

Toxic behaviours



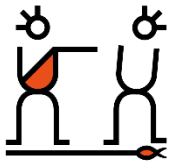
Let's look more closely at four specific toxic behaviours or 'team toxins' that often occur in teams or groups.

These four behaviours are so damaging to relationships that research conducted by Dr John Gottman (relationship expert and best-selling author) indicates that they can be physically toxic. This makes sense from a body chemistry perspective because cortisol, the hormone released in a threat or fear response, is toxic to our bodies. We are designed for only short, small bursts of cortisol and it takes a while for the body to metabolise it. People exposed to others' threat responses and their associated destructive behaviour can suffer a build-up of cortisol. So these threat and fear-based behaviours are, quite literally, toxic.

Unchecked, toxic behaviours can lead to discord on a team and an associated dip in morale and cohesiveness.

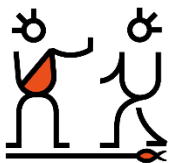
Getting curious in identifying the toxins will be the first step in delivering the vital toxin antidotes!

Blame / Criticism



Blame/Criticism consists of blaming or attacking someone else for something that has happened, often under the guise of diagnosing a problem or error.

While it is helpful to diagnose what has gone wrong, the energy of blame and criticism make it personal and it feels like a personal attack on one's character. This is usually delivered with a critical attitude and somewhat aggressive energy (though it might be subtle or passive).



Defensiveness

Although it's understandable that there are times when you will want to defend or justify yourself, Gottman's research shows that this approach rarely works. A defensive person does not back down or apologise, in fact they might not even listen fully to a complaint. This is because defensiveness is really a form of blaming in reverse. It's like saying: "It's not me, it's you!". This escalates the conflict. It is common for the defensive person to feel like he is above the conflict, when in fact he is contributing to it just as much.

Stonewalling



Stonewalling includes cutting off communication, giving someone “the silent treatment”, refusing to engage, withholding information, withdrawal or simply being reluctant to express one's thoughts and feelings directly.

Often, after one or more of the other toxic behaviours has been running rampant, it might feel necessary to just check out of the whole interaction and stonewall. While the person who uses stonewalling may be just trying to

protect themselves or be “invisible” for a while, it still is toxic and it makes toxic interactions escalate.

Contempt



Contempt includes sarcasm, belittling, cynicism, name-calling, hostile humour, disdain and belligerence.

Contempt is the most poisonous of all the toxic behaviours because it conveys disgust and condescension. A steady diet of contempt has been shown to be harmful to the physical health of an individual – both the person who uses contempt and the receiver of it.

Contempt is often fuelled by long-simmering negative thoughts about someone. You're more likely to have such thoughts if your differences are not regularly resolved soon after they occur.

Antidotes to toxic (and limbic) behaviours



Toxic behaviours will bounce around in a group or team of people, which is why we refer to them as 'team toxins'. They happen because of our social-oriented limbic system that is always monitoring social interactions and looking for slights or threats from other people. When it interprets something as a slight, it immediately issues an alert which often takes the form of a toxic behaviour. Then, because emotions are contagious, others respond with another toxin, and then there will be another, leading to an

on-going cycle of toxicity.

We need to recognise when we get sucked into this toxic cycle: when others use these behaviours, you will be likely to respond with your own toxic behaviour. The best thing you can do to stop the cycling is to refrain from playing into toxic interactions. And of course, you can also encourage your people to limit the use of these behaviours in their work together.

Next are a few things you can do to prevent yourself and others from entering the toxic behaviour game.

Learn to stay present

When we are exposed to toxic behaviour we may not feel good physically and we usually want to run, hide or fight back. Getting feedback, hearing complaints, disagreeing with someone, others being in conflict around you, people misunderstanding your good intentions... all of these are difficult to endure. It does not feel good physically and we usually want to run, hide or fight back.

Our inclination to flight, fight or freeze is of course a threat response. Your limbic system is trying to tell you that your survival is at stake – that you might die if this continues – and you should do something about it NOW!

But it's probably exaggerating. A lot.

Instead of reacting, you can:

Observe the feelings without following through with a fear-based behaviour

You are very unlikely to be truly harmed by feedback and other difficult conversations around you. Yes, words really can hurt you and that hurt can last for a long time. But fighting back isn't going to prevent that.

Get curious about what your limbic system is trying to tell you

Observing your own feelings will give you an opportunity to notice your needs. This will give you a better chance to set boundaries and give people feedback about how you are willing to be treated.

Stay present and do your best to listen to the other person's views and emotions, even if you don't like it

If you stay present, you can learn more about the other person or learn more about the situation. This will give you the opportunity to see the bigger, fuller picture of what's going on.

Reserve judgement

Your limbic system and the faster functions of the brain want you to make quick decisions based on limited information - to get a quick win (and the dopamine that comes with it). But those solutions are often short-sighted and can create other problems.

Reserving judgement helps you embrace the complexity of a problem which will give you the opportunity to find better, more appropriate, solutions.

Practice good brain care

Practising good brain care is going to help prevent you reacting and the more you stay and be present, the easier it becomes.

Listen for the 2% truth

Listening for the 2% truth is another great way to interrupt your limbic reactions. This is mostly about pointing your attention. When in a challenging situation, perhaps when it feels like you are being blamed, instead of focusing on how they are wrong and how unfair it is they are blaming you, shift your attention by asking yourself:

"What might be 2% true about what this person is saying to me?"

Even if their comments are ridiculous, there might be just a tiny bit of it that is true. Your curiosity will have you listen in a different way so you can hear more relevant information. Your attention will help the other person feel listened to which may be calming for them. And ultimately, listening can keep toxic behaviours from escalating out of control.