

Disclaimer

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Emergency Exit Plan for those who need to leave quickly.

For those of you who need an emergency exit strategy, please go straight to Chapter 7.

SAMPLE

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8. The Act of Staying Away...

After the act of leaving comes the immediate act of staying away. There is an incredible risk that abuse victims will return to their partner for a prolonged period after they leave. This can be within hours, days and in some cases, years after the relationship has been stated to have ended. The risk of returning to our ex is most hazardous for us in the early periods after we leave and whilst we try to recover a connection with reality and create a plan of what we want and need.

I recall when Sarah didn't turn up for a therapy session after our first few weeks, sending the message, "sorry, I know I said I wouldn't, but we've decided to try at making it work again". Returning to her ex, despite a history of awfulness.

The risk of returning does not simply disappear. Like an addiction, we have to work hard to avoid our drug of choice (our lover/abuser) and often involves painful withdrawal symptoms. You will need to tackle the immediate effects of leaving, the adaptations that occurred in the relationship, and the core changes in you that enabled an abusive relationship.

This risk of returning can be experienced as returning to our ex or replacing our ex with new people (lovers or friends) who bring the same abusive cycles to our lives.

In this chapter, we look at the immediate impact of leaving, and address the primary psychological need of anyone who has left a relationship– **how to stay away**.

The inner storm that comes with leaving

Leaving a relationship and rejecting the abuser is the ultimate insult to the person we love and whom we are so desperate to please. The reaction from the abuser is often dramatic, ranging from rage to complete detachment. A calm and considered interaction style should not be expected and even when it is received, it should be considered as a potential attempt to pull us back through the act of love, rather than hate.

In these moments, the inner world of the escapee is extremely stressful (Fear). Many traumas have trained our entire being to seek to please our lover, to remedy all stress by submission, concession and apology (Obligation). But here we are, the cause of the distress and a target of rejection from the person we know is so vulnerable and weak (Guilt). We find ourselves held in an emotional state that will not resolve itself, anxious about the experiences of our partner and desperate to experience any self-worth that will reassure us that we are not worthless and not justifiably rejected or hated (Shame). This is experienced as an inner emotional storm that feels impossible to settle.

In these moments we have no resource to settle our inner emotional turmoil. Our emotional regulator is our lover – they have doled out love and hate, control and freedom, insult and adoration, safety and risk for so long that our emotional world is entirely externally managed. Our route to calm self-worth is now bound onto a cyclical switch in emotional state in our abuser. When they switch back to loving us, we release and repackage the past up as quickly as we can to make sense of what happened (cognitive dissonance and dissociation). Worse than this, the adrenal cycle between these states – from adrenaline to endorphin release – is our addiction. At the very point of staying away, the pains of withdrawal kick in and the entirety of us - our reward system, emotional regulation system, belief system and self-worth are craving the one drug that fixes it all. Love. Or to put it more accurately, dysfunctional love.

During these moments, where we feel a pull to go back – the insights from ACT I can be most helpful. We can now name emotional experiences that are otherwise confusing to us. Craving, obligation, shame, guilt, confusion and a loss of trust in ourselves. Our new world, out on our own, can feel alien and threatening versus the world with our abuser where calm and relief is promised at some point – albeit through the cycle of abuse.

It is a repeated mantra of abuse advisors the world over, “don’t contact your ex” and “don’t go back to your ex”. A mantra that reveals just how often they see the people they are supporting,

return to the abuse they are trying to escape. It is frustrating to them, trying to help us – and others who try to help. But it is equally frustrating to us, who feel the urge to leave and escape with an urge to make contact and return. At this point, the act we need is an act of staying away. Staying away, despite the sun not yet rising on our futures and a clear picture of what we have been through.

To achieve this, we have to expect to want to go back and plan to stop ourselves acting on this. We have to commit to two actions:

1. Going cold turkey

There is only one way to beat an addictive pull of this magnitude and that is to go cold turkey. Total abstinence is required, which in this case means no contact with our ex. This has become a golden rule in the work I do with clients – zero contact else we are likely going back.



Humans are fascinating in our irrational nature when it comes to commitment to such decisions. A decision to go no contact is like a decision to quit smoking, remembering that we can be addicted to the ups and downs of the abusive relationship. We are all in or we are not. How many smokers have you met who quit, only to

have a quick cigarette in a bar and then find themselves with a pack of 20 in their pocket the next day? When we dabble with contacting our ex, we are on some level no longer an ex-smoker – we are no longer an ex. We are an addict, and subject to the risks of addiction where one dose can trigger us to fall back in. We are trying to get the bits of the relationship we need, a quick fix, whilst denying the risks that come with it.

But when it comes to interacting with our ex-lover, it is important to realise that they hold all the power. We are a long way from having the resources to control the dynamic. They can slip in the dose of what we need at any amount and are experts in tweaking the dose until we just can't avoid returning. The hate slips into love, as we slip into apology and promises of a bright future are made and pull us back with open arms to our soul mate, who this time has changed. We slide into the cycle of abuse like sliding into a soothing warm bath, it feels familiar, predictable and like home.

So, zero contact is the first step in staying away. This means no monitoring via social-media and instead blocking their link to us. Even better, close social media for a while to keep others from getting involved. No text tennis, casual house drive-bys, shopping in the same stores, asking friends how they are. For a long time, they cease to exist as a being in your life and thinking. This is our detox from our worse drug of choice – our abuser.

Some of us have children, pets and other shared commitments and this begs the question about how zero contact is possible. This is challenging yes, and such responsibilities can be leveraged to great effect to create emotional pulls or opportunities for a conversation to spout. In this context, I've seen clients use many approaches including:

- Asking an intermediary to manage texts relating to children and plans.
- Send all texts and proposed responses to a friend to help you avoid emotional entanglement.
- Set very clear timetables that don't need communication regularly. Respond in a time you have set aside to have the right approach and never knee jerk reactions that invite your emotions.

- Keep all texts about the needed topic only, don't let it stray into anything none essential.
- Set rules on sending 3 texts max – the issue, the proposed solution and your final agreement.
- Set rules on what you will write in texts – information only, no responses to criticisms, end the conversation if it shifts off-topic etc.

As I write this, it concerns me that *any* contact with our ex is problematic. We are often hyper-developed in being able to sense their mood – from the way a door is closed, a silence is introduced or a phrase is used. These silences and phrases can appear in texts and calls, which would seem innocent to others – but are a small dose of the drug we are used to. Like a whistle to a sheepdog. We can expect any attempt to control the interactions to be ignored and counter-controlled, as we have lived this way for a long time. I can really only say - strive for zero contact.

2. Get a buddy

We go into zero contact knowing that we will experience cravings, withdrawal and the pains that come going cold turkey. Addicts will tell you, even the best laid plan will feel difficult to stick to when the pains of withdrawal kick in. We should expect that we will want to contact or monitor our ex. We should expect our bonds to our abuser to urge us back to them, as we desperately crave relief and love. Planning for and expecting this self-sabotage

is in fact healthy and the exact route most addicts take out of addiction.

My approach, and the one I've recommended to others, in the context of this risk, is to learn from Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Have a buddy. AA use a system where you contact a buddy when you feel like you are going to drink. This is the approach I used which I credit to my being able to hold zero contact.

My closest friend served as the poor recipient of relentless calls from me, where I'd say how I felt and how hard it was not to contact my ex. She'd help to pull me back to my realisations about why I was feeling this and also why I left. Over and over I did this, sometimes multiple times a day. Enabling me to release the emotion, receive some support in regulating my emotions and reconnect with the reality I was trying to avoid. In almost every case I've seen of someone Getting Out and staying out, I've seen some version of a buddy. A parent, friend, internet forum, social media group, therapy group, abuse advisor, mental health telephone line etc. I feel confident in saying that it is near impossible to do alone, particularly in the early periods.

At this point, we need to commit to avoiding contact of any type and a rescue plan where we get support, when we feel like wavering.

Pause and process your story

This concept of cravings and withdrawal, how do they make you feel? Do they empower you to understand and commit to zero contact with the support of a buddy OR do they feel alarming and create a sense of vulnerability?

The insights we are inviting at this point relate to how freedom cannot be invited whilst we unconsciously crave what we have left. AA members announce their addiction in every meeting to remind themselves to turn up for themselves. They call on the support of others and use others to activate self-care when they feel most vulnerable. This is perhaps the most effective intervention known for alcohol addiction, far outstripping any intervention provided by medics and therapists: the power of personal insight alongside the support of others.

Recognise this *need* in your story now. Invite yourself to support this need, not to consider yourself in any negative way for it.

How will you hold onto the truth of your experience, when you feel most desperately in need of your ex?

Who will you recruit to support you (e.g. friend, family member, online forum, advisor, support line, therapist etc)?

Perhaps you need a collection of options, to create a 24/7 support route. Nothing is quite as challenging as the 2am grief where the only release comes in the seductive form of a quick text to our ex.

Plan for these moments – expect them – and refuse to arrive at them without a plan to rescue yourself.

Summary

Staying away is the greatest challenge and the greatest risk to us, after we escape. It baffles the world to see us return, but connects with our deepest needs and our inability to see reality for what it is. In our inner world, it can make sense to go back and we have to plan for this happening to avoid it.

The plan we need is to keep awareness. Don't mistake the pull back to our ex as love. It is addiction to an abusive cycle. It is a desperate need to end the pain of chaotic emotions and thoughts. It is not true. Read ACT I over and over, if this feels out of reach – and repeat the tasks set out to process the reality into thoughts.

We should expect ourselves to ignore our own plan and best interests, and so need to set a rule that enables support. Before any contact with our ex – we will contact our buddy (or supporters) to get their input. Make this a cast iron rule. Activate others to save us at our lowest ebb. Encourage them to read this book, if they need the same insights.

Trust that addictions fade over time. It is not fast and will take the work I am about to introduce, towards self-love. Addictions

fill holes in ourselves – holes we are going to fill with the right stuff.

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Reflection Exercise

Staying Away more than an idea

Reflect on how difficult this might be, or is / was for you.

SA

After reading the book to this point, what have you learned about your experience and risks?

SAM

Reflect here on how hard it is to tell the difference between love and addiction. Try to notice that we can confuse love for a dysfunctional story that is in fact damaging to you. What do you realise that you need to hold on to?

SAM

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