

Reject Spirit Zappers

“How do I end up with this type of guy? Am I some kind of magnet for users and abusers?”

Natalie’s anguish was intense as she sought advice on how to deal with a verbally abusive boyfriend.

“No, you’re not a magnet,” I assured her. “It’s just that you force yourself to endure too much. A more evolved you wouldn’t hang around after the third or fourth uncaring comment.”

I told her that an enlightened butterfly may land on an unsuitable spot—accidentally—but after she realizes the terrain is treacherous, she takes flight. On the other hand, an unenlightened butterfly hangs around far too long. Quite possibly she takes up residence on that spot, sponging up negativity that nearly poisons her spirit. The moral: a smart butterfly doesn’t make herself tolerate the intolerable. A dumb butterfly settles for inhospitable conditions.

The people we choose to get chummy with should be those who are positive for our wellbeing, not negative.

Natalie asked an important question: “How do I know where to draw the line?”

“The key is to listen to yourself,” I replied. “Be wary and become protective of yourself whenever you start feeling emotionally assaulted.”

Another client, Tiffany, is numb to such feelings. Many examples in her life tell me that valuing and protecting herself have taken a back seat. As a child she was the target of ongoing abusive treatment. Consequently, she has grown to expect it—even feeling she deserves it. In a nonchalant manner, she described frequent occasions in which her boyfriend harshly assaulted her with his mean words.

“What are your limits in terms of tolerating abusive treatment?” I asked.

“Verbal abuse doesn’t faze me,” she said. “I let it roll off my back.”

“How sad, Tiffany,” I said, “that you’re not offended by unkind treatment.” She suddenly dropped her head and cried softly—clear evidence that her self-denial had collapsed. Until she was ready to speak, I remained silent because the solemnity of the moment was invaluable self-affirming for Tiffany. Her tears—a natural occurrence derived from self-compassion—signaled me that she was well on her way to becoming her own caring protector.

Being connected to our feelings is necessary to protect ourselves from harmful and degrading treatment. For example, by experiencing the pain of a hot stove, we learn to back off—we avoid it. On the other hand, if we’re numb to our pain, we’re vulnerable to injury. We need our pain. It helps us stay clear of danger zones.

Logically, then, we need to evict abusive people from our orbit unless they are willing to change.

I'm reminded of the movie *As Good As It Gets*, starring Jack Nicholson as Melvin and Helen Hunt as Carol. Raw callousness was Melvin's style. Without batting an eye, he would knife a person with a ridiculing or cutting remark. Carol, the woman he loved, was not exempt from such treatment, and at one point, while poised to walk out, she announced to him: "I don't think I want to know you anymore. You make me feel bad about myself."

When we tune in to the outrage of being violated, no matter what the degree, it's the beginning of putting up a protective shield. We're designed to be invested in self-preservation.

It appears that for the duration of our lifetime, we're assigned to one person to fully watch over, to love unconditionally, and bathe with constant caring and protection. We inhabit that person's body. How else can you explain survival instincts, defense mechanisms, and pain?

I urged Natalie and Tiffany to never let put-downs, name-calling, insults and nasty accusations go unchecked. "Instead, nip them in the bud," I advised. "To allow even one oral zinger sends a message that the offender is welcome to dish out more."

I suggested they stand tall and say, "When you treat me that way, it drives me away."

It's not as important to figure out why we attract the wrong type as it is to understand why we continue to accept their poison. Any of us can attract a wide variety of types, for example, any moth may show up at the light bulb, just as any person can come knocking at the door. But not everyone is welcome, and that's how it should be.

We're supposed to reject those who deflate our spirit.