

*Names are changed to honor client confidentiality*

## **The Misguided Heart**

She got pregnant because she didn't want to hurt her boyfriend's feelings.

Dru, 17, sat in our counseling session with tears streaming down her face, expressing what was going on in her head the night she conceived:

"I didn't want to do it! I didn't feel right about it, but I would've been consumed with guilt if I let him down!"

It's lamentable that Dru would be paying such a hefty price for being dominated by guilt and possessing an overblown sense of responsibility for her boyfriend's happiness. Virtually overnight, her future was no longer in her hands—she would be a mother with responsibilities. Her dreams, her interests and much of her freedom would have to be shelved for a very long time.

Our desire to give to others, to make them happy, is rooted in a kind heart, but it's unhealthy when it becomes an obsession, when the thought of disappointing someone is unbearable, and when our happiness depends on making that other person happy. The common term used to describe this set of traits is codependency. The causes are deep-rooted and complex, so change isn't as simple as snapping a finger.

Being loyal to others when loyalty isn't deserved is also a codependent trait.

Maggie, another client, has a boyfriend who lashes out at her frequently. She tells me she's always nervous around him and bends herself so he won't get mad.

"I feel watched—like I'm going to do the wrong thing," she said.

He grills her about where she's been, who she's been with and who she's texting. Maggie wants to leave him, but she struggles with that decision.

"I feel sorry for him," she said. "He doesn't have any friends."

I replied: "Of course he doesn't have any friends, making and keeping friends requires being nice."

Like Dru, Maggie ignores how she feels, sacrificing her well-being for the sake of another person. For both, the pathway to getting healthy entails learning that self-neglect is wrong. Their heart lacks balance—it's one-sided. For example, Dru's pregnancy was the result of caring too much for her boyfriend and too little for herself. Maggie's constant state of nerves and enduring a walking-on-eggshells existence is rooted in making her boyfriend a priority. Guarding and protecting themselves should be as instinctive and automatic as stopping a child from running into the street.

Like the child, Dru and Maggie need loving, protective arms to encircle them. First and foremost, those arms must be their own. Traffic isn't their threat, but the controlling tactics of others can be. Tactics such as sulking, criticizing, blowing up, and withdrawing love. It's important that Dru and Maggie learn to recognize and honor their internal signals that warn of threats to their well being—to their integrity.

Both suffer from an excessive sense of responsibility. My efforts will include helping them see that their boyfriends are ultimately responsible for their own happiness. They also need to realize that hurting someone's feelings isn't always a bad thing. Being denied, stopped or corrected is a part of life and necessary for teaching us our limits and how to be sensitive and respectful to others. We rob people of growing in these ways when we give in to pouts or angry outbursts.

Understandably, it's wrong to deliberately hurt someone's feelings, but this isn't the case with Dru and Maggie. They're not mean-spirited—quite the contrary.

Dru ended the relationship with her boyfriend, and a few months later she miscarried. It was devastating for her. Emotionally, it had the same intense impact as finding out she was pregnant. For several months, she went through a whole mixture of feelings including grief over losing the baby. But she also grew.

I asked her: "In looking back, what did that experience teach you, Dru?"

She replied: "That I can't let anybody have control over me again. I can't let someone suck my spirit from me. It drains me."

"Exactly what drains you?" I asked.

"Worrying about people, wanting to make them feel better," she said. "I have this problem of wanting to make everyone happy even if it costs me my own happiness. It's all so draining! But I'm getting stronger."

I agree; Dru is getting stronger. She's in a new relationship and to her delight, she's not obsessed or burdened with worry about what he's feeling, thinking, or needing. She describes the relationship as "freeing."

“How will you know if this relationship turns unhealthy?” I asked.

She thought for a moment:: “If we become codependent where he needs me and I fall into my old habit of taking care of him. If that happens, I’ll feel trapped and guilty for not taking care of him.”

It’s good to see that Dru’s “getting it.”

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