in me” (254 upvotes). Redditors resonated with “when they seem to argue with you a lot, and make petty things into a huge dispute,” giving the comment 1.9K upvotes and one award. Numerous comments on both Reddit and Quora noted partners engaging in toxic relationship behaviors were quick to anger and lash-out, some using the word “tantrum” to describe behavior when people did not get their way.

Coercing and Controlling through Sex

Coercing and controlling through sex ($n = 37$) refers to negative behaviors related to sex designed to influence relational partners and serve one’s own needs. Redditors resonated with the comment “pressuring you into sexual activities,” which earned 5.3K upvotes and 10 awards. Other Redditors expounded upon pressuring tactics, with one commenter stating

Pressuring doesn’t have to be force either. If they get overly sad and hurt by you saying no, and they’re pretty much trying to guilt you, or give you excuses why you might not want sex so you can get over it. Manipulation and guilt can pressure you into sex. It’s called sexual coercion.

Several comments indicated relational partners have a sense of sexual entitlement—they “expect sex on demand” (Quora-user, 11 upvotes) regardless of their partners’ desires.

In addition, commenters described how sexual acts were used to manipulate partners. A Quora-user noted how people “will use sex as a weapon. I will reward you with sex if you’ve behaved correctly and I will deny sex if you behaved wrongly.” Another Quora-user indicated partners use sex as a “bargaining chip.” For example, one Redditor shared the following: “So many times she would have sex with me, and then later on if she wanted to do something it was simply a question, or it wasn’t okay for me to decline, because, “I let you do XYZ with me earlier

and you can't even do this?" Moreover, sex is used as an avoidance tactic. A Quora-user noted, "You employ it [sex] to curb fights too, instead of talking things through!" (276 upvotes).

Displaying signs of Obsession and Codependency

Displaying signs of obsession and codependency ($n = 35$) refers to behaviors suggesting partners were hyper-focused and/or overly-dependent on their relational partners (Springer et al., 1998). A Quora-user noted how the "relationship becomes more important to you than your health, your parents, your friends and more important than your goals both personal and academic" (34 upvotes). Moreover, users from both Reddit and Quora indicated partners exhibited "extreme clinginess." A Redditor shared they had "no friends of my own, she always was there, it was smothering. It's fucked me up too, because after 5 years with her I don't know how to not be codependent" (85 upvotes).

Engaging in Intermittent Reinforcement

Engaging in intermittent reinforcement ($n = 28$) refers to the inconsistent "good-bad" or "hot-cold" behaviors people exhibit toward their relational partners (Dutton & Painter, 1993). As one Redditor noted, partners are "one minute being all lovey-dovey, then being cold and distant" (358 upvotes). Intermittent reinforcement can also be indicated by "alternating wildly between incredible highs and lows in the relationship" (Quora user). Intermittent reinforcement is a powerful force that keeps people in toxic relationships. As another Quora user observed:

Some days things are wonderful, and you start to feel cared about and safe, but on other days you are anxious and agonizing. Maybe you even acknowledge the bad days as being painful but you choose to see your suffering as "worth it" because of the good days.

A Redditor who self-identified as a toxic partner wrote a response delineating several elements of their toxic romantic relationship. The segment below indicates how intermittent reinforcement—intentional or not—may manifest in toxic romantic relationships:

I had weird swings: one day, I would feel all in love with him, peppering him with affection, texting him sweet nonsense and even scrubbing his back in bath just to see him happy. Other day, I couldn't stand his existence. I hated just to look at him, not to mention speak with him. Everything he did irked me and I had to hold back not to beat

him. On good days, I would ride him all the time. On bad days, even a brief touch disgusted me, I couldn't stand the sound of him breathing.

Notably, intermittent reinforcement creates strong emotional bonds (Dutton & Painter, 1993).

Discussion

Based on the data extracted ($n = 1,615$), 14 toxic relationship behaviors emerged that have implications for both academic and popular press. This section addresses the underlying threads that connect toxic romantic relationships, prototypical toxic relationship behaviors, and toxic romantic relationships' connection to relationship violence.

Underlying Threads of Toxic Romantic Relationships

Based on preliminary research into what constitutes toxic romantic relationships as well as phenomena likely present in toxic romantic relationships, the primary investigator thought dyadic behavioral patterns may emerge from the data. However, when people discussed toxic romantic relationships on Reddit and Quora, they predominantly outlined one partner's toxic relationship behaviors. Although the modes of relating constitute the toxic romantic relationship (Motz, 2014), it appears that people discussing toxic relationships on these sites perceive that one member of the relationship predominantly engages in the toxic relationship behavior.

Through the 12 one-sided toxic relationship behaviors (i.e., controlling to possess and isolate; creating relationship imbalances; denying responsibility and deflecting blame; criticizing and conveying contempt; deceiving and misrepresenting the self; disregarding partner; gaslighting; love-bombing; using physical violence; exploding with negativity; coercing and controlling through sex; displaying signs of obsession and codependency) permeates a thread of power, control, and self-centeredness. Power is the ability to do what a person wants, whereas control is the ability to exert influence over another person (Berger, 1985). Deeply intertwined, behaviors rooted in power and control are self-centered: they function as a way to get what a person wants. This is also evident in the two toxic relationship behaviors related to dyadic patterns.

Notably, the dyadic patterns identified (i.e., walking on eggshells and engaging in intermittent reinforcement) are in response to one partner's toxic relationship behavior. Walking

on eggshells is a toxic relationship behavior characterized by individuals hyper-monitoring or silencing their own communication to prevent any aversive responses (e.g., yelling, screaming, insults, violence) from their partners and is related to the chilling effect, which occurs when people refrain from voicing opinions and complaints out of fear of negative partner reactions (Roloff & Cloven, 1990). Part of walking on eggshells includes feeling tense, anxious, and on-edge due to the fear of how partners may react; thus, the “feared” partner is driving the interaction. Similarly, engaging in intermittent reinforcement involves one partner alternating between hot-cold behaviors toward the other. This pattern is common in cycles of abuse and leaves partners susceptible to traumatic bonding (Dutton & Painter, 1993), which may cause partners to seek relief from the same people who cause psychological pain. The person who gives the pain is also the person who takes it away.

Of importance, the toxic relationship behaviors identified from these online forums are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, several behaviors identified—denying responsibility and deflecting blame, criticizing and conveying contempt, deceiving and misrepresenting themselves, and disregarding partner—can be used as gaslighting tactics. Additionally, partners who have a high sense of entitlement (which is a characteristic of creating relationship imbalances), specifically relational entitlement, are prone to engage in conflict with verbal aggression as well as control and domination (Williams et al., 2018), which could encompass a variety of toxic relationship behaviors. However, the toxic relationship behaviors that emerged from the data are *necessarily* exhibited in conjunction. Moreover, by parsing out specific behaviors, the primary investigator hoped to help people identify observable behaviors.

Prototypical Toxic Relationship Behaviors

Consistent with popular definitions of toxic relationships, the toxic relationship behaviors most frequently mentioned contain elements of power, control, and self-centeredness (Cory, n.d.; PsychAlive, 2014). Controlling to possess and isolate was—by far—the most frequently

mentioned¹⁹ type of toxic relationship behavior. Quora and Reddit users consistently mentioned one partner isolating the other from friends and family as well as controlling and limiting extradyadic interactions with other people (e.g., acquaintances, colleagues, gamers). Controlling to possess and isolate also involves surveillance (e.g., keeping track of partner whereabouts) and controlling and invading technology (e.g., going through a partner's phone). Indicated in the name, controlling to possess and isolate illuminates the controlling aspect of toxic romantic relationships. Arguably, attempts to possess another person are about having power, which is inherently self-centered in nature. In a more subtle manner, creating relationship imbalances alludes to power, control, and self-centeredness, too.

Creating relationship imbalances, the second most-frequently mentioned behavior, is predominantly driven by self-centeredness. Reddit and Quora users addressed how the self-centeredness of one partner shaped the relationship, whether through double standards (e.g., “If they can get emotional during arguments but you can't,” Redditor), inequitable effort (e.g., “There is only take take take...let's say like a parasitic...and zero give,” Quora-user), or prioritizing themselves over others (e.g., “The whole relationship revolves around him/her,” Quora-user), the crux of the imbalance is one partner acts in ways that assert their wants, needs, and desires before all others. Notably, both Reddit and Quora users indicated narcissism or narcissistic tendencies, characterized by interpersonally exploitative behavior and viewing themselves as the center of the world (APA, 2013; Lay, 2019), fell in-line with the toxic relationship behaviors creating relationship imbalances. Admittedly, most toxic relationship behaviors may lead to creating relationship imbalances; however, in the context of this study, the imbalance is due to self-centered behaviors. These self-centered behaviors could be related to the third most-frequently noted toxic relationship behavior, denying responsibility and deflecting blame.

Denying responsibility and deflecting blame involves a relational partner shifting accountability away from themselves by turning relationship issues back on their partners (e.g.,

¹⁹ The high-frequency of the toxic relationship behaviors to follow does not override the severity and importance of other toxic relationship behaviors; however, the more frequently mentioned toxic relationship behaviors may have heuristic value as “prototypical” behaviors used to describe toxic romantic relationships.

“Where I would bring up an issue and she would have this reason for why it actually hurt her more. Or she would get angry and tell me things I did to hurt her,” Redditor), blaming others (e.g., “put blame on everything but themselves,” Redditor), and playing the victim (e.g., “They play victim even when it's their own doing,” Redditor). Research on defensive denial—behaviors that “fail to acknowledge the reality of a situation or fail to acknowledge personal responsibility for a situation in ways that may or may not include misattribution to other external causes” (Lannin et al., 2013, p. 968)—indicates defensive denial is linked to relational instability and blaming the partner for problems, refusing to solve problems, and—a top-reported toxic relationship behavior—criticizing. When individuals deny responsibility and deflect blame, they are also unlikely to change their toxic behavior because they do not see it as their problem.

Another toxic relationship behavior commonly mentioned was criticizing and conveying contempt. According to Gottman (1994), criticism and contempt are components of unhealthy relationship communication (The Four Horsemen). Complaints are similar yet distinct from criticisms. Complaints are expressed concerns over specific behaviors, whereas criticisms are attacks on a person’s qualities, behaviors, abilities, or character (Gottman, 1994). Notably, some forms of complaints, behavioral complaints, can actually be beneficial to relationships to encourage positive change (Alberts, 1989; Gottman, 1994). The data from the online forums seem to complement and support that perspective: behavioral complaints were not outlined, solely criticism and contempt. Contempt elevates criticisms to another level, adding an element of superiority over the partner (Gottman, 1994). Feelings of contempt also may be related to relationship violence.

Toxic Relationship Behaviors and Relationship Violence

Relationship violence, specifically intimate partner violence, is characterized at least one of the following four behaviors: physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Based on the data, psychological aggression and stalking were the most prevalent forms of intimate partner violence discussed. Several types of toxic relationship behaviors could constitute psychological aggression (communication used to mentally or emotionally harm someone or exert control), such as

controlling to possess and isolate, criticizing and conveying contempt, disregarding partner, gaslighting, exploding with negativity, and engaging in intermittent reinforcement. Arguably, controlling to possess and isolate—specifically monitoring partner whereabouts—could be part of stalking. Notably, though physical violence and sexual violence were mentioned when Redditors and Quora-users described toxic romantic relationships, they were not the defining toxic relationship behaviors—psychological aggression was. Furthermore, additional toxic relationship behaviors may be evident of phenomena closely related to relationship violence, such as trauma bonds and cycles of abuse.

Connections to Cyclical Patterns

The popular press and empirical literature focus on how toxic and/or abusive relationships are often characterized by cycles of relationship abuse that function to keep people in these unhealthy relationships. One such pattern is intermittent reinforcement, which was discussed previously. Although other patterns were not explicitly mentioned by many of the Redditors and Quora users, many of the toxic relationship behaviors they posted commonly occur within the context of broader patterns of relationship abuse, as discussed next.

Cycle of Abuse

As previously noted, Walker (2017) identified three phases of abuse from her research on battered women syndrome: (I) tension-building; (II) acute battering incident; and (III) loving contrition. The tension-building phase (phase I) could be related to walking on eggshells, with one partner sensing the tension and being wary of setting the other partner off. When the acute battering incident occurs (phase II), it is typically explosive in nature, which is in-line with the toxic relationship behavior exploding with negativity (e.g., yelling, screaming, “blowing up”), possibly in conjunction with escalating to using physical abuse (e.g., hitting, throwing items, destroying property) and/or criticizing and conveying contempt (e.g., insulting, belittling, humiliating). Following the incident is phase III, loving contrition. The toxic relationship behaviors deceiving and misrepresenting themselves (e.g., making empty promises) as well as love-bombing (e.g., showering with love and affection) may manifest during phase III. The cycle of abuse is also

indicative of a partner engaging in intermittent reinforcement. A related yet distinct cycle of abuse is narcissistic abuse.

Narcissistic Abuse

Narcissistic abuse begins with idealization, follows with devaluation, and ends with discarding (Howard, 2019), although hoovering can occur (Gaba, 2021). Several toxic relationship behaviors may be present in this cycle. The idealization stage is predominantly characterized by love-bombing. The person engaging in love-bombing may also engage in the toxic relationship behavior of deceiving and misrepresenting themselves. In research on narcissistic abuse, Howard (2019) indicates people with NPD will engage in pathological lying, weaving their own tale of abuse, and present a false version of themselves. Devaluation involves removing partners from their pedestals and engaging in the toxic relationship behavior of criticizing and conveying contempt. Howard (2019) also notes how people with NPD will often disregard their partners, another toxic relationship behavior that emerged from this research. During the discarding stage, when people with NPD end their relationships, they often engage in gaslighting, denying responsibility and deflecting blame, and deceiving and misrepresenting themselves (Howard, 2019). Hoovering—a communication tactic aimed at sucking a person back into a toxic romantic relationship—may also occur (Gaba, 2021). Manifesting in a variety of ways, hoovering may involve love-bombing as well as deceiving and misrepresenting themselves to try to get back into the ex-partner’s life. Hoovering inherently involves engaging in intermittent reinforcement.

Traumatic Bonding

Both cycles of abuse and narcissistic abuse may promote trauma bonds. Traumatic bonding occurs in relationships with (1) severe power differentials between partners, (2) the presence of intermittent reinforcement, and (3) the target of psychological and/or physical aggression having an attachment to the person engaging in the aforementioned types of aggressive behaviors (Dutton & Painter, 1993). Severe power differentials between partners (1) are indicated with the toxic relationship behavior controlling to possess and isolate as well as surmised from the toxic relationship behavior creating relationship imbalances. To expound upon

this point, part of creating imbalances is pervasive self-centeredness from one partner in the dyad and double-standards. Although not explicitly outlined by Reddit and Quora users as elements of power, these behaviors are indicative of power imbalances, with one partner's wants and desires molding the relationship. Another component of trauma bonds—engaging in intermittent reinforcement (2)—emerged from the data. Moreover, physical and/or psychological aggression (3) may be constituted by the toxic relationship behaviors using physical abuse, criticizing and conveying contempt, disregarding partner, gaslighting, and exploding with negativity. Although it is unclear if these characteristics worked together in ways that created trauma bonds for the Redditors and Quora users in this study, they represent the “raw materials” for trauma bonds to be developed and maintained in toxic romantic relationships.

Limitations and Contributions

To the primary investigator's knowledge, this is the first study to investigate toxic romantic relationships from a communicative perspective. Further, this dissertation expands the bounds of qualitative romantic relationship research by examining organic content from posters across the globe, aiding in the cross-cultural applicability of toxic romantic relationship communicative practices. Importantly, the findings coalesced from people's personal experiences as well as expert testimony from therapists and counselors. Moreover, the people who experienced toxic romantic relationships may have sought-out information about abusive cycles, like the battered woman's cycle (Walker, 2017) or narcissistic abuse (Howard, 2019). Seeking out information may have a reciprocal effect on reframing behaviors as toxic. Indications of seeking information include the hundreds of units excluded from analyses that included phrases like “not respecting boundaries” and “pushing boundaries.” The idea of boundaries is prevalent in advice about creating healthy relationships (Chesak, 2018; Pattemore, 2021; Love is Respect, n.d.); however, specific behavioral examples were not included with the mentioning of boundaries—nor were “boundaries” defined—and were thus excluded from analyses.

Overall, the data from the Reddit and Quora threads connect to several well-researched, established phenomena. The toxic relationship behavior walking on eggshells relates to the *chilling effect*, withholding expressions of opinions or complaints out of fear of partner response

(Roloff & Cloven, 1990). Numerous toxic relationship behaviors (e.g., controlling to possess and isolate, criticizing and convey contempt, using physical violence) constitute forms of intimate partner violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Moreover, behaviors that characterize cycles of abuse–battered woman (Walker, 2017), narcissistic abuse (Howard, 2019), and traumatic bonding (Dutton & Painter, 1993)–appear to be present in how individuals have characterized toxic romantic relationships (e.g., love-bombing, disregarding partner, exploding with negativity). Importantly, the data from Redditors and Quora-users support the notion that psychological abuse is a dominant form of abuse²⁰.

The next step in the dissertation is to examine some of the toxic relationship behaviors further to see how they associate with breakup distress and post-traumatic growth once individuals are no longer part of a toxic romantic relationship. Part of the process involved developing a self-report measure about toxic relationship behaviors, as described next.

²⁰ At least in the United States of America (Black et al., 2011) and Europe (FRA, 2014).

CHAPTER 3
TOXIC RELATIONSHIP BEHAVIORS SCALE DEVELOPMENT

'Cause you're hot then you're cold
You're yes then you're no
You're in then you're out
You're up then you're down...
(You) You don't really want to stay, no
(You) But you don't really want to go
-Katy Perry (2008)

Toxic relationship behaviors are behaviors characterized by power, control, and self-centeredness, which contribute to the decline of personal stability, wellbeing, and independent sense-of-self for one or both relational partners. As will be discussed in this chapter, several pre-existing scales related to toxic relationship behaviors exist, however, there is no comprehensive measure that captures the various forms of toxic behavior, and more so one that includes themes that emerged in the qualitative study. Thus, the goal of the present study was to develop a measure of toxic relationship behaviors that includes subscales related to the key themes uncovered in Chapter 2. Before describing how this new scale was constructed and tested, a review of other measures related to toxic behavior was conducted, noting the limitations of these scales in relation to the qualitative results presented in this dissertation.

Measuring Toxic Relationship Behaviors Using Self-Report Assessments

There are a variety of scales that measure specific aspects of toxic behavior. Lehman and colleagues (2012), with the help of several thousand women who volunteered while seeking refuge at a domestic violence shelter, assessed and ultimately validated the Checklist of Controlling Behaviors (CCB). The 10 subscales ($\alpha = .80 - .92$) of the CCB ($n = 84, \alpha = .94$) are based on the Power and Control wheel and elements of coercive control: (1) physical abuse, (2) sexual abuse, (3) emotional abuse, (4) economic abuse, (5) intimidation, (6) threats, (7) minimizing and denying, (8) blaming, (9) isolation, and (10) male privilege. Clearly, multiple subscales in the CCB relate to the toxic relationship behaviors identified in the qualitative study

(e.g., controlling to possess and isolate, denying responsibility and deflecting blame, using physical violence, coercing and controlling through sex, criticizing and conveying contempt). Of particular relevance to toxic relationship behaviors are the items in the behavioral subscales²¹ that relate to psychological and emotional aggression: *emotional abuse* and *isolation*.

The emotional abuse subscale contained three items relevant to the qualitative findings on toxic relationship behaviors in this dissertation: “insulted me in front of others,” “criticized my care of children or home,” and “blamed me for his problems” (Lehmann et al., 2012, p. 927). These items connect to the toxic relationship behaviors criticizing and conveying contempt as well as denying responsibility and deflecting blame. The isolation subscale ($\alpha = .91$) contained 10 items, eight of which connected to the toxic relationship behavior controlling to possess and isolate (e.g., “forbade or stopped me from seeing someone,” “monitored my time or made me account for where I was,” and “pressures me to stop contacting my family or friends,” Lehmann et al., 2012, p. 929). Importantly, the high reliability of the scale indicates quality items. However, the population (i.e., women in a domestic violence shelter) who participated is quite a specific group of women who, likely, experienced substantial physical abuse. As the qualitative data in Chapter 2 showed, many people reported experiencing toxic romantic relationships that were characterized by psychological abuse rather than physical abuse.

Another scale by Follingstad and colleagues (2015) focuses on psychological abuse using the Measure of Psychologically Abusive Behaviors (MPAB). The MPAB includes 14 categories of psychologically abusive behavior: sadistic behaviors, threats, isolating, manipulation, public humiliation, verbal abuse, wounding (re:sexuality), treating as inferior, creating a hostile environment, monitoring, wounding (re:fidelity), pathological jealousy, withholding emotionally or physically, and controlling personal decisions. Several toxic relationship behaviors resonate with the psychologically abusive behaviors, such as controlling to possess and isolate, criticizing and conveying contempt, disregarding partner, and exploding with

²¹ The minimizing and blaming subscales, though seemingly related, contained items specifically about abuse (e.g., “Denied that he had abused me” and “I asked/dared him to hurt me,” Lehmann et al., 2012, p. 928 and 929, respectively), which were too pointed for toxic relationship behaviors.

negativity. Interestingly, subscales were created with items that were “milder, moderate, and severe” in terms of psychological abuse. The measure also includes perceptions of intent of partner behaviors. Notably, Follingstad and colleagues (2015) used two samples to assess the MPAB: young women and women who self-identified as in distressed relationships. Across samples, the scale and subscales had excellent internal reliability (α , .89 -.97).

Categorically, though women in distressed relationships reported more psychologically abusive behaviors, both groups predominantly experienced verbal abuse, creation of a hostile environment, and treatment as an inferior. Women in distressed relationships, however, were more likely to experience manipulation, whereas young women were more likely to experience monitoring (Follingstad et al., 2015). Though the MPAB is fairly comprehensive, behavior that may constitute a form of psychological abuse identified in the toxic relationship behavior research is absent: denying responsibility and deflecting blame.

Powell and colleagues (1997) researched the association between avoidance of responsibility with Disruptive Behavior Disorders (Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder). The self-report checklist yielded nine factors: (1) affect rationalization; (2) no remorse; (3) blaming; (4) victim role–past; (5) no personal responsibility; (6) misunderstanding; (7) playing dumb; (8) victim role–others; and (9) immoral attitude. Moreover, four tactics to avoid responsibility accounted for 24 percent of the variance in Disruptive Behavior Disorders symptoms: immoral attitude, victim role–past (attributing inappropriate behavior to past victimization), no remorse [for inappropriate behavior], and playing dumb (claiming ignorance about the impact of inappropriate behavior) (Powell et al., 1997).

Overall, the scale had acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .74$). The blaming subscale contained four items: (1) when I get in trouble it is because I am angry; (2) when I get in trouble it is someone else’s fault; (3) if my actions hurt someone, they deserve it; and (4) I do *not* care about others’ feelings. Notably, the internal reliability for the blaming subscale was poor ($\alpha = .57$) and, in the primary investigator’s opinion, one factor contributing to this low reliability could be poor face validity. Although a helpful resource to get an idea of how people cognitively avoid responsibility,

the avoiding responsibility scale does not capture the *behaviors* associated with avoidance of responsibility.

Although scales on controlling (Lehmann et al., 2012), psychological abuse (Follingstad et al., 2015), and avoiding responsibility exist (Powell et al., 1997), they do not capture the essence of the toxic relationship behaviors reported by Reddit and Quora users in the qualitative data reported in Chapter 2. Moreover, to the primary investigator's knowledge, scales do not exist for walking on eggshells, engaging in intermittent reinforcement, and love-bombing²². For the aforementioned reasons, it was deemed important to create a new Toxic Relationship Behavior scale modeled after the themes found in the qualitative data.

Method

Item Development

The primary investigator and her advisor examined the most frequently addressed toxic relationship behaviors ($n > 100$ units) (i.e., controlling to possess and isolate, creating relationship imbalances, denying responsibility and deflecting blame, criticizing and conveying contempt, deceiving and misrepresenting the self, and walking on eggshells) to determine which would be included in the toxic relationship behaviors. Part of the process of determining which behaviors to develop scales for involved assessing behaviors that may specifically apply to toxic romantic relationships as well as behaviors with rich data descriptions to aid in scale creation. For this reason, deceiving and misrepresenting the self was omitted from analyses²³ and engaging in intermittent reinforcement was added²⁴. Additionally, it was deemed important to include both of the behaviors that reflected the dynamic between both partners (i.e., walking on eggshells and intermittent reinforcement).

Of importance, controlling to possess and isolate was the most frequently referenced type of behavior in the qualitative study ($n = 430$) with the next type of behavior containing only 186 references. For that reason, controlling to possess and isolate was split into two sub-

²² Though idealistic distortion (Stafford & Merolla, 2007) is love-bombing adjacent.

²³ Deceiving and misrepresenting the self are common behaviors across various relationship contexts, and the data predominantly included brief descriptions like "lying."

²⁴ Intermittent reinforcement, though the least-mentioned toxic relationship behavior from Reddit and Quora users, is commonly cited in literature about abusive relationships (Dutton & Painter, 1993; Walker, 2017).

categories: isolating and surveilling. Moreover, creating relationship imbalances was predominantly characterized by selfish, self-centered behavior. For this reason, a specific type of imbalance was examined: partner prioritizing self [above all others].

The primary researcher and her advisor developed items from the language used in the qualitative data (e.g., “toxic people check your phone/monitor your whereabouts,” “being berated and belittled constantly,” “alternating wildly between incredible highs and lows in the relationship”). The preliminary toxic relationship behaviors questionnaire included seven subscales with five items each ($n = 35$) using a 7-point Likert-type scale ($1 = \textit{never}$, $7 = \textit{always}$): isolating, surveilling, criticizing and conveying contempt, walking on eggshells, deflecting blame, partner prioritizing self, and engaging in intermittent reinforcement. These items were included in a broader questionnaire used for both scale development. Following the validation, results from this measure were used to test possible associations with breakup distress and post-traumatic growth, as described in Chapter 5.

Participants

Participants²⁵ were initially recruited through flyers²⁶ shared on social media (February 4, 2022; 206 responses) and later recruited through sharing the survey amongst college students (February 14, 2012; 51 responses) in communication classes at a large Southwestern university (closed February 21, 2022; total responses 257). After being directed to an informed consent²⁷ page, participants consented to completing a survey using Qualtrics. Participants first answered questions about relationship duration and breakup qualities. Then, they completed the following questionnaires: toxic relationship behaviors, breakup distress, post-breakup coping behaviors, and post-traumatic growth inventory. Next, participants were asked to describe their current communication with their ex, current relationship/dating status, and any additional thoughts they would like to share about their toxic romantic relationship. Last, they answered demographic questions. The final page provided resources for information about (un)healthy relationships.

²⁵ This study (STUDY00015352) received IRB exemption (see Appendix B) prior to launching the survey.

²⁶ See Appendix C for recruitment content.

²⁷ See Appendix D.

Participants who completed the entirety of the survey ($n = 168$) took an average of 17.11 minutes to complete the survey. There was no compensation for participation.

The participants who completed this questionnaire were comprised of 184 individuals ages 18-77 ($M = 27.95$, $SD = 8.81$) who met the following criteria at the time of the survey: at least 18 years of age, at least three months out of the toxic romantic relationship, the relationship was (presumed) monogamous, did not marry the ex, do not have children with the ex, and do not have an ongoing relationship with the ex (co-parent, business partner, or personal relationship).

When asked about gender identity, 75.54 percent ($n = 139$) identified as a woman, 14.67 percent ($n = 27$) identified as a man, 1.10 percent identified as gender nonbinary ($n = 2$), 1.10 percent identified as gender fluid ($n = 2$), 0.54 percent identified as nonbinary femme ($n = 1$), 0.54 percent identified as Nadleehi, a traditional Navajo gender meaning “the changing one” ($n = 1$), and 6.52 percent did not answer ($n = 12$). The majority (57.07 percent) of participants identified as heterosexual ($n = 105$), 19.02 percent ($n = 35$) as bisexual, 5.98 percent as pansexual ($n = 11$), 2.17 percent ($n = 4$) as asexual, 1.63 percent as gay ($n = 3$), 2.17 percent as lesbian ($n = 4$), 1.10 percent as queer ($n = 2$), 1.10 percent identified demisexual ($n = 2$), 1.10 percent as questioning or unsure ($n = 2$), and 7.61 percent ($n = 14$) did not respond.

When asked about race and ethnicity, participants were directed to select all that apply. Participants predominantly (79.9%) identified with one race and ethnicity ($n = 147$): white ($n = 126$, 68.48%), Hispanic ($n = 10$, 5.43%), Asian ($n = 4$, 2.17%), Latinx ($n = 2$, 1.10%), Black ($n = 2$, 1.10%), Native American ($n = 2$, 1.10%), Middle Eastern ($n = 2$, 1.10%), Native Hawaiian ($n = 1$, 0.54%). Some participants ($n = 17$, 9.23%) identified with two or more races and ethnicities from the selections listed: Hispanic-white ($n = 6$, 3.26%), Hispanic-Latinx-white ($n = 3$, 1.63%), Hispanic-Asian ($n = 1$, 0.54%), Black-white ($n = 2$, 1.10%), Asian-Pacific Islander ($n = 1$, 0.54%), Latinx-white ($n = 1$, 0.54%), Native American-white ($n = 1$, 0.54%), Middle Eastern-white ($n = 1$, 0.54%), Pacific Islander-white ($n = 1$, 0.54%). Three participants wrote-in their identification with two races and ethnicities: Greek-American (0.54%), Scottish Pict-white (0.54%), and Bi-racial (0.54%). One selected “other” with no specification (0.54%). Two participants preferred not to share (1.10%), and 11 participants did not select or write-in races and ethnicities (5.98%).

Time together (“on” time) with exes ranged from one month to nearly 11 years (in years: $M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.92$). When asked about how many times they broke-up before their “breakup stuck,” 175 participants provided a definitive amount ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 2.48$). However, the remaining participants ($n = 9$; time together in years $R = 1.67 - 5.33$) indicated there were “too many [breakups] to count” ($n = 4$), two participants noted “10+,” one responded “probably more than 30 times,” one responded “40 times at least,” and one responded “less than twenty times over eight months.” Participants’ time since their final breakups ranged from four months to just over 17 years (in years: $M = 4.35$, $SD = 3.74$). Following relationship breakup, 81.52 percent ($n = 150$) of participants indicated their ex continued to exhibit toxic behaviors toward them ($M = 1.35$, $SD = 1.46$), with 62.67 percent of those participants indicating it persisted no more than one year.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

To determine the factor structure of the 35 items, Costello and Osborne’s (2005) best practices for using exploratory factor analysis were followed. The exploratory factor analysis was conducted using Maximum likelihood extraction and oblim rotation. After examining the factor loadings and scree plot to determine the overall pattern of factor loadings, items were designated as belonging to a factor if the primary loading on that factor was at least .40, with the largest secondary loading at least .20 less than the primary loading. After an initial run, any items that did not fit the criteria or produced split loadings were dropped ($n = 2$). Then, the final exploratory factor analysis was run²⁸. For the toxic relationship behaviors exploratory factor analysis, $\chi^2 (496) = 4173.27$, $p < .001$, $KMO = .92$, six subscales emerged: (1) isolating ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .92$), (2) displaying righteous self-centeredness ($n = 7$, $\alpha = .89$), (3) walking on eggshells ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .90$), (4) criticizing and conveying contempt ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .89$), (5) surveilling ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .88$), and (6) engaging in intermittent reinforcement ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .85$)²⁹. Collectively, the subscales accounted for 64.70 percent of the variance. See Table 2 for factor loadings and Table 3 for correlations among toxic relationship behaviors.

²⁸ All exploratory factor analyses in the next chapter followed this protocol.

²⁹ See Appendix C for the questionnaire.

Table 2.

Exploratory Factor Analysis for Toxic Relationship Behavior Items

Item	Primary Loading
Factor: Isolating	
My ex isolated me from family and/or friends.	.96
My ex alienated me from people I was close to.	.87
My ex sabotaged my relationships with other people.	.52
My ex limited how much time I spent with other people.	.61
My ex cut me off from people I love.	.71
Factor: Displaying Righteous Self-centeredness	
My needs were ignored.	.79
My ex thought nothing was ever their fault.	.76
Everything was centered around what my ex wanted.	.74
My ex prioritized their needs over mine.	.71
My ex was “all take and no give.”	.70
My ex twisted things to avoid being blamed for things.	.65
My ex had trouble admitting when they were wrong.	.59
Factor: Walking on Eggshells	
I felt like I had to monitor what I said and did so my ex wouldn't get upset.	-.74
I felt like I was walking on eggshells to avoid upsetting my partner.	-.70
I felt like I was navigating a minefield to prevent problems in my relationship.	-.69
I was scared of doing something that would set my ex off.	-.68
I was careful to avoid doing anything that might cause issues in my relationship.	-.46
Factor: Criticizing and Conveying Contempt	
My ex belittled me.	.75
My ex put me down.	.75
My ex criticized me.	.67
My ex said things that made me feel worthless.	.57
My ex called me names.	.55

Table 2.***Exploratory Factor Analysis for Toxic Relationship Behavior Items***

Item	Primary Loading
Factor: Surveilling	
My ex monitored my whereabouts.	.81
My ex monitored who I was talking to.	.72
My ex wanted to know where I was all the time.	.72
My ex went through my phone.	.64
My ex stalked my social media.	.55
Factor: Engaging in Intermittent Reinforcement	
My ex's behavior toward me cycled between good and bad.	.67
My ex treated me great sometimes and horrible other times.	.67
My ex's behavior ran hot and cold.	.58
My ex acted like they loved me one minute and hated me the next.	.52
My ex behaved in ways that created incredible highs and lows in the relationship.	.45

Table 3.***Correlations Among Toxic Relationship Behaviors***

Scale	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Isolating	-					
2. Displaying Righteous Self-Centeredness	.45 < .001	-				
3. Walking on Eggshells	.55 <.001	.48 .004	-			
4. Criticizing and Conveying Contempt	.55 <.001	.50 <.001	.54 <.001	-		
5. Engaging in Intermittent Reinforcement	.51 <.001	.59 <.001	.65 <.001	.53 <.001	-	
6. Surveilling	.69 <.001	.25 .001	.47 <.001	.47 <.001	.40 <.001	-

Note. *p* values listed under the correlations are two-tailed.

Discussion

The exploratory factor analysis revealed six subscales: (1) isolating, (2) displaying righteous self-centeredness, (3) walking on eggshells, (4) criticizing and conveying contempt, (5) surveilling, and (6) engaging in intermittent reinforcement. Importantly, the scales representing each of these factors all showed good to excellent inter-item reliability. Items loaded in ways consistent with the categories that emerged from the qualitative analysis discussed in Chapter 2 with the exception of displaying righteous self-centeredness, which contained items from creating relationship imbalances as well as denying responsibility and deflecting blame.

It is important to note in the qualitative analysis detailed in Chapter 2, several data units were originally double-coded into both the creating relationship imbalances theme as well as denying responsibility and deflecting blame theme. Given that some of the items sat at the intersection of these two categories, it is not surprising that they came together to form a new broader scale—displaying righteous self-centeredness—in the exploratory factor analysis. Based on the findings from the qualitative study, part of creating imbalances—where partner prioritizing self emerged—included exhibiting an inflated sense of self-importance, conveying entitlement, and demonstrating the belief that the world revolves around themselves. The behaviors described, as well as many data units indicating “narcissism,” align with characteristics associated with NPD: grandiosity, entitlement, self-centered worldview, need for admiration, and lack of empathy” (APA, 2013; Lay, 2019). These behaviors and cognitions correspond with deflecting blame: People with NPD (or NPD-like tendencies) are the center of the world and therefore infallible. The need for admiration may also influence blame-deflecting behavior. Thus, the items from partner prioritizing self and deflecting blame logically hang together, ultimately creating the displaying righteous self-centeredness subscale.

The new Toxic Relationship Behaviors scale developed for the purpose of this study focuses on a broader array of behaviors compared to previous scales. For researchers wanting to tap into the most common behaviors that are associated with toxic relationships, this scale would be a good choice. The scale also includes an intermittent reinforcement subscale, which captures a dyadic dynamic that occurs within some toxic relationships. In the future, new subscales could

be created to measure the other less common themes found in the qualitative data. Future research should also validate the structure of the factors that represent the subscales within the Toxic Relationship Behavior scale using confirmatory factor analysis. The subscales should also be validated by checking for convergent and divergent validity. Toxic relationship behaviors should be positively associated with other measures of psychologically abusive behavior and negatively associated with measures of constructive and caring communication. The data analysis in the next chapter, Chapter 4, has the potential to show the subscales in the Toxic Relationship Behaviors scale have predictive validity.

CHAPTER 4
QUANTITATIVE STUDY

Now I hold my head up high and you see me

Somebody new

I'm not that chained-up little person still in love with you

And so you felt like dropping in and just expect me to be free

Well, now I'm saving all my lovin' for someone who's loving me

-Gloria Gaynor (1978)

While the behaviors in toxic romantic relationships may be disheartening, the aftermath of the relationship may ultimately yield positive change in some cases. Following relational dissolution, people tend to experience varying cognitive and emotional states. Some people experience ambivalence or conflicting feelings about the breakup (Daily et al., 2020c), whereas others may experience relief or disbelief. In a grounded-theory approach of change and personal growth following breakups among college students, Hebert and Popadiuk (2008) developed a model driven by the core category of *moving-self-forward* which weaves in-and-out of three interrelated phases. *Moving-self-forward* refers to “movement that is oriented toward recovery from the breakup and personal growth and change” (Hebert & Popadiuk, 2008, p. 9). Phase 1, *experiencing a loss*, is “marked by the participants’ loss of a romantic relationship, the immediate processing of the loss, as well as the realization and recognition of the resulting implications” (Hebert & Popadiuk, 2008, p. 6). After realizing the finality of the loss, people often move to phase 2, *pulling apart*, which is characterized by physically, emotionally, and symbolically separating themselves from their exes. During this time, people employ myriad cognitive and behavioral strategies to manage their distress. In phase 3, *moving beyond*, people report less distress and an ability to grow from their breakup. Importantly, time spent in each phase varies from person-to-person. The aforementioned model discusses three elements of toxic romantic relationships I aim to assess: post-breakup distress, how people cope with the breakup, and post-traumatic growth.

Post-Breakup Outcomes

Breakup Distress

Breakups are one of the most distressing experiences people endure, as researchers have known for decades (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). In fact, people report relational breakups as one of the most hurtful and least forgivable offenses (ex)partners make (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). Notably, in a review of monogamous romantic relationships and well-being research, Kansky (2018) noted “intimate partnerships greatly impact one’s physical and emotional health in both positive and negative ways depending on relationship status and quality” (p. 5). Romantic relationships can be sources of well-being, intimacy, companionship, and happiness, as well as, conversely, poor mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, aggression, substance use) and poor immune functioning (Kansky, 2018). Hebert and Popadiuk (2008) note that following relational breakup, people report feeling sad, hurt, angry, and alone; this distress, however, lessens over time. Additionally, Field and colleagues (2009) argue breakup distress in university students may resemble complicated grief, which includes “intensive intrusive thoughts, pangs of severe emotion, distressing yearnings, feeling excessively alone and empty, unusual sleep disturbances, and loss of interest in personal activity” (p. 705).

Breakup distress may be more salient in individuals who have left toxic romantic relationships due to the intensity and volatility of the toxic relationship behaviors. One behavior in particular—intermittent reinforcement—may heighten breakup distress. Individuals who have experienced intermittent reinforcement may yearn to contact their toxic partners to relieve feelings of stress, anxiety, and vulnerability (Dutton & Painter, 1993). For this reason, the first hypothesis is posed:

H1: The extent to which people report that their ex partner engaged in intermittent reinforcement is positively associated with breakup distress.

Beyond engaging in intermittent reinforcement, toxic relationship behaviors and associations with breakup distress are largely exploratory. For example, on one hand, people might feel some relief at getting away from a partner who engaged in criticism and was self-righteously selfish, which could reduce breakup distress. They might also feel freedom if they had previously been isolated

from friends and family. However, toxic romantic relationships that include these behaviors can be fraught with codependency, and someone who was isolated may no longer have a social network they can easily turn to, which are factors that could increase breakup distress. Because the associations among these toxic relationship behaviors and breakup distress are unclear, a research question is posed:

R1: Is the extent that people report that their ex partner used isolating, surveilling, criticizing and conveying contempt, deflecting blame, prioritizing-self, or walking on eggshells associated with breakup distress?

Coping with Breakups

Breakup distress is likely related to post-breakup coping strategies. Thus, breakup distress may be ameliorated through various coping strategies. In a review of coping scales, Skinner et al. (2003) identified more than 400 different labels ranging from specific “instances” of coping to broader basic adaptive processes. Some common ways people respond to stress include rumination, social support seeking, problem solving, denial, and cognitive restructuring (Skinner et al., 2003).

Some responses to distressing situations such as breakups are more productive than others. Rumination, defined as repetitive thought patterns about a past event (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998; Marshall et al., 2013), can be adaptive through reflection but maladaptive through brooding and preoccupation (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). Reflection can increase relationship understanding and facilitate moving forward, whereas brooding and preoccupation can keep people focused on their distress and prevent them from moving on (Brenner & Vogul, 2015; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). Maladaptive rumination may be related to “stalking” (i.e., surveilling) an ex’s social media, despite the fact that social media surveillance of an ex leads to greater breakup distress (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Lukacs & Quan-Haase, 2015; Marshall, 2012). In response to distress, people may also become more self-reliant (Davis et al., 2003) or may self-isolate. Moreover, people may cope through outwardly destructive behaviors, such as increased consumption of drugs and alcohol (Davis et al., 2003), which are rarely if ever effective at reducing breakup distress in the long-term.

Forms of positive distraction, such as engaging in new activities to grow as a person and spending time with friends and family (i.e., seeking social support) can be effective for coping with distress (Davis et al., 2003; Moller et al., 2003). By keeping the distressed person occupied, positive distractions help reduce a slew of counterproductive behaviors that prevent a distressed individual from moving forward, such as brooding, moping around, and stalking the ex. Problem-solving coping styles can manifest in a variety of ways. If an ex is a source of distress and pain, people may “solve this problem” by avoiding contact with someone or eliminating “reminders” of an ex (e.g., photographs, clothes, gifts) (Davis et al., 2003). In fact, Fox and Tokunaga (2015) suggest “individuals experiencing a high level of distress from a breakup should consider disconnecting from the ex-partner on SNSs, either temporarily or permanently” (p. 495)³⁰.

For toxic romantic relationship post-breakup coping, I have categorized post-breakup coping as productive³¹ or counterproductive. Productive post-breakup coping behaviors include positive distractions (e.g., engaging in enjoyable activities), social support-seeking (e.g., spending time with family and friends), and contact avoidance (e.g., blocking someone on social media). Counterproductive post-breakup coping behaviors include solitude/isolation (e.g., spending excessive time alone), dangerous behaviors (e.g., having indiscriminate sex), and ex-focused behaviors (e.g., contacting or stalking ex after breakup). Thus:

H2: Breakup distress is (a) positively associated with unproductive post-breakup coping behaviors and (b) negatively associated with productive post-breakup coping behaviors.

Post-traumatic Growth

Post-breakup coping behaviors may also be related to post-traumatic growth. Romantic relationship dissolution—whether the relationship was toxic or not—may be a traumatic experience. When there is trauma, however, there is also opportunity for personal growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Given the behaviors present in toxic romantic relationships (e.g., isolating, surveilling, walking on eggshells, criticizing and conveying contempt, deflecting blame,

³⁰ “SNSs” refer to social networking sites.

³¹ Productive meaning “moving forward,” which aligns with the breakup phases described by Hebert and Popadiuk (2008).

partner prioritizing self, and engaging in intermittent reinforcement), it is reasonable to conclude that, for some people, toxic romantic relationships may be more traumatic than a non-toxic relationships breakup. When someone is accustomed to toxicity and instability in a relationship, it can be a challenge for people to adjust after experiencing and expecting so much chaos in their daily lives. The transition out of such a relationship can leave people feeling confused and anxious, even though they are no longer in a romantic relationship with the source of their trauma. Toxic romantic relationships can take a toll on people emotionally and leave them with lowered self-esteem. The cognitive and emotional space that used to be invested in dealing with the toxicity in the relationship may, post-breakup, be used to ruminate over what went wrong and to re-live the stress they experienced (i.e., unproductive post-breakup coping strategies). The good news, however, is that people sometimes emerge stronger after dealing with trauma.

In particular, researchers have discussed the concept of post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth is “how people often change in positive ways in their struggles with adversity” (Joseph et al., 2012, p. 316). Common forms of personal growth include changes in perception of self, changes in relationships with others, and changes in life philosophies (Joseph et al., 2012). People who have experienced toxic romantic relationships may view themselves as survivors or fighters for extricating themselves from a toxic romantic relationship. They may also strengthen bonds with family and friends (i.e., productive post-breakup coping strategies), as well as know what behaviors they deem unacceptable in future romantic relationships. Additionally, people who have experienced toxic romantic relationships may feel emboldened and go after what they want, no matter how intimidating it may seem. Therefore, the promise of post-traumatic growth may be a silver lining for people freshly out of toxic romantic relationships. Importantly, post-traumatic growth may be related to how people cope with a toxic romantic relationship breakup. In a meta-analysis of factors contributing to posttraumatic growth, Prati and Pietrantonio (2009) concluded optimism, social support coping, seeking social support, spirituality, acceptance coping, reappraisal coping, and religious coping are all positively related to posttraumatic growth. Thus, H3 is posed:

H3: Post-traumatic growth is (a) negatively associated with unproductive post-breakup coping behaviors and (b) positively associated with productive post-breakup coping behaviors

It is unknown whether certain toxic relationship behaviors prevent or promote post-traumatic growth. For some, toxic relationship behaviors may make it difficult for people to move on, gain closure, and focus on themselves. For others, liberation from the toxic romantic relationship may instill a sense of accomplishment and strength in a person. To address these possibilities, a second research question is advanced:

R2: How are toxic relationship behaviors associated with post-traumatic growth?

Method

Participants and Procedures

The participants for this study are the same 184 individuals described in Chapter 3, all of whom recalled their experiences in a toxic romantic relationship that had ended at least three months before the data were collected. (See Chapter 3 for a complete description of the sample and study procedure.)

Measures

Toxic Relationship Behaviors

As described in Chapter 3, the Toxic Relationship Behaviors Questionnaire³² was subjected to an exploratory factor analysis with six subscales emerging: (1) isolating ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .92$), (2) displaying righteous self-centeredness ($n = 8$, $\alpha = .89$), (3) walking on eggshells ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .90$), (4) criticizing and conveying contempt ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .89$), (5) surveilling ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .88$), and (6) engaging in intermittent reinforcement ($n = 5$, $\alpha = .85$).

Breakup Distress

The Breakup Distress Scale ($n = 10$) is a seven-point Likert-type scale ($1 = not at all$, $7 = very much so$). The scale in the survey contained 10 items from the Field et al. (2009) Breakup Distress Scale and three items from the PTSD Checklist – Civilian Version (PCL-C) (Weathers et

³² See Chapter 3 for details on scale development, factor loadings, and correlations.

al., 1994)³³. An exploratory factor analysis, $\chi^2(45) = 944.48, p < .001, KMO = .82$, indicated two factors accounted for 56.45 percent of variance: cognitive breakup distress ($n = 4, \alpha = .88$) and emotional breakup distress ($n = 6, \alpha = .83$). There was a positive correlation between emotional breakup distress and cognitive breakup distress, $r(175) = .43, p < .001$. See Table 4 for factor loadings and Appendix F for the questionnaire.

Table 4.
Exploratory Factor Analysis of Breakup Distress Items

Item	Primary Loading
Factor: Cognitive Breakup Distress	
I wondered if my ex was thinking of me.	.91
I wondered what my ex was up to.	.88
I couldn't stop thinking about my ex.	.72
I felt lonely.	.61
Factor: Emotional Breakup Distress	
I felt a sense of disbelief	.70
I had a physical reaction (e.g., heart pounding, sweating) when thinking about my ex.	.69
I felt empty	.68
I felt jumpy or easily startled.	.63
I felt stunned or dazed over what happened.	.61
I felt emotionally numb.	.61

Post-breakup Coping Behaviors

The Post-Breakup Coping Behaviors Questionnaire ($n = 24$) is a seven-point Likert-type scale ($1 = never, 7 = always$), partially adapted from the communicative responses to sadness inventory (Guerrero & Reiter, 1998): “activity” was changed to “positive distractions” with two items reworded and two items omitted; the items from “dangerous behavior and negative

³³ These items were added to address the physiological responses people experience with breakup distress.

distractions were reworked and went from two items to four items; one item was omitted from social support seeking; and one item was omitted from solitude/isolation. The primary investigator and her advisor created two new subscales: ex-focused behavior and contact avoidance.

After an exploratory factor analysis, $\chi^2 (171) = 1811.44, p < .001, KMO = .83$, five factors emerged. The largest factor contained both positive and negative loadings, so the primary researcher ran a secondary factor analysis to assess dimensionality. The secondary exploratory factor analysis showed the scale was bi-dimensional and separated into two factors. This resulted in six subscales (see Table 5 for factor loadings) that accounted for 62.44 percent of variance: positive distractions ($n = 5, \alpha = .87$), dangerous behavior and negative distractions ($n = 4, \alpha = .88$), social support seeking ($n = 3, \alpha = .82$), solitude/isolation ($n = 3, \alpha = .75$), ex-focused behavior ($n = 4, \alpha = .83$), and contact avoidance ($n = 3, \alpha = .78$). For factor loadings see Table 5, for bivariate correlations see Table 6, and for the questionnaire see Appendix G.

Table 5.
Exploratory Factor Analysis of Post-breakup Coping Behavior Items

Item	Primary Loading	Secondary EFA
Factor: Positive Distractions		
I focused on doing things that make me feel good about myself.	-.75	
I engaged in enjoyable activities to keep my mind off things.	-.72	
I kept busy with activities that helped me grow as a person.	-.71	
I tried to keep myself busy with things I like to do.	-.66	
I tried new things, like getting involved in a new project or activity.	-.63	
Factor: Dangerous Behavior and Negative Distractions		
I engaged in behaviors that made me feel bad about myself.	.90	
I did things that I later regretted.	.80	
I engaged in behavior that was out of control.	.79	
I did crazy things I normally wouldn't do.	.70	

Table 5.***Exploratory Factor Analysis of Post-breakup Coping Behavior Items***

Item	Primary Loading	Secondary EFA
Factor: Social Support Seeking		
I asked others for support.	.79	
I discussed how I was feeling with someone close to me.	.70	
I sought-out comfort from my social circle.	.57	
Factor: Solitude/Isolation		
I spent more time alone than usual.	.67	
I kept to myself.	.61	
I went out less than I normally did	.59	
Factor: Ex-Focused Behavior		
I tried to get back together with my ex.	-.90	.95
I hung on to the possibility we would get back together.	-.88	.88
I tried to talk to my ex.	-.74	.67
I stalked my ex's social media.	-.58	.60
Factor: Contact Avoidance		
I removed all traces of my ex from my phone and social media.	.50	.95
I packed away or got rid of anything that reminded me of my ex.	.47	.65
I unfollowed or blocked my ex.	.49	.61

Table 6.
Correlations Among Post-Breakup Coping Behaviors

Scale	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Ex-Focused Behavior	-					
2. Solitude	.07 .32	-				
3. Negative Distractions	.38 <.001	.22 .004	-			
4. Contact Avoidance	-.49 <.001	.16 .038	-.06 <.001	-		
5. Seeking Social Support	-.09 .258	-.42 <.001	-.14 .070	.18 .02	-	
6. Positive Distractions	-.26 .001	-.20 .007	-.22 .003	.39 <.001	.53 <.001	-

Note. *p* values listed under the correlations are two-tailed.

Post-traumatic Growth Inventory

The Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory ($n = 15$) is a seven-point, Likert-type scale ($1 = not\ at\ all$, $7 = a\ great\ deal$) adapted from Choi and Toma (2017)³⁴ to examine growth following a romantic breakup. In the present, further-modified version, three subscales remained the same (appreciation of life, new possibilities, personal strength), the subscale relating to others was split into two subscales (relating to others and relationship appreciation), and the subscale of spiritual change was removed.

However, an exploratory factor analysis, $\chi^2(105) = 1552.68$, $p < .001$, $KMO = .88$ revealed three factors: personal growth ($n = 9$, $\alpha = .90$), heightened appreciation of relationships ($n = 3$, $\alpha = .88$), and increased sensitivity toward others ($n = 3$, $\alpha = .86$). The factors accounted for 59.63 percent of variance (see Table 7 for factor loadings)³⁵. There was a positive correlation between personal growth and heightened appreciation of relationships, $r(175) = .63$, $p < .001$, and increased sensitivity toward others, $r(175) = .59$, $p < .001$. There was also a positive

³⁴ Choi and Toma (2017) used a modified version of Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) post-traumatic growth inventory.

³⁵ See Appendix H for the inventory.

correlation between heightened appreciation of relationships and increased sensitivity toward others, $r(175) = .51, p < .001$.

Table 7.

Exploratory Factor Analysis of Post-traumatic Growth Inventory Items

Item	Primary Loading
Factor: Personal Growth	
It helped me establish a new path for my life.	.74
It gave me a greater appreciation for the value of my own life.	.72
It helped me discover that I'm stronger than I thought I was.	.72
It gave me a greater sense of self-reliance.	.71
It showed me I can do better things with my life.	.70
It showed me that I can handle difficulties.	.68
It changed my priorities about what is important in life.	.65
It helped me better appreciate each day.	.60
It made me more likely to change things that need changing.	.51
Factor: Heightened Appreciation of Relationships	
It helped me see how wonderful some of the people in my life are	-.95
It gave me a greater appreciation of my friends and family.	-.74
It helped me appreciate the people I can count on in times of trouble.	-.62
Factor: Increased Sensitivity toward Others	
It helped me develop passion for others.	-.92
It gave me a stronger sense of empathy.	-.80
It made me more supportive of other people.	-.59

Control Variables

Several variables were considered as control variables: length of the relationship, number of times they broke up and got back together, and amount of contact since the breakup. However,

the aforementioned were not significantly associated with the other variables (toxic relationship behaviors, breakup distress, post-traumatic growth, post-breakup coping behaviors).

Results

Analytical Plan

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the study's hypotheses. The toxic relationship behaviors were entered in Block 1. Due to the exploratory nature of this study and fairly high correlations among toxic relationship behaviors, (in the .50 - .60 range; see Table 3) these variables were entered into the first block using the stepwise method. The variables in the second block, which consisted of six of the post-breakup coping behaviors (i.e., positive distractions, dangerous behavior and negative distractions, social support seeking, solitude/isolation, ex-focused behavior, contact avoidance), were entered simultaneously. This procedure was followed for all of the regression analyses described next.

Predictor variables (i.e., toxic relationship behaviors, post-breakup coping behaviors) were evaluated as significant based on one-tailed tests for hypotheses and two-tailed tests for research questions. Finally, correlations were calculated between the dependent variables measuring breakup distress and post-traumatic growth. Only two small significant correlations emerged; cognitive breakup distress was positively associated with heightened appreciation of relationships, $r(175) = .16, p < .05$; and increased sensitivity to others, $r(175) = .18, p < .05$.

Breakup Distress

The first set of hypotheses (H1 and H2) and RQ1 focused on breakup distress. H1 predicted that engaging in intermittent reinforcement would be positively associated with breakup distress. RQ1 asked how the other five toxic relationship behaviors related to breakup distress. H2 predicted that: (a) unproductive post-breakup coping behaviors (dangerous behavior and negative distractions; solitude/isolation; and ex-focused behavior) would be positive predictors of breakup distress, whereas productive post-breakup coping behaviors (positive distractions; social support-seeking; and contact avoidance) would be negative predictors of breakup distress. Two analyses were conducted to test this set of hypotheses since the factor analyses revealed that

the breakup distress emotions grouped into separate factors representing *emotional breakup distress* and *cognitive breakup distress*.

Emotional Breakup Distress

For the hierarchical regression on emotional breakup distress, in Block 1, conveying criticism and contempt of partner entered the model first as a negative predictor of emotional distress ($\beta = -.26, t = -2.95, p < .01$) followed by engaging in intermittent reinforcement ($\beta = .16, t = 1.93, p < .05$), which emerged as a positive predictor of emotional distress. The model with these two toxic behaviors as predictors of emotional breakup distress was significant, $F(2,176) = 4.412, p < .05, R^2 = .05$. When the post-breakup coping behaviors were entered, however, both of these toxic relationship behaviors become non-significant. It appears that the post-breakup coping behaviors account for more variance in breakup distress than the toxic behaviors exhibited in the romantic relationship. The final model containing Blocks 1 and 2 was significant, $F(8,170) = 19.11, p < .001, R^2 = .47$.

As predicted, contact avoidance ($\beta = -.13, t = -1.78, p < .05$) was negatively associated with emotional breakup distress, whereas ex-focused behavior ($\beta = .54, t = 7.50, p < .001$) was positively associated. Contrary to H2b, social support-seeking also emerged as a significant positive predictor in the model ($\beta = .14, t = 2.00, p < .05$). None of the other post-breakup coping behaviors emerged as significant. Thus, H2 was partially supported for emotional breakup distress. The regression analysis produced mixed results for engaging in intermittent reinforcement; although it was a significant positive predictor of emotional distress when entered before the post-breakup coping behaviors, once the post-breakup coping behaviors were entered the association was rendered non-significant. As noted above, the findings on engaging in intermittent reinforcement indicate the significant impact post-breakup coping behaviors have on emotional breakup distress.

Cognitive Breakup Distress

For cognitive breakup distress, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. In Block 1, displaying righteous self-centeredness entered the model first ($\beta = .29, t = 4.04, p < .001$) followed by surveilling ($\beta = .18, t = 2.55, p < .05$); both of these toxic relationship behaviors

positively associated with cognitive breakup distress. The model was significant after these two toxic relationship behaviors were entered in Block 1, $F(2,176)= 15.20, p < .001, R^2 = .15$. The model's significance improved when the post-breakup coping behaviors were added in Block 2, $F(8,170)= 11.76, p < .001, R^2 = .36, R^2_{\text{Change}} = .21, p < .001$. In this final model, displaying righteous self-centeredness ($\beta = .23, t = 3.42, p = .001$), surveilling ($\beta = .18, t = 2.68, p < .01$), ex-focused behavior ($\beta = .31, t = 4.00, p < .001$), seeking social support ($\beta = .22, t = 2.70, p < .01$), and solitude/isolation ($\beta = .31, t = 4.21, p < .001$) were all positively associated with cognitive breakup distress. In sum, H1 was not supported as the association between engaging in intermittent reinforcement and cognitive breakup distress was nonsignificant.

With respect to R1, people who reported their partners showed higher levels of displaying righteous self-centeredness and surveilling tended to also report higher levels of cognitive breakup distress ($r = .60, p < .001$). In partial support of H2a, two of the three unproductive post-breakup coping behaviors—ex-focused behavior and solitude—emerged as significant predictors of cognitive breakup distress. H2b, in contrast, was not supported: none of the productive post-breakup coping behaviors were negatively associated with cognitive breakup distress as predicted. Positive distractions ($\beta = -.06, t = -.78, p = .44$) and contact avoidance ($\beta = .11, t = 1.35, p = .18$) were non-significant while seeking social support ($\beta = .22, t = 2.70, p < .01$) was a positive rather than negative predictor of cognitive breakup distress.

Post-traumatic Growth

The research question and hypothesis focused on post-traumatic growth as the dependent variable. R2 asked if toxic relationship behaviors would be associated with post-traumatic growth following the final breakup. H3 predicted that: (a) engaging in unproductive post-breakup coping behaviors would be negatively associated with post-traumatic growth, whereas (b) engaging in productive post-breakup coping behaviors would be positively associated with post-traumatic growth. As exploratory factor analysis revealed three types of post-traumatic growth—personal growth, heightened appreciation of relationships, and increased sensitivity toward others—three hierarchical regression analyses were run, one for each of these dependent

measures. The same procedure as described above for the analyses on breakup distress was followed.

Personal Growth

The first regression focused on personal growth as the dependent measure. For the toxic relationship behaviors entered in Block 1, engaging in intermittent reinforcement ($\beta = .23, t = 2.28, p < .05$), walking on eggshells ($\beta = .27, t = 2.87, p < .01$), and displaying righteous self-centeredness ($\beta = .17, t = 1.98, p < .05$), emerged as positive predictors of personal growth, whereas isolating ($\beta = -.24, t = -2.76, p < .01$) emerged as a negative predictor. The model with the Block 1 variables entered was significant, $F(4,170) = 11.85, p < .001, R^2 = .22$. When the block of post-breakup coping behaviors was entered, the model improved significantly, $F(10,164) = 10.10, p < .001, R^2 = .38, R^2_{\text{Change}} = .16, p < .001$. For this final model, the significant predictors were: engaging in intermittent reinforcement ($\beta = .20, t = 2.18, p < .05$), walking on eggshells ($\beta = .24, t = 2.75, p < .05$), isolating ($\beta = -.22, t = -2.61, p = .01$), displaying righteous self-centeredness ($\beta = .17, t = 2.10, p < .05$), positive distractions ($\beta = .30, t = 3.82, p < .001$), and seeking social support ($\beta = .17, t = 2.04, p < .05$). All of these variables except isolating were positively associated with personal growth following the breakup of a toxic romantic relationship. Isolating, however, was negatively associated with experiencing personal growth.

H3b, which predicted that productive post-breakup coping behaviors would be positively related to personal growth, was partially supported by the findings for positive distractions and seeking social support (but not for contact avoidance). H3b, which predicted that the unproductive post-breakup coping behaviors would be inversely associated with personal growth was not supported. In response to R2, individuals who reported experiencing high levels of partner engaging in intermittent reinforcement, walking on eggshells, and displaying righteous self-centeredness, along with relatively low levels of isolating, reported more personal growth following the final breakup.

Heightened appreciation of relationships

When heightened appreciation of relationships served as the dependent measure, walking on eggshells ($\beta = .28, t = 3.80, p < .001$) emerged as the only significant predictor in

Block 1, $F(1,173)= 14.38, p < .001, R^2= .08$. Adding the post-breakup coping behaviors in Block 2 improved the model, $F(7,167)= 9.05, p < .001, R^2= .28, R^2_{\text{Change}}= .20, p < .001$. Only two predictors were significant in the final model, with participants more likely to report having a heightened appreciation of relationships if they had felt that they were walking on eggshells ($\beta = .25, t = 3.72, p < .001$) and had engaged in social support seeking after the breakup ($\beta = .28, t = 3.80, p = .001$). Results indicate partial support for H3b, but no support for H3a.

Increased sensitivity toward others

For the model predicting post-traumatic growth of sensitivity toward others, only one toxic relationship behavior, walking on eggshells ($\beta = .25, t = 3.37, p = .001$), obtained significance in Block 1, $F(1,173)= 11.35, p = .001, R^2= .06$. When post-breakup coping behaviors were added in the second block, the model improved, $F(7,167)= 5.45, p < .001, R^2= .19, R^2_{\text{Change}}= .12, p < .001$. Walking on eggshells retained significance in the final model ($\beta = .19, t = 2.70, p < .01$). Consistent with and in partial support of H3b, positive distractions ($\beta = .19, t = 2.10, p < .05$) and seeking social support ($\beta = .16, t = 1.83, p < .05$) were directly associated with increased sensitivity toward others. H3a was not supported as unproductive post-breakup coping behaviors did not obtain significance.

Summary

The following table (Table 8) summarizes the findings from the regression analyses. Taken together, these findings indicate H1, which predicted engaging in intermittent reinforcement would be positively associated with breakup distress, was not supported. H2a predicted a positive association between unproductive post-breakup coping behaviors and breakup distress and was partially supported: ex-focused behavior was positively related to both emotional and cognitive breakup distress and solitude was positively related to cognitive breakup distress. H2b, which predicted an inverse relationship between productive post-breakup coping behaviors and breakup distress, was not supported.

For post-traumatic growth, the overall findings show partial support for H3b, which predicted productive post-breakup coping behaviors would have a direct association with post-traumatic growth. Seeking social support was a positive predictor of all three forms of post-

traumatic growth, and positive distractions was a positive predictor for two forms (personal growth and increased sensitivity to others). None of the unproductive post-breakup coping behaviors emerged as significant predictors for any post-traumatic growth indicators; as such, H3a was not supported.

Finally, in response to the research questions, several toxic relationship behaviors were significantly associated with breakup distress and/or post-traumatic growth indicators. Displaying righteous self-centeredness was positively associated with cognitive breakup distress as well as personal growth. Surveilling also shared a direct positive association with cognitive breakup distress. Walking on eggshells was a positive predictor in the regression models for all three indicators of post-traumatic growth. Engaging in intermittent reinforcement and isolating were positively and negatively associated with personal growth, respectively.

Table 8**Summary of Quantitative Findings**

Dependent Measure	Significant Predictor Variables
Emotional Breakup Distress	+ Ex-focused Behavior + Seeking Social Support [- Conveying criticism and Contempt] [+ Engaging in Intermittent reinforcement]
Cognitive Breakup Distress	+ Solitude + Ex-focused Behavior + Displaying Righteous Self-Centeredness + Seeking Social Support + Surveilling
Personal Growth	+ Positive Distractions + Walking on Eggshells - Isolating + Engaging in Intermittent reinforcement + Displaying Righteous Self-Centeredness + Seeking Social Support
Heightened Appreciation of Relationships	+ Seeking Social Support + Walking on Eggshells
Increased Sensitivity toward Others	+ Walking on Eggshells + Positive Distractions + Seeking Social Support

Notes. Predictor variables marked with a + had a positive association with the dependent measure; those marked with a - had a negative association. The bracketed predictor variables were significant in Block 1, but lost significance when Block 2 variables were added. Predictor variables are listed next to each dependent variable in order of association strength.

Discussion

Social support seeking stood out as an important coping behavior as it was positively related to both forms of breakup distress as well as all three forms of post-traumatic growth. Of the toxic relationship behaviors, walking on eggshells was especially predictive of post-traumatic growth following the breakup of toxic romantic relationships. These, and other key findings, are discussed next.

Social Support Seeking

Social support seeking emerged as a key predictor variable; it was positively associated with both forms of distress (cognitive and emotional) and also positively associated with post-traumatic growth. At first, it may seem counterintuitive that people who sought social support reported experiencing high levels of cognitive and emotional breakup distress because of the assumption that receiving social support should lessen someone's psychological pain. However, causality could run in the other direction, such that people are more likely to seek social support when they are deeply emotionally and cognitively distressed after a breakup. Although the current study cannot determine causality because of the cross-sectional nature of the data, this explanation is plausible given the direction of the associations found between social support seeking and distress. This is an important area for future research.

Another consideration is the types of social support communication individuals dealing with a toxic romantic relationship breakup may receive. The social support measure focuses on the extent to which the person who had been in a toxic romantic relationship reported seeking support, but it does not assess the type or quality of support received. Importantly, friends may have grown exasperated with the individual who had been in the toxic romantic relationship (Vallade et al., 2016), and not provided them with high quality support because they simply did not want to talk about the relationship anymore with them. Put another way, people who were being sought out for social support may have grown weary of the toxic romantic relationship and not have the capacity to provide social support. Potential support providers could respond by giving helpful support or by saying things like "I told you so" or "It's about time." If people were

looking for high quality support from others and did not receive it, this could have produced even more distress.

Another reason social support seeking may be positively associated with breakup distress is due to sense-making; working through what transpired during their toxic romantic relationships can reveal exactly how dysfunctional the relationship truly was. Moreover, simply discussing the relationship might lead to individuals to think more about their exes, in turn contributing to cognitive breakup distress. Indeed, data from this dissertation show that individuals who focused on the ex after the breakup were more distressed. Thus, it is likely that social support that revolves around the ex would sustain and produce some level of distress.

Regardless of the type and quality of social support messages, social support seeking was also associated with the three forms of post-traumatic growth: personal growth, heightened appreciation for relationships, and increased sensitivity toward others. This finding aligns with Prati and Pietrantonio (2009), who through a meta-analysis found that social support seeking as a way of coping is positively related to post-traumatic growth. Notably, both high- and low-quality support messages could contribute to post-traumatic growth. High quality messages could include messages about how that individual is strong and will get through the breakup stronger on the other end (potentially contributing personal growth), and those types of messages could lead to heightened appreciation of relationships, due to the compassion their social networks exhibited. By discussing the toxic romantic relationship, people in their social networks may disclose how watching the toxic romantic relationship was agonizing for them as a loved one and perhaps did not respond compassionately during the toxic romantic relationship, or even share similar experiences they endured. In turn, the individuals who are no longer in the toxic romantic relationship may have an increased sensitivity toward others. Moreover, seeking social support may encourage positive distractions through invisible types of social support.

Positive Distractions

The other coping behavior that was associated with post-traumatic growth was positive distractions. Positive distractions encompass various activities people engage in post-breakup, which can include activities people enjoy or have enjoyed in the past or new activities that help

them grow as a person. Contrary to findings from previous research (Davis et al., 2003; Moller et al., 2003), positive distraction was not associated with either form of breakup distress. However, positive distraction was positively associated with two forms of post-traumatic growth: personal growth and increased sensitivity toward others. Given the premise of positive distractions (i.e., engaging in new activities that get their mind off of the ex and their distress), it makes sense that positive distractions would share a direct relationship with personal growth. After all, the person is away from the toxic partner and trying new things, which is a recipe for change and growth. Moreover, as self-expansion is an element of positive distractions, the findings of a positive association between positive distractions and increased sensitivity toward others logically tracks. When people expand their experiences, they may be more likely to have the capability to empathize with others.

Ex-Focused Behavior

Ex-focused behavior was positively associated with both emotional breakup distress and cognitive breakup distress. An element of ex-focused behavior is rumination, repetitive thought-patterns about past events (Marshall et al., 2013; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998), and social media “stalking.” The positive association between ex-focused behavior in this study supports previous findings of both maladaptive rumination (i.e., brooding; Brenner & Vogul, 2015; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007) and social media surveillance of an ex leading to greater breakup distress (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Lukacs & Quan-Haase, 2015; Marshall, 2012). A reciprocal relationship likely exists between emotional breakup distress and cognitive breakup distress. If people feel shocked or in disbelief about what happened (i.e., emotional breakup distress), they will likely wonder about their ex is up to (i.e., cognitive breakup distress). And, if they are wondering what their ex is up to (i.e., cognitive breakup distress), they may feel shocked or in disbelief about what happened (i.e., emotional breakup distress).

Walking on Eggshells

Of importance, walking on eggshells (how people hyper-monitor their own communication to prevent aversive responses from their partners) is the only toxic relationship behavior the participants engaged in themselves as opposed to being targets of a toxic relationship behavior.

Notably, an emotional undercurrent influences walking on eggshells—people are on-edge, anxious, and afraid of how their partners will react to any and everything. Thus results the hyper-vigilance of crafting communication in a gentle, non-reactive way (if communication of concerns occurs at all). Walking on eggshells, as previously mentioned, is related to the chilling effect, which refers to the hesitancy people have to communicate concerns to their partners out of fear of negative partner reactions (Cloven & Roloff 1993; Roloff & Cloven, 1990). Often, the chilling effect occurs when one partner is highly controlling of the other, who then refrains from expressing themselves (Catalozzi et al., 2011). No longer being entangled in relationships that are restrictive of self-expression may be liberating. As such, in this study, walking on eggshells was not at all associated with breakup distress yet was positively associated with all three forms of post-traumatic growth: personal growth, heightened appreciation of relationships, and increased sensitivity toward others.

Post-traumatic growth is characterized by positive change following difficult experiences (Joseph et al., 2012). Walking on eggshells is, arguably, a difficult experience. Not only does it cause feelings of anxiety, it also requires strenuous cognitive effort to hyper-monitor myriad forms of communication. Following the toxic romantic relationship breakup, people who reported walking on eggshells also reported personal growth. Personal growth encompasses cognitive and behavioral changes around perceptions and capabilities of the self. Moreover, when people are no longer walking on eggshells around their social network and feel free to express themselves, it could contribute to a heightened appreciation of relationships—friends and family accept them as-is and are receptive to the expression of their thoughts and feelings. Additionally, walking on eggshells during a toxic romantic relationship may impact increased sensitivity toward others; after enduring the strain of walking on eggshells in a toxic romantic relationship, people may be more attuned and empathetic toward others. Part of being empathetic involves being able to take another person’s perspective (Suwinyattichaiorn et al., 2021). After going through the experience of being nervous and walking on eggshells all the time, people may feel better able to take the perspective of others who are going through similar traumas.

Displaying Righteous Self-Centeredness

Characterized by one partner prioritizing themselves above all else with the belief they are the center of the world and therefore unerring, displaying righteous self-centeredness was positively associated with cognitive breakup distress and personal growth. When a toxic romantic relationship revolves around one relational partner's desires, the cognitions of the other relational partner may shift to focusing on the partner displaying righteous self-centeredness. It is understandable that despite the fact the relationship ended, the brain is still preoccupied with thoughts about the ex. Interestingly, having an ex-partner display righteous self-centeredness was also positively associated with personal growth. After experiencing a toxic romantic relationship, people may develop new standards for future relationships, one of which may involve ensuring that both partners' needs and desires are managed in a way that seems equitable instead of one-sided.

Contributions and Limitations

To the primary researcher's knowledge, this is the first study to employ a toxic relationship behaviors questionnaire as well as examine the relationships among toxic relationship behaviors, breakup distress, post-breakup coping behaviors, and post-traumatic growth. The results of the study suggest that social support matters, and that, importantly, the most opportunity for post-traumatic growth may occur when people experience high levels of certain toxic relationship behavior while in the relationship, and then engage in social support seeking and positive distractions to cope with the aftermath of the end of that relationship. This is a positive message for those who are dealing with toxic romantic relationships—it is possible to survive and thrive when the relationship ends, and to experience personal growth, a heightened appreciation of your other relationships, and increased sensitivity to others.

Another strength of this study is that the sample population was more diverse than is typical. Many different ages and backgrounds were represented. The biggest shortcoming with the sample was that it was skewed toward people identifying as women. The reason for this needs future investigation. Perhaps women are more likely to label their relationships as toxic than men. If this is the case, it would be critical to determine if this is due to norms for how men

and women perceive each other's negative behavior or if there are actual differences in how men and women exhibit toxic behaviors in their relationships. Another limitation of this study is that the quality of social support received was not assessed. Similarly, the types of positive distractions engaged in are unknown. A next step for researchers is to determine specific types of social support and positive distractions that are helpful for those coping with the end of a toxic romantic relationship. These and other directions for future research will be explicated in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

*But since you been gone
I can breathe for the first time
I'm so moving on, yeah, yeah
Thanks to you
Now I get what I want
Since you been gone*
-Kelly Clarkson

The findings of the quantitative study suggest that Kelly Clarkson's words have real meaning to those who are able to disentangle themselves from toxic romantic relationships. They can achieve post-traumatic growth, which includes personal self-expansion, a heightened appreciation of the good people in their lives, and more sensitivity and empathy toward others. The song lyrics also echo some of the findings from the qualitative study, which showed that control, often through possession and isolation, constitute central characteristics of many toxic romantic relationships. So, indeed, when people emerge from the ashes of a toxic romantic relationship, they may feel like they are able to breathe again for the first time in a while. They may also feel like they can finally get what they want, especially if their toxic romantic relationship had been characterized by the types of imbalances and selfish behavior that emerged in the qualitative study. This final chapter summarizes these and other key ideas that emerged from this dissertation project.

Key Elements of Toxic Romantic Relationships

The qualitative data come from a rich, organic data set that included voices from people who endured toxic romantic relationships as well as experts who work with people impacted by such relationships. From these qualitative data, many themes emerged. It is notable that many of these themes are also present in the popular press information found on toxic relationships, as well as in the scant academic literature on the topic. These themes include: power dynamics and

control, self-centeredness which is manifested in imbalances and a disregard for the partner, and being drawn in through intermittent reinforcement and love-bombing.

Power Dynamics and Control

Elements of power and control permeate through all relationships. In romantic relationships, partners may have more power and control in some domains and less in others. People in relationships with a relatively equal power balance feel comfortable complaining to one another without feeling threatened, believing positive change will come from expressing complaints (Worley & Samp, 2016). However, people in toxic romantic relationships appear to have a skewed balance of power, with one partner dominating—to varying degrees—the other partner. Based on the research from this dissertation, criticizing and conveying contempt—hurtful expressions of perceived flaws and disdain—override the presence of complaints that are constructive expressions of behavioral concerns (Gottman, 1994). And, as discussed in Chapter 4, walking on eggshells (hyper-monitoring of own communication to prevent an aversive response from a partner) is related to the chilling effect, which refers to how partners do not express concerns to their partners out of fear of negative partner reactions (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Roloff & Cloven, 1990). Notably, research indicates the chilling effect occurs when there is a power imbalance with one partner controlling the other (Catalozzi et al., 2011). Importantly, power and control may not always involve using direct or obvious controlling behaviors, but may instead be manifest through self-centered behaviors creating relationship imbalance.

Self-centeredness, Imbalances, and Disregard for the Partner

In toxic romantic relationships, one partner tends to exhibit egocentric behaviors with no culpability for how those behaviors impact other people. Moreover, the self-centered partner is “all take and no give” with no reciprocal support with their partner but countless double standards. This, and prioritizing themselves above all others, creates imbalances that characterize toxic romantic relationships. As mentioned in Chapter 2, all toxic relationship behaviors could, arguably, create relationship imbalances. However, the imbalances identified in the qualitative data pertain to the one-sided nature of toxic romantic relationships. Moreover, the primary investigator wanted to describe specific types of toxic relationship behavior for people to readily

identify. For that reason, two toxic relationship behaviors related but not solely defined by self-centeredness include denying responsibility and deflecting blame as well as disregarding partner. Denying responsibility and deflecting blame may also include underlying elements of wanting to be liked, whereas disregarding partner may emerge due to contempt. However, these types of behaviors often co-occur. For example, a Redditor shared:

Any issue I had was MY fault. If he said something incredibly hurtful and I started crying, that was my fault for being too sensitive. If I was upset with him and got angry, I was being dramatic. If he did something wrong, it wasn't a big deal. Incredibly dismissive.

Clearly, this is indicative of relationship imbalance. The self-centered partner was unwilling to listen to their partner's concerns about behaviors the self-centered partner engaged in, nor did the self-centered partner see fault in their own behavior. Moreover, the Reddit post also alludes to the toxic relationship behavior disregarding partner, particularly with the word "dismissive." When one partner disregards, ignores, or invalidates their partner in various capacities (e.g., thoughts, feelings, achievements, or interests), it is inherently self-centered. The self-centered partner does not empathize with the concerns of their partner or the even celebrations for their partner. However, the unyielding self-centeredness of a partner may be peppered with tender moments, leading to intermittent reinforcement.

Intermittent Reinforcement and Love-Bombing

Though the processes of positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement are broadly recognized, knowledge of intermittent reinforcement is less prevalent. Intermittent reinforcement describes how inconsistent positive and negative reinforcement can create powerful responses in the targets of such behavior and is widely discussed in academic literature on battered woman syndrome (Walker, 2017) and traumatic bonding (Dutton & Painter, 1993). However, in popular culture, the phrase "intermittent reinforcement" is replaced with "hot-and-cold behavior." Though describing toxic romantic relationships as "hot-and-cold" is helpful, it does not capture the strength of emotional attachments that may develop from intermittent reinforcement. Recognizing the term "intermittent reinforcement" may, at the very least, prompt people to investigate what it means and, hopefully, recognize it as a contributing factor as to why people stay in toxic romantic

relationships. The idea of intermittent reinforcement goes beyond hot and cold behaviors because it explains why such behavior keeps people in toxic relationships. Rather than the focus being on the toxic person's hot and cold behavior, the focus is on how that behavior reinforces the importance of the relationship for the person on the receiving end of the hot and cold behavior, making them yearn for the positive reinforcement even when experiencing negative reinforcement. This is a much more sophisticated way of understanding the extreme swings in behavior, and the effects of that behavior, in toxic relationships.

Importantly, a behavior that can be part of intermittent reinforcement is love-bombing (a term academic literature has yet to assimilate). Popular culture descriptions of toxic romantic relationships often mention love-bombing. Love-bombing occurs when someone is “bombed” with expressions of love and affection (e.g., unrestrained praise, excessive sentiments of admiration, declarations of love) in a short period of time. Notably, love-bombing differs from other toxic relationship behaviors by appearing prosocial—it feels good to receive praise, feel appreciated, and build relationships—and is precisely why it is nefarious. Love-bombing is often the first stage in the narcissistic abuse cycle, followed by devaluation, discarding (Howard, 2019), and sometimes hoovering (Gaba, 2021) (sucking a person back into a relationship through love-bombing). During the love-bombing phase, the bomber typically presents a false version of themselves. These behaviors—the love-bombing and self-misrepresentation—are reminiscent of the third stage in battered woman syndrome, loving contrition. Loving contrition occurs after an abusive event and involves reparative behaviors, including showering the target with affection and gifts—a hallmark of love-bombing—and false presentations of the self (i.e., the abuser asserting they would “never do that again” yet inevitably does). The concepts of intermittent reinforcement, love-bombing, and loving contrition need to come together in a cohesive way to help people identify and understand the inner-workings of toxic romantic relationships.

Toxic Relationship Behaviors and Cluster B Personality Disorders

Often in the popular press, when toxic relationship behaviors are discussed, it is in the context of being in a relationship with an individual who has a personality disorder (Harrison & Dixon, 2019; Posey; 2019; Cohen, 2020; Kelley, 2020; Gaba, 2021). As discussed in Chapter 1, a

perusal of the term toxic on a site like Amazon in a book search will produce results focusing on narcissism, the narcissist abuse cycle, and, to a lesser extent, borderline personality disorder. Many of the toxic relationship behaviors found in this dissertation correspond with those identified as associated with Cluster B personality disorders, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9.
Cluster B Personality Disorders and Toxic Relationship Behaviors

	Antisocial	Narcissistic	Borderline	Histrionic
Exploding with negativity	X	X	X	X
Deceiving and misrepresenting the self	X	X	X	X
Gaslighting	X	X	X	X
Denying responsibility and deflecting blame	X	X	X	
Disregarding partner	X	X	X	
Criticizing and conveying contempt	X	X	X	
Creating relationship imbalances	X	X		X
Using physical violence	X			X
Love-bombing		X	X	X
Engaging in intermittent reinforcement		X	X	
Coercing and controlling through sex		X		X
Walking on eggshells			X	X
Displaying signs of obsession and codependency			X	X
Controlling to possess and isolate	X			

For those with Cluster B personality disorders, toxic relationship behaviors can emerge in reaction to a desire to control others, as well as to feelings of insecurity and fears of abandonment. Some Cluster B personality disorders are tied to low levels of empathy and high levels of manipulation, whereas others are tied to emotional instability and a lack of emotional control. Although people can engage in toxic relationship behaviors without having a personality disorder, some of the same driving forces, such as insecurity and fear of abandonment, that prompt these behaviors in those with personality disorders may be present in partners in toxic romantic relationships. More work needs to be done to examine where the line is drawn. Regardless, understanding that certain behaviors are toxic, and that people do not have to be toxic or have a personality disorder to engage in toxic relationship behaviors, is critical. This dissertation helps to advance research and theorizing on the types of behaviors that people consider toxic, rather than just casting people who behave badly as toxic.

Practical Applications

Popular resources about unhealthy or abusive relationships, specifically National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, One Love Foundation, and Planned Parenthood, outline several behaviors present in toxic romantic relationships: isolating, possessive behaviors, controlling behaviors, belittling, deflecting responsibility, minimizing, denying, and blaming. The organizations can use the information from this dissertation to help disseminate knowledge to people actively seeking help. They can supplement their pre-existing material with the emergent toxic relationship behaviors as well as create new content related to post-traumatic growth.

Organizations, as well as mental health professionals working with people who have endured toxic romantic relationship, should discuss coping strategies to promote post-traumatic growth. In particular, seeking social support and engaging in positive distractions as post-breakup coping strategies prompt people to grow as individuals, appreciate healthy relationships, and become more empathetic to others. Thus, mental health professionals can encourage people to reach out to their supportive networks; moreover, there needs to be a push to encourage social networks to support loved ones enduring a toxic romantic relationship breakup by listening to them, spending time with them, and doing new activities together. Research on supportive

communication purports several domains of social support: emotional (expressing empathy), esteem (making someone feel valued), informational (providing information to help someone solve a problem), tangible (providing goods and services), and network (directing someone to others who had similar experiences) (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Importantly, one of the most effective ways to provide support is through *invisible support*. Invisible support is support the person does not even realize they are receiving and effectively lowers recipient distress and promotes good health (Bolger & Amarel, 2007).

For people working directly with individuals experiencing (or experiencing the breakup of) toxic romantic relationships, it is imperative to explain the process of intermittent reinforcement to them. Victim-blaming from people beyond the romantic dyad is prevalent with relationships characterized by intermittent reinforcement; however, so is self-blame for the person staying in the relationship (Riddell et al., 2009). By outlining the subconscious mechanisms at work, mental health professionals can help alleviate the self-blame (and, through broader discourses, hopefully eradicate victim-blaming). Moreover, mental health professionals can advise clients enduring toxic romantic relationships to show themselves compassion, especially if the individuals are in an on-again/off-again type situation. On average, it takes someone seven times to leave an abusive relationship (Black et al., 2011) marked by intermittent reinforcement. Additionally, as toxic romantic relationships are typically characterized by psychological and emotional forms of abuse, there may be utility in describing relationships as toxic as opposed to abusive. For some, acknowledging a relationship as toxic may be more readily acceptable as opposed to declaring their relationships abusive. “Abusive relationship” is a loaded term with highly negative denotative and connotative meanings—as it should—but using the term may prevent people from opening up about the dynamics and behaviors characterizing their relationships. Thus, the descriptor “toxic” provides an accessible way to facilitate conversation about psychologically and emotionally abusive relationships.

In a broad scope, the information from the dissertation should be implemented in relationship education curricula. People, particularly adolescents and young adults, need to stay cognizant of insidious behaviors related to controlling to possess and isolate. Behaviors like

begging a partner to stay in with them for the night or insisting on joining them during every outing may seem endearing; however, those types of behaviors may be harbingers of the control to follow. To curtail the risk of isolation, people need to consciously schedule and adhere to time apart from their romantic partners. One way to spend time apart involves maintaining relationships with family and friends. Individual time with loved ones provides a mutual opportunity to check-in with each other and, if family and friends have concerns, they can express them without fear of a partner's reaction. Additionally, people should continue engaging in their productive pre-relationship hobbies and activities, such as creative outlets like painting or singing as well as physical activity like walking or swimming.

Connection to the Dark Side

In addition to practical applications, this dissertation contributes to supporting and connecting elements of the dark side of communication. Toxic romantic relationship behaviors align with the several aspects of the dark side of communication, such as fatal attraction, hurtful messages, and jealousy.

Fatal attraction occurs when the qualities that draw a person to another eventually contribute to relational dissolution (Felmlee, 1995). A common fatal attraction is *strong to domineering*. *Strong* alludes to strength in character extending to pushy or *domineering* behavior. In relation to toxic romantic relationships, *strong to domineering* may manifest as controlling to possess and isolate. Moreover, the fatal attraction of *spontaneous to unpredictable* may indicate relational unpredictability. The *unpredictable* aspect in toxic romantic relationships may emerge with people engaging in intermittent reinforcement, oscillating between feelings of intense commitment and fleeting love. Notably, people with NPD (narcissistic personality disorder) tend to, at least initially, ooze charisma and charm. However, the magnetism people with NPD exude applies to any and everyone who will help inflate their ego, often deterring partners. The way charisma and charm functions with NPD may be related to fatal attraction (Back et al., 2010). Furthermore, fatal attraction may come from a shift in perceptions behind partner behaviors. For example, initially, someone may perceive their partner following only them on social media as sweet; however, they may come to perceive this as a form of surveillance with the aim to control

various aspects of their life (i.e., controlling to possess and isolate). The controlling behaviors may be related to jealousy.

Jealousy involves thoughts and feelings about losing something of value (e.g., a relational partner) due to interference from a real or imagined rival (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998). Communicative responses to jealousy, specifically rival-focused responses (Guerrero et al., 2011) seem connected to behaviors encompassed in the toxic relationship behavior controlling to possess and isolate. Rival-focused responses include signs of possession, derogating competitors, surveillance, and rival contacts. Redditors and Quora-users reported partners in their toxic romantic relationships monopolizing their free time, monitoring their whereabouts, and trash-talking about their family and friends. Of course, hurtful comments were often directed at relational partners, as well.

Hurtful messages involve words that cause the receiver of the message psychological pain. Importantly, hurtful messages involve a component of relational devaluation (Feeney, 2005), which is also present in the narcissistic abuse cycle (Howard, 2019). Common hurtful messages involve evaluations (e.g., “This is the worst relationship I have ever been in”), accusations (e.g., “You are so insecure”), and informative statements (e.g., “I loved my ex more than I love you”) (Vangelisti, 1994). The toxic relationship behavior, criticizing and conveying contempt, constitutes a type of hurtful message. Particularly severe hurtful messages may become memorable messages—messages that leave a lasting impact on a person (Miczo et al., 2018).

Future Directions

After initial inquiries into pop-culture phenomena, research into both on-again/off-again relationships (Dailey et al., 2013) and friends with benefits relationships (Mongeau et al., 2013) have yielded several sub-categories of each type of relationship. The primary researcher’s next endeavor is to explore the potential for a toxic romantic relationship typology. Based on the qualitative data, people identified one person predominantly engaging in toxic relationship behaviors; however, there may be different “groupings” of toxic relationship behaviors. For example, walking on eggshells is likely related to exploding with negativity but not necessarily deceiving and misrepresenting the self. Or, perhaps, certain behaviors at the beginning of a toxic

romantic relationship (e.g., love-bombing, deceiving and misrepresenting the self) become identifiable as toxic relationship behaviors following the emergence of other toxic relationship behaviors (e.g., criticizing and conveying contempt, exploding with negativity), as is the case with narcissistic abuse (Howard, 2019).

Another important direction for future research is to explicate the association between social support seeking and both breakup distress and post-traumatic growth. The quantitative study showed that social support seeking is positively associated with breakup distress as well as all three forms of post-traumatic growth. In Chapter 4, several possible explanations for the direct associations between social support seeking and breakup distress (both emotional and cognitive) were discussed. These included that people seek more support when they are distressed, that receiving poor quality support (by people who may be tired of hearing about the toxic romantic relationship) may increase rather than decrease breakup distress, and that the process of sense-making and talking about the ex might keep the person from gaining closure and moving on, thereby sustaining or intensifying their distress. New research should examine these possibilities, and also focus on the various ways that people seek and give social support after toxic romantic relationships end. In terms of post-traumatic growth, certain types of social support may be especially helpful in prompting re-appraisal, closure, and, ultimately, the ability for someone to not just move beyond the toxic romantic relationship, but to learn and grow for it in ways that improve their lives. Understanding those modes of social support would be theoretically and practically important. Indeed, programs could include training for those wanting to support friends and family who are embroiled in toxic romantic relationships, as well as teaching them how to help support them when the toxic romantic relationship ends.

As mentioned briefly in Chapter 4, more research should also be conducted looking at various types of positive distractions. This dissertation showed that individuals who engaged in positive distractions following the breakup of a toxic romantic relationship reported more post-traumatic growth in terms of personal growth and increased sensitivity to others. There is a wide array of ways people can positively distract themselves, such as spending time with friends, trying a new hobby, reading a good book, redecorating their home, taking a class, and so on. Some

forms of distraction may be more effective than others at promoting personal growth and an increased sensitivity to others. Trying new activities may help someone discover new talents and interests, which involves self-expansion. And increased sensitivity to others may be cultivated by engaging in activities such as volunteering or reading self-help books.

An additional area of future research involves explicating the ways that people stay focused on their ex after the breakup of a toxic romantic relationship. Focusing on the ex has a direct association with both emotional and cognitive distress post-breakup. This is not surprising. The more someone is focused on the ex, the less they are breaking away and moving on. The quantitative study's results for cognitive distress, in particular, paint a picture of someone having a difficult time moving on. Cognitive distress was not only positively related to focusing on the ex, but also to having been in a relationship with someone who engaged in a high level of surveillance and righteous self-centeredness. When you put these together and consider that a person has been in a relationship with someone who controlled their whereabouts and behavior, and made themselves the center of the relationship, it makes sense that it would be difficult to break free from thinking about that person. After all, they controlled everything. This leads to many interesting questions for future research. For example, how can people stop thinking about their exes in these situations? Positive distractions did not seem to help here since this coping behavior did not emerge as a significant predictor in the regression analysis.

Another issue is what people recently removed from toxic romantic relationships are thinking about in relation to the ex. The items in the cognitive distress scale measured how much the person was wondering if the ex was thinking about them, how much they wondered what the ex was up to, how lonely they felt, and how hard it was to stop thinking about the ex. These items tap into how much cognitive energy was still being pulled by the ex, but they do not get at specifics that might help explain the relationship between ex-focused behavior and cognitive distress. For example, some of the ex-focused items involve hanging on to the belief that they could get back together, and trying to talk to the ex. While thinking about an ex, someone could relive the positive parts of the relationship, which could increase loneliness and the desire to reconcile, or they could think about the dysfunctional and unhealthy aspects of the relationship,

which could make them realize they are better off out of it. More research, therefore, is needed to understand the kinds of thoughts people have as part of the cognitive distress they experience following the breakup of a toxic romantic relationship, as well as thoughts that may help them achieve closure and move toward post-traumatic growth.

Limitations and Strengths

Each of the future directions mentioned above are related to limitations of this dissertation project. In each case, additional data would have helped clarify and explain the relationships found. Other limitations also suggest future directions. As mentioned in Chapter 4, a limitation of the quantitative study is that there were a disproportionate number of women participants. It has yet to be determined whether this is because women are more likely to be in toxic romantic relationships. Alternatively, women could be more likely to identify their partner's behaviors as toxic or men could underreport such behavior. Similarly, most of the popular press information on toxic romantic relationships either explicitly or implicitly examines monogamous heterosexual relationships. Although this dissertation included people in relationships with various sexual orientations, more work needs to include diverse populations to determine if the power dynamics that appear to underlie many toxic romantic relationships operate differently depending on the relational configuration (mono- or poly-) and gender composition of romantic partners.

A key limitation of the quantitative study is its cross-sectional design. People retrospectively reported about their experiences. Therefore, the causal nature of the associations found in this study is unknown. For example, it makes sense that the direct relationship found between social support seeking and breakup distress would mean that people who are distressed seek more social support, rather than people who receive more social support are more distressed. Yet, there is no data to back this claim. As mentioned previously, it could be that the quality of social support tends to be low in the case of toxic romantic relationships, leading people to be more distressed after receiving poor quality support. Longitudinal data is needed to clarify the nature of these types of relationships. Although it would be challenging to conduct a study that captured points in time while someone was in a toxic romantic relationship and getting out of one, it would be well worth the effort to collect data at different time points if feasible.

Aside from its diverse sample, the quantitative study had several other specific strengths. The items for the toxic relationship behaviors scales were developed based on emergent themes found through an inductive coding process. The development of these scales makes a contribution to the literature on its own. The data for the qualitative study has some limitations, in that demographics could not be ascertained and the sample is limited to those who participate on Reddit or Quora forums. However, the size and richness of the data produced by these participants outweighs this limitation. Finally, the use of mixed methods is another strength of this project, which aids in a comprehensive understanding of toxic romantic relationships.

Conclusion

Taken together, the studies in this dissertation have accomplished three major goals. First, types of toxic relationship behaviors were identified through an inductive process. These behaviors reflected some behaviors mentioned in popular press and academic literature as well as revealed some unique themes. These data also clearly indicated toxic romantic relationships do not necessarily include physical or sexual abuse; forms of psychological abuse were mentioned far more. Second, a new scale was developed to measure central toxic relationship behaviors that emerged in the qualitative study, giving them strong face validity. All subscales held very good to excellent inter-item reliabilities. Third, the quantitative study, which used these new scales, produced findings that showed how toxic relationship behaviors, along with coping behavior, are associated with breakup distress and post-traumatic growth. The key takeaway message from this study is that people move on from toxic romantic relationships in ways that lead them to grow as individuals, value their healthy relationships more, and be more sensitive and empathetic to others. The findings for personal growth bring this message home. Individuals reported experiencing the most personal growth if they (1) were walking on eggshells in their relationship, (2) had been subjected to intermittent reinforcement, and (3) partnered with someone who displayed righteous self-centeredness, but then, after the breakup, sought social support and engaged in positive distractions rather than isolating themselves. This is a positive message for anyone who is or has been in a toxic romantic relationship.

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APPENDIX A
QUALITATIVE STUDY IRB EXEMPTION



EXEMPTION GRANTED

[Laura Guerrero](#)
[CLAS-SS: Human Communication, Hugh Downs School of](#)
480/965-3730
Laura.Guerrero@asu.edu

Dear [Laura Guerrero](#):

On 4/1/2021 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Identifying Characteristics of Toxic Relationships
Investigator:	Laura Guerrero
IRB ID:	STUDY00013762
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Graham, Callie - Identifying Characteristics of Toxic Relationships, Category: IRB Protocol;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation, (4) Data, documents, or specimens on 4/1/2021.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at research.integrity@asu.edu to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required. Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Callie Graham
Laura Guerrero

APPENDIX B
QUANTITATIVE STUDY IRB EXEMPTION



APPROVAL: EXPEDITED REVIEW

[Laura Guerrero](#)
[CLAS-SS: Human Communication, Hugh Downs School of](#)
480/965-3730
Laura.Guerrero@asu.edu

Dear [Laura Guerrero](#):

On 1/31/2022 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Toxic Romantic Relationship Behaviors and Post-breakup Outcomes
Investigator:	Laura Guerrero
IRB ID:	STUDY00015352
Category of review:	
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Graham Scales, TRR 2022 UPDATE 1-31-2022.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);• Graham, C - IRB Social Behavioral TRR 2022 UPDATE 1-31-2022.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;• Graham, C Model Short Consent TRR UPDATE 1-31-2022.pdf, Category: Consent Form;• recruitment_methods_flyer_30-1-2022.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;

The IRB approved the protocol from 1/31/2022 to 1/30/2027 inclusive. Three weeks before 1/30/2027 you are to submit a completed Continuing Review application and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 1/30/2027 approval of this protocol expires on that date. When consent is appropriate, you must use final, watermarked versions available under the "Documents" tab in ERA-IRB.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

REMINDER - - Effective January 12, 2022, in-person interactions with human subjects require adherence to all current policies for ASU faculty, staff, students and visitors. Up-to-date information regarding ASU's COVID-19 Management Strategy can be found [here](#). IRB approval is related to the research activity involving human subjects, all other protocols related to COVID-19 management including face coverings, health checks, facility access, etc. are governed by current ASU policy.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Callie Graham

APPENDIX C
RECRUITMENT FLYER

If you were the target of toxic behaviors in a toxic romantic relationship and meet the qualifications listed below, please participate in a 15-20 minute survey to share your experiences at https://asu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8bHr0As9ePk4loO or scan the QR code below.

share your experience: toxic romantic relationships

If you were the target of toxic behaviors in a toxic romantic relationship, please participate in a 15-20 minute survey.



To participate, you must meet the following criteria:

- You are at least 18 years of age
- Your relationship was monogamous
- You are at least three months out of the relationship
- You did not marry your ex
- You do not have children with your ex
- You do not have an ongoing relationship with your ex (co-parent, business partner, personal relationship)



If you meet the criteria and wish to participate, scan the QR code or click the link in the text above!

Let's uncover what makes a romantic relationship toxic!

Callie Graham
DOCTORAL CANDIDATE
CMGRAHA8@ASU.EDU



APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT

Hello!

I am Callie Graham, a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Laura Guerrero in the Hugh Downs School of Communication at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to examine behaviors in toxic romantic relationships.

I invite you to voluntarily participate in a 20–30-minute survey about your past toxic romantic relationship. There will be questions about behaviors in the relationship, how upsetting the breakup was, coping behaviors you used for the breakup, and what you have learned about yourself since the breakup. You have the right not to answer any question as well as stop participation at any time without penalty.

To participate, you must meet the following criteria:

- You are at least 18 years of age
- Your relationship was monogamous
- You are at least three months out of the relationship
- You did not marry your ex
- You do not have children with your ex
- You do not have an ongoing relationship with your ex (e.g., co-parent, business partner, personal relationship)

By participating in this anonymous survey, you may gain insight into how your past toxic romantic relationship has impacted you.

All data collected will be anonymous and only accessible by the research team. If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at cmgraha8@asu.edu or Laura.Guerrero@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

By proceeding to the survey, you are agreeing to be part of the study.

APPENDIX E

TOXIC RELATIONSHIP BEHAVIORS QUESTIONNAIRE

Stem: When we were in a relationship...

Scale: 7-point (never - always)

Isolating

1. My ex isolated me from family and/or friends.
2. My ex alienated me from people I was close to.
3. My ex sabotaged my relationships with other people.
4. My ex limited how much time I spent with other people.
5. My ex cut me off from people I love.

Displaying Righteous Self-Centeredness

1. My needs were ignored.
2. My ex thought nothing was ever their fault.
3. Everything was centered around what my ex wanted.
4. My ex prioritized their needs over mine.
5. My ex was "all take and no give."
6. My ex twisted things to avoid being blamed for things.
7. My ex had trouble admitting when they were wrong.

Walking on Eggshells

1. I felt like I had to monitor what I said and did so my ex wouldn't get upset.
2. I felt like I was walking on eggshells to avoid upsetting my partner.
3. I felt like I was navigating a minefield to prevent problems in my relationship.
4. I was scared of doing something that would set my ex off.
5. I was careful to avoid doing anything that might cause issues in my relationship.

Criticizing and Conveying Contempt

1. My ex belittled me.
2. My ex put me down.
3. My ex criticized me.
4. My ex called me names.
5. My ex said things that made me feel worthless.

Surveilling

1. My ex monitored my whereabouts.
2. My ex monitored who I was talking to.
3. My ex wanted to know where I was all the time.
4. My ex went through my phone.
5. My ex stalked my social media.

Engaging in Intermittent Reinforcement

1. My ex treated me great sometimes and horrible other times.
2. My ex's behavior toward me cycled between good and bad.
3. My ex's behavior ran hot and cold.
4. My ex acted like they loved me one minute and hated me the next.
5. My ex behaved in ways that created incredible highs and lows in the relationship.

APPENDIX F
BREAKUP DISTRESS SCALE
(Field et al., 2009)

Stem: For this next set of questions, think about the month immediately following the break up.

Scale: 7-point (not at all – very much so)

Cognitions

1. I couldn't stop thinking about my ex.
2. I wondered what my ex was up to.
3. I wondered if my ex was thinking of me.
4. I felt lonely.

Emotions

1. I felt a sense of disbelief.
2. I had a physical reaction (e.g., heart pounding, sweating) when thinking about my ex.*
3. I felt empty.
4. I felt jumpy or easily startled.*
5. I felt stunned or dazed over what happened.
6. I felt emotionally numb.*

* Indicates item comes from the PTSD Checklist – Civilian Version (Weathers et al., 1994)

APPENDIX G
POST-BREAKUP COPING BEHAVIORS

Stem: After the breakup,

Scale: 7-point (never – always)

Productive Post-breakup Coping Behaviors

Social Support Seeking*

1. I asked others for support.
2. I discussed how I was feeling with someone close to me.
3. I sought-out comfort from my social circle.

Positive Distractions*

1. I focused on doing things that make me feel good about myself.
2. I engaged in enjoyable activities to keep my mind off things.
3. I kept busy with activities that helped me grow as a person.
4. I tried to keep myself busy with things I like to do.
5. I tried new things, like getting involved in a new project or activity.

Contact Avoidance

1. I removed all traces of my ex from my phone and social media.
2. I packed away or got rid of everything that reminded me of my ex.
3. I unfollowed or blocked my ex.

Unproductive Post-breakup Coping Behaviors

Dangerous Behavior and Negative Distractions*

1. I engaged in behaviors that later made me feel bad about myself.
2. I engaged in behavior that was out of control.
3. I did things that I later regretted.
4. I did crazy things I normally wouldn't do.

Solitude/Isolation*

1. I spent more time alone than usual.
2. I kept to myself.
3. I went out less than I normally did.

Ex-Focused Behavior

1. I tried to get back together with my ex.
2. I hung on to the possibility we would get back together.
3. I tried to talk to my ex.
4. I stalked my ex's social media.

* Indicates subscales were modified from the Communicative Responses to Sadness Scale (Guerrero & Reiter, 1998)

APPENDIX H

POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH INVENTORY

(Choi & Toma, 2017, modified from Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996)

Stem: How much did your experience of being in and then getting out of this toxic relationship cause a change in the following behaviors and attitudes?

Scale: 7-point (not at all – a great deal)

Personal Growth

1. It helped me establish a new path for my life.
2. It gave me a greater appreciation for the value of my own life.
3. It helped me discover that I'm stronger than I thought I was.
4. It gave me a greater feeling of self-reliance.
5. It showed me I can do better things with my life.
6. It showed me that I can handle difficulties.
7. It changed my priorities about what is important in life.
8. It helped me better appreciate each day.
9. It made me more likely to try to change things that need changing.

Heightened Appreciation of Relationships

1. It helped me see how wonderful some of the people in my life are.*
2. It gave me a greater appreciation of my friends and family.
3. It helped me appreciate the people I can count on in times of trouble.*

Increased Sensitivity toward Others

1. It helped me develop compassion for others.
2. It gave me a stronger sense of empathy.
3. It made me more supportive of other people.

* Indicates items were modified further for this dissertation