

7 Types of Dysfunctional Relationships (W/ Examples)

The Power Moves | 6 June, 2018 | by Lucio Buffalmano

Dysfunctional relationships can lead to [toxic relationships](#), to [vicious circles](#), and ultimately to breakups. BUT, if you catch them in time or if you are able to fix them, then you can also fix your relationship.

This article lists 7 of the most common dysfunctional relationship types.

Dysfunctional relationships follow patterns of behavior that are repeated over time, and that's why some relationship researcher calls them "dysfunctional relationship dances".

I will use the same expression for this article.

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What Are Dysfunctional Relationships

Let me say this right away:

Almost every couple develops what some relationship researcher calls "relationship dances".

Dances are interactions based on traits and behaviors that are repeated in a loop through the years.

There advantages to relationship dances, such as familiarity and [building a shared meaning](#).

Relationship dances can be healthy and helpful.

For example, if every time that one partner is down one cheers the other up, that's a positive dance.

The disadvantage is that they can become inflexible, and potentially even constrict our personalities at times that we are growing or want to change -or that we *should* change-. And [that's when some partners have affairs](#): to try on new roles.

And of course, some of these dances are unhealthy and bring unhappiness in the relationship.

This is, then, the definition of a dysfunctional relationship:

A dysfunctional relationship is a relationship where patterns of destructive, harmful or abusive behaviors, also called "dances", are repeated over time

It's important to distinguish between "one-off" events and patterns of behavior.

A one-off event can be abusive, but it doesn't qualify as a "dysfunctional relationship" unless it's

repeated over time.

The Ugly Side of Dances

Harville Hendrix in [Getting The Love You Want](#) explains that we naturally seek partners who are different than we are.

The opposite traits are attractive in the beginning. But in a deteriorating relationship they start to annoy us, they grow more extreme and they exacerbate the relationship problems.

Dysfunctional Relationship Dances

In dysfunctional relationships partners have their personality defined and validated by the other partner's role.

This is a list of the some of the most common and dysfunctional relationship dances:

#1. Child and Parent

In a child/parent relationship the parent is the partner who has the highest authority.

But not only in the relationship, but also in the outside world.

The parent may have a good career, or an authoritative position or hold major responsibilities, and he is held in high self-esteem by society and by the couple's social circle.

The child admires his partner, but also resents him.

The parent in exchange envies the freedom and freewheeling spirit of the child.

Albeit these roles were attractive to each other in the beginning, the couple might grow uncomfortable being in a child/parent relationship. It might feel incestuous, or we might feel our partner is not up to our level and/or too different.

Age Is No Always A Differentiator

It can be the case that the parent is older.

But it's not always the case. And sometimes it can also happen the older partner is the baby.

Vasco Rossi, a famous Italian rocker (yes, famous only in Italy :D), sings:

| (...) and maybe you're right, when you say that I'm a child... And you're 20 years younger

Vasco Rossi, a drug abuser and an alcoholic, is singing about her life partner who is more mature than he is in spite of the age difference.

Example:

The movie Mrs. Doubtfire is such an example. But Miranda / Steve relationship is even more obvious:

#2. Saint and Sinner

In the saint and sinner dysfunctional relationship dance, there's a "good" partner and "bad" and wild one.

And the bad one is busy reforming, taming and trying to teach the wild one about the "normal" life they would like to share.

She might be the party girl and he might be the guy bringing her headache tablets the day after. Or he might be the philanderer and she the one trying to make him monogamous.

But it's more codependence in the Saint and Sinner, and it replicates the parent/child relationship of teenager years.

The sinner rebels, while the saint stays watchful.

#3. Authority and Rebel

In the authority and rebel dance one partner is strong, judgmental and intimidating.

And the other tries to carve his own space by resorting to subterfuge and small acts of rebellion.

The rebel sometimes learned to act behind their parent's back as a child. When they grow up, instead of facing their partner openly and voicing their opinion, they might say yes and pretend to go along with it. Only to then to what they want to do when the partner is not watching.

This is a very bad dynamic that stifles the development of a solid emotional bond. They are also very prone to affairs and cheating because the rebelling is used to commit and hide small acts of sabotage.

Example: Female Sinner

My father and my mother often tell the story of my mother's smoking.

My father was in the navy and used to gather all the free cigarettes he didn't smoke.

One day he picked the stack to give to some friend. And there and then he realized... They were all empty.

Instead of coming clean of her smoking habits and risking to face a judgmental husband, she smoked behind his back.

This example might not qualify today as a saint and sinner, but back then people didn't think cigarettes were harmful and women often smoked as a sign of independence.

#4. Demand-Withdraw Dance

This is very common and possibly one of the least destructive of this list.

There are two types of demander and withdrawer:

1. Actual tasks: one partner asks to do a task, and the other postpones
2. Resolution: one partner demands to discuss or fix a problem, while the other withdraws ([Papp et al., 2009](#))

Often the woman demands and the man withdraws.

Example:

The Break Up (2006), is a movie featuring a demander and a withdrawer. In the beginning of this video you can see an example:

#5. Pursuer and Distancer

Somewhat similar to the demand and withdrawal, but the struggle is over a deeper connection and less about a specific event.

The pursuer, often the woman, [seeks an emotional connection](#) or a discussion about relationship issues. And the man withdraws emotionally or runs away physically.

The running only makes the pursuer chase harder, and that often means an escalation with [criticism](#) and [contempt](#), to which the man responds with [defensiveness](#) and [stonewalling](#).

The pursuer and distancer is part and parcel of the “[anxious-avoidant trap](#)”.

Watch out: [this cycle doesn't usually go on forever](#). It usually sets off a [vicious cycle](#) that makes the relationship worse and worse.

As long as the wife keeps chasing, she's still invested in the relationship. But eventually, she will stop chasing after him, which means she mentally checked out.

And a break up soon follows suit.

| [Anxious-Avoidant Attachment: Analysis & Fixes \(W/ Examples\)](#)

#6. Boxer and Avoider

Gottman talks about boxer and avoider when he describes the “fighting styles” of different couples.

The boxer is the partner who is a conflict engager.

He raises his voice, uses barbed words, and overall tries to get a rise out of the avoider.

The avoider is a conflict avoider though and shies away from any confrontation or tension.

The boxer feels there's no intimacy in the relationship not because there is no real intimacy, but because there is a mismatch in argument styles.

From a cultural perspective, the stereotype is that boxers tend to be from Latin or southern European cultures while the conflict avoiders tend to be from more withdrawn cultures.

#7. Reminder and Forgetful

In the reminder-forgetful dance, one partner is responsible and detail-oriented, while the other appears a lazy slacker.

It's similar to the demander and procrastinator, but the demander is not necessarily precise, while the responsible is all about “doing it properly”.

The demander feels the forgetful is untrustworthy and a slob. The forgetful feels the reminder is an annoying square.

Fixing Dysfunctional Relationships

You are not stuck in any position or situation in life, but it's up to you where you will move and where you will end up.

The same is true for dysfunctional relationships: it's wholly up to you to stay stuck in them or to transform them into healthy and invigorating relationships.

The simplest step is to start meeting half way.

There's a strong element in dysfunctional relationship dances where the partners expect the other to be extreme and they automatically go on the other extreme end just to start with an advantage. Or sometimes just to annoy their partners.

Instead of falling for these hollow power games, start meeting halfway.

- The partner who pushes, backs off a bit
- The partner who retreats, meets halfway and show more proactiveness

When you moderate yourself, you also make it easier for your partner to moderate themselves.

SUMMARY

Dysfunctional relationship dances entail each partner occupying a different extreme of temperament, goals or personality.

But since they are not ready to accept their partner as they are, they end up arguing and fighting to get it their way.

Sources:

- Cliff Notarius and Howard Markman (1993), *We can work it out: Making sense of marital conflict*, New York: Putnam
- Gottman, [Why Marriages Succeed or Fail](#) , [The Seven Principles to Make Marriage Work](#), [Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage](#)
- Annette Lawson (1988), *Adultery: An analysis of love and betrayal*, New York: Basic Books

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