

April, 2002

When a Relationship Becomes Destructive

by

Jim Platt, Director - Faculty & Employee Assistance Program

In reviewing the first half of our fiscal year, the EAP office discovered some very interesting data: the leading reasons cited for using our program were marital and family issues, closely followed by work and relationships. In many ways the workplace is a family of sorts, and just as we may engage in a dance ranging from closeness to avoidance in our personal lives, we may find ourselves dancing through similar steps in our vocational relationships. Whether at home or at the office, relationships can feel exciting, challenging, and vibrant. At other times, we may feel trapped, unappreciated, or disrespected. Sometimes, it is not clear what our response needs to be, or even what choices exist on the menu.

Of course, every action has a reaction—and sometimes there is a fear that “if I express how I feel, I could be labeled as difficult to please or ungrateful.” Perhaps, even worse, will there be some sort of conflict leading toward feeling humiliated or ashamed? When overwhelmed by these feelings, a typical response is to “shut down” and refrain from speaking out, yet this is, in essence, colluding with that process of devaluation and subsequently very likely to lead us to view ourselves as unworthy of a better relationship.

In the movie *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen makes a profound statement: “Relationships are like sharks; they have to keep moving or else they die.” What Allen is referring to is growth—and for a relationship to grow, communication must flow between the different parties, who need to engage equally in the dialogue. However, for that to be effective, there are four required ingredients: the ability to be in touch with one’s thoughts or feelings; the ability and freedom to articulate those ideas or emotions; the ability to trust that those statements will be received in a manner that will allow the contributor to feel safe; and the shared belief that what is expressed may in fact challenge the status quo. Ugh, oh—change.

When relationships become static, it usually involves a coercive process, designed to maintain one partner’s need for power and control. The accompanying delusion tends to be, “You are in a relationship with me because you lack certain qualities—that I can provide. Therefore, do what I say, because you don’t have the capacity on your own to offer any additional benefit to the relationship. Certainly there is no need for you to attempt to improve anything about yourself or the situation—that’s my job.” No wonder people develop a hopeless and helpless attitude, becoming blind to the controlling behavior.

Continued on next page

April, 2002

How Do You Know When Your Behavior Is Being Controlled?

The following are examples of psychological and physical controlling behaviors. They do not help relationships in moving forward, but instead maintain the status quo.

Psychological Controls

Name calling; swearing; veiled or directly articulated put-downs; pressuring or sulking; claiming to be the ultimate authority; emotional withholding; belittling the other's attempts at self-improvement.

Physical Controls

Hitting, grabbing, kicking, or pushing; uninvited touching or contact; throwing objects; damaging furniture; abusing pets; uninvited visits or calls; following or stalking; frequent "checking up"; threats of violence.

These behaviors tend to be cyclical—psychological insult, physical insult, followed by the absence of intimidation and then back to psychological intimidation.

How Do I Respond?

Contemplating taking a stand in response to these behaviors can be very intimidating. In addition to fear of direct repercussion, perhaps even more threatening is "How will I take care of myself (emotionally, financially, socially)?" Depending on the severity, there may be a need to devise a "safety plan" for self-protection if the decision is made to confront the behavior or leave the situation.

People do not have the right to shame you into fulfilling their needs. The first step in reclaiming one's self and moving toward healthier relationships, whether at home or in the workplace, is seeking support—as much support as you can find. There are several resources on campus that are available to employees and their loved ones to aid in this journey. These include, but are not limited to, The Office of Human Resources, The Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity, The Women's Resource Center, and Safety and Security. The counselors at the Faculty and Employee Assistance Program are always available to meet confidentially with employees and/or their family members to discuss these issues in more depth.