

A Guide to Healthier Relationships: Identifying Safe vs Unsafe People

When you become used to unhealthy relationship dynamics, it becomes easy to repeat cycles or harm and abuse.

This pattern repeats itself throughout all of our relationships- personal, social, and within the workplace.

We learn to “just deal with” negative and toxic behaviors from others, based off instilled fear- fear of what will happen if we push back. Fear of those people taking away their time, attention or resources. Fear of being unliked. Fear of the unknown.

The first step to breaking these cycles is breaking the hold the fear has on you.

Breaking toxic cycles
requires you to change
your relationship with fear.



Breaking Up With Fear

Many of us unknowingly continue to engage with harmful people and places out of not only fear (fear of consequences, fear of losing some benefit, etc.) but also a sense of obligation, instilled in us by those who benefit from harming us.



Fear distorts perception.

- Fear of rejection, retaliation, or losing belonging can cause us to overlook red flags.
- If someone has power over us (a boss, influential peer, family member), fear may silence our inner alarms.
- Fear also activates old patterns: if you've learned to normalize unsafe dynamics, you might interpret control, criticism, or inconsistency as "care."

Obligation keeps us tethered.

- Social expectations (loyalty, respect, politeness, family duty, team cohesion) often pressure people into maintaining unsafe connections.
- Obligation can masquerade as "kindness" or "being a good person," when really it's about compliance with external standards.
- In workplaces especially, obligation is institutionalized: "be a team player," "don't rock the boat," "support your colleagues no matter what." These norms can keep people tied to harm long after they've sensed it isn't safe.

Together, fear + obligation create a trap.

- Fear convinces you that leaving or setting boundaries will result in punishment.
- Obligation convinces you that staying is the "right" or "mature" thing to do.
- You may label someone "safe" (because it feels easier or less risky to go along) even when your deeper self knows they're not.
 - And- you remain in connection or proximity to people who disregard you.

How can you really know who's who?

Seeing through the Fakeness

Sometimes kindness isn't about care or positive regard- it's about control. When someone decides when, how and to whom they'll be kind to (using kindness as a strategy as opposed to being a genuinely kind person), that kindness can leave you feeling off-balance instead of supported and genuinely cared for. Here's what this may look like:



- **Warmth and encouragement only when you agree or comply:** If you set a boundary or otherwise don't follow their script, they will grow cold quickly.
- **Public displays of kindness but private withdrawal:** They want to appear to be treating you kindly to others, without actually being kind to you. It's for their own benefit.
- **Selective kindness that excludes others to create alliances:** Inability to show basic care and concern to people they don't like or who don't align with their worldview.
- **Kindness used as a reset button after harm, instead of accountability:** They'll only be kind as a way to keep you stuck in the dynamic. They'll cause harm, then say/do nice things to disarm you.
- **Turning kindness into obligation:** They may frame your helpfulness and kindness as something you "should" just do for them (if you were a good person....) They may act offended or hurt when you set boundaries.
- **Compliments and flattery that feels off:** They comment on things they barely know about you or even on things it would be impossible for them to know. This is to fake rapport and trust.
- **Acting as if they've known you forever after 5 minutes:** Similar to the above, they are rushing a sense of connection they haven't built yet.
- **Testing you:** They'll test your boundaries, they'll set up situations just to see if you'll act in alignment with things you've said, they'll cause unnecessary chaos under the guise of "just needing to see if you're real." In reality, this is insecurity. You'll never break out of that cycle, and you'll be exhausted by this type of relationship. There are healthy ways you can gauge someone's genuineness, which we'll discuss next.

Expressing Genuine Kindness in Relationships

As I continued on my own healing journey, one thing that tripped me up was the feeling that I had to "hide" my kindness to protect against users and abusers. This of course was just another way to dim my light, which was no longer an acceptable way for me to exist.

Instead of dimming my light and hiding from others, I've learned to be very intentional and directive with the energy I give to people. I give what I get- if you are toxic, cold, and calculating, you will not have access to my full self. In situations like workplaces where you can't really pick and choose, you'll get a version of me that is very surface level, and you'll never progress past that (unless you prove yourself through your behavior). I allow observed patterns of behavior with people to determine their level of access to me.

Here's that approach mapped out for you. Use the approach to preserve your energy and protect your peace. Each level invites more connection, and you should progress through levels as others prove themselves to be consistently safe to connect with.

Level 1: Contained Kindness

Containment kindness is warmth that stays in the realm of public and light, never personal.

- "Thanks for your help with that." (genuine, but minimal).
- Smiling or acknowledging someone without revealing anything about your life, feelings, or needs.

Level 2: Regulated Kindness

Most people who feel drained give outward first. Hold onto your energy with people you don't know well yet.

- When you feel the impulse to do something kind for someone else, do the equivalent for yourself first. Then, if you still have energy, choose to share.
- This conditions your nervous system to feel that kindness is something you get to enjoy too, not just others.

Level 3: Choose Safe People

Predators and takers are often **the most visible and socially active**- but safe, grounded people are out there, usually less flashy and more subtle.

- Give in small increments, watch the response.
- If they meet your energy with consistency (not intensity), they're worth more access.
- Build your network of safe people over time, based on patterns, not fleeting feelings or situations.

Are Your Relationships healthy?

	Trustworthy	Risky
Consistency & Psychological Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acts the same toward you in public and private.• Behaves respectfully regardless of who is present.• Leaves you feeling informed, respected, and able to focus on your work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acts supportive in public but undermines or excludes you privately.• Treats you well only when they want something or around certain people.• Leaves you feeling drained, excluded, or on guard after interactions.
Respect & Boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Respects your stated limits without pushback or ridicule.• Gives you space to work without unnecessary intrusion.• Honors your need for privacy around personal matters.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dismisses or mocks your boundaries.• Pushes for personal details you haven't offered.• Uses your openness as leverage against you.
Mutual Support & Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acknowledges you and your contributions in group settings.• Checks in on workload or priorities before adding new tasks.• Shares credit when projects succeed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Takes credit for your work or omits your role.• Says they support you, but there is no evidence of this.• Avoids giving acknowledgment or downplays your input.
Communication & Conduct	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communicates directly, clearly, and respectfully.• Listens without interrupting or dominating the conversation.• Addresses disagreements constructively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Uses sarcasm, gossip, or indirect criticism to undermine you.• Talks over you or dismisses your ideas without consideration.• Avoids direct communication, creating confusion or tension.
Conflict Handling & Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Brings up issues privately and works toward resolution.• Accepts responsibility for their part when mistakes happen.• Follows through on agreements after conflict.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Escalates conflicts publicly or retaliates after being challenged.• Blames others for their mistakes without accountability.• Makes agreements during conflict but doesn't follow through.

Moving Forward With Clarity

Many people carry around toxic expectations of relationships, allowing manipulators and abusers to decide how and when you'll receive decent treatment. Most of us learn much later in life that what's commonly accepted as normal social and behavior is actually very toxic- and most people never unlearn these harmful patterns.

I support individuals in spotting these harmful patterns, learning to identify them for what they really are, and not just what we've been told they are. I do this by:

- Untangling confusing or draining relational dynamics
- Helping you to build confidence and set boundaries
- Teaching you to recognize (and trust) early signs of safety or harm
- Helping you to reclaim your clarity and foundation in environments that don't always make space for it

Ways We Can Work Together

- **1:1 Coaching:** Personalized support for navigating workplace or relational dynamics.
- **Toolkits & Guides:** Practical resources to help you identify, interrupt, and address unhealthy patterns.
- **Workshops & Trainings:** For organizations and groups who want healthier, more human-centered cultures.

I hope this guide was useful to you in some way. If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to me: info@icolaconsulting.com.

Let's Connect.

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