

# Overcoming toxicity: Take control and reclaim your emotional wellbeing

In the second of a three-part article, Avi Liran provides key tips to rise above toxicity and prioritise your wellbeing.

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Now that you have mastered the art of identifying toxic behaviours in the workplace, the next step is to develop strategies that can help you better address and overcome the challenges and protect yourself from the mental and physical toll of toxicity.

## 1. Self-Reflection

If you have been hurt by toxic behaviour, it is not your fault. You did not deserve it and are not responsible for someone else's harmful actions. Reflection is not about taking the time. It is about making sure you are responding with awareness, not assumptions.

That said, toxicity is not always one-sided. People who display toxic behaviour might be responding to you or are simply misguided. Before labelling someone as toxic, ponder the role you might play in the poisonous relationship. To gain clarity, reflect on how the situation unfolded. Be honest with yourself.

Solicit feedback from trusted people. If you discover you might be contributing to the toxicity, it is essential to contain the fallout. Identify your mistakes, take responsibility, apologise, and take steps to mitigate and rectify the damage.

However, avoid the pitfall of excessive self-blame. Instead, embrace the opportunity to foster self-awareness and reflection to improve your relationships, especially in complex situations where both parties may contribute to negative dynamics.

## 2. Misguided misstep or toxic trap?

It can be challenging to determine whether a person's actions stem from a momentary lapse in judgment or reflect a deeper pattern of toxic behaviour.

The key lies in understanding the intentions behind the actions, observing patterns, and noting their response to feedback.

**Intent:** They say, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." Evaluate the intention behind the behaviour. A misguided person may have good intentions but poor execution, resulting in negative outcomes. In contrast, a toxic person often exhibits malicious intent, aiming to manipulate, control, or harm others.

**Patterns:** A one-time mistake can happen to anyone and usually does not define a person's character. However, if the behaviour recurs, it suggests a pattern. Misguided individuals may repeatedly make similar mistakes due to ignorance or lack of skill, but typically respond positively to feedback and adjust.

In contrast, toxic individuals follow a "playbook" of manipulation, harm, abuse, and control, regardless of the context or feedback received. They may demonstrate a pervasive negative behaviour as a constant pattern woven into their interactions and relationships.

**Responding to feedback:** A genuinely misguided individual will typically show remorse and take accountability for their actions. They demonstrate a willingness to learn, adjust, and make amends. Conversely, toxic individuals dodge responsibility. They deflect blame, try to turn the tables on others, and twist narratives. They remain indifferent to the harm they cause. They tend to use emotional manipulation to deflect your feedback, by gaslighting, guilt-tripping, or playing the victim, to avoid accountability and maintain control.

## 3. Realise

You have taken incredible steps to identify toxic behaviours, reflect on your role, and even extend an olive branch to the toxic provocateur.

Now, it is time to prioritise your wellbeing.

Whatever you do, do not JADE (Justify, Argue, Defend, Explain). Engaging with toxic people is a one-way ticket to frustration. Do not get sucked into their "black hole" of endless justifications or arguments. Toxic individuals are not listening; they are strategising because they lack empathy and are laser-focused on their agenda.

## 4. Take Action

Once you have realised that this person is not just having a bad day but is as toxic as a perpetually regifted fruitcake, you have two choices: take swift action or continue to suffer.

Here's how to navigate this tricky terrain:

**Resilience over resistance:** Sometimes, running away from a toxic environment is not an option. Family commitments or a tough job market can make quitting feel like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. In these cases, staying under a toxic boss's rule becomes more about survival than strategy. However, no boss lasts forever, and if you can navigate the rough seas, you might find a better spot within the same organisation.

Plus, learning to handle difficult people and upgrading your skills could be the unexpected silver lining in this storm. Thriving through adversity might not be fun, but it is an essential leadership skill that will serve you long after the storm passes.

**Eject them from your galaxy:** Toxic people rarely change, and if their presence in your life is optional, it is time to hit the eject button and move on. Preserving your well-being is not only your right but also your responsibility. Know when to walk away, especially if the relationship or situation is beyond repair.

**Set firm boundaries:** To keep toxicity at bay, set clear boundaries. They are like a strong fence around your personal garden, defining what behaviours you will not tolerate. Be sure to be firm and direct in communicating your limits and expectations. Determine what kind of treatment is acceptable in your garden and what will be considered unwelcome.

**Limiting interactions:** If you cannot cut them out completely, reduce their impact. When it comes to toxic people, less is more. Reducing the frequency and duration of your interactions with toxic individuals might be necessary to preserve your mental and emotional health and shrink their influence and the potential stress they can cause. KISS or Keep It Short and Sweet! When interaction is unavoidable in a professional environment, keep discussions focused, brief, and strictly business. Toxic people thrive on drama, so starve them of it.

**Leverage on rules or norms:** Toxic people's behaviour sometimes goes beyond mere annoyance and crosses into violations of rules or norms. Familiarising yourself with the organisation's policies on behaviour and reporting empowers you to handle issues calmly and objectively. Rules shift the focus from personal confrontation to enforcing fair and well-known standards, helping to de-escalate potentially volatile situations.

Cultural norms also play a critical role in maintaining a healthy group dynamic.

Leaders cannot just watch from the sidelines in a workplace where gossip is brewing. Gently pull the person aside and say, "You don't want the reputation of a gossip. We value respectful communication, and talking about someone behind their back isn't kind. Let's keep our conversations constructive."

However, if you are not the leader and fear for your position, find a trusted senior person and ask, "Is this kind of behaviour tolerated here?" It subtly signals the issue without making yourself a target.

**Seek support: Your pit crew:** Navigating the rough waters of toxic behaviour alone can be exhausting. Seeking support from friends, family, or a professional is crucial for your physical and mental health. It is a sign of wisdom and humility, not a weakness. Even the F1 champion driver needs a pit crew to keep them going.

Your inner circle: Family and friends are your trusted go-to mechanics. They know you inside out, can provide emotional fuel, and offer encouragement, perspective, and advice. When you are running on empty, a chat with them can recharge your batteries.

Colleagues, coaches, and mentors: In the workplace, trusted colleagues, coaches, and mentors can offer invaluable guidance and support. They understand the unique context of your challenges and can provide practical advice. Personal coaches play a crucial role, too, offering tailored insights and strategies to help you excel.

Support groups: They say that a problem shared by many is a comfort to fools, but that was before they invented the idea of support or mastermind groups. Joining a support group connects you with others facing similar challenges. It is like being part of a racing team where everyone understands the pressures and shares strategies for success.

## 5. Act Like a Leader, Not a Bystander!

At Delivering Delight, we work with organisations to measure and upgrade their culture and present the leadership with an "MRI" of their organisation's culture. One of our global clients had a culture report showing high entropy and complaints of bullying.

During the subsequent phase, where we helped them redefine and upgrade the organisation's core values, the top leadership committed to non-toxicity and no bullying. They also established safe reporting mechanisms to ensure swift action against toxic behaviours. A few months after completing the cultural transformation, I was informed that a bullying incident had occurred, and the toxic leader involved was asked to leave.

If you are a leader, remember that toxicity cannot thrive without your tolerance. Your response to toxic behaviour defines the culture of your organisation. Allowing an achiever to bully others because of their contribution to the bottom line poisons the well, eroding trust and damaging the culture.

As a leader, you have the responsibility and obligation to root out such behaviour, ensuring a healthy and respectful environment for all.

About the Author:



Avi Liran is an author, writer, C-level mentor, and one of Asia's top motivational and inspirational keynote speakers. Avi is a thought leader and expert in creating delightful customer and employee experiences, fostering appreciation, and building authentic resilience.

In the last part of this three-part article, Avi will examine how you can rise above toxicity and embark on a journey of post-traumatic growth by turning pain into purpose.