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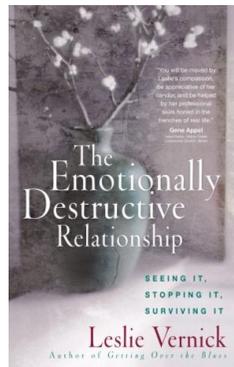
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Enriching the relationships that matter most!

How to Interact with a Destructive Person

Excerpted from chapter 12

By Leslie Vernick



Even if you are no longer in close relationship with a destructive person, you might still have encounters. Divorced parents, for example, may need to interact on behalf of their children. When the destructive person is a family member, whether by blood or the family of God, at times you will be in the same place together. Start now to prepare and practice for these meetings. The apostle Paul warned young Timothy about how to handle a destructive person. He said, “Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message” (2 Timothy 4:14–15 NIV).

We learn from this passage that Alexander did not merely oppose Paul’s message, he personally harmed Paul, and Paul warned Timothy to be careful around the man. If we were to handle hazardous materials such as insecticide or dangerous chemicals, a wise person would put on appropriate clothing, like gloves and a mask, for protection. In the same way, when we are around toxic people, we must protect ourselves so that their toxicity does not infect us.



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Preparation

If you know ahead of time that you will be encountering a person who has previously been abusive, controlling, deceitful, or indifferent toward you, you must mentally, emotionally, and spiritually prepare yourself. You wouldn't knowingly enter a hazardous environment without some forethought, so don't blindly walk into an obviously difficult situation without first making a plan.

When I went with my sister to Florida to see our hospitalized mother, I had been anticipating such a moment for a long time. I had forgiven her years earlier and, like Paul did with Alexander, I turned our relationship over to God. But now I needed to prepare myself to see her. What kinds of things might she say that would push my buttons? What did I need to do to mute my buttons so if she pushed, I wouldn't react?

Giving advance thought about how to best interact with a destructive person pays off in large dividends. One of my clients, Sally, knew that conversations with her ex-husband around any issue always left her feeling exhausted and angry. In spite of a great deal of growth, she still had trouble with allowing him to intimidate her into doing what she didn't want to do. As she prepared for a difficult discussion with him around some child-support issues, she decided to put her remarks in writing and send them via e-mail. She told him that because she found it difficult to have a constructive conversation with him, she wanted to have all future correspondence and conversation done through e-mail.

Sally took responsibility for her problem. She wasn't yet able to set boundaries that protected her in face-to-face meetings. She continued to allow her ex-husband to control her, so she came up with a plan to put limits on his contact with her. She created some distance so that she could respond more thoughtfully and appropriately. The added benefit was that her ex-husband now put his manipulative behavior and intimidating manner in writing, and Sally had a much easier time recognizing it and not falling prey to it.

If you must interact with someone whom you know is unsafe, whenever possible insist that a mediator or third party be present for all communication.



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Practice

As I packed to go to Florida for my first visit with my mother in more than fifteen years, I began to mentally role play all kinds of possible scenarios that might happen. I knew her ways, and I also knew my own weaknesses. I rehearsed how I wanted to respond differently than I had in the past. If she provoked me, I wanted to be gracious and quiet, not taking her bait. If she was cold, I wanted to be patient and warm. If she began verbally assaulting me, I wanted to respond by inviting her to stop, and if she didn't, to not react in kind. As a person, I was growing to be more proactive instead of reactive in many areas of my life. If she treated me abusively, I did not want to repay her evil with more evil of my own. In this moment with my mother, God was testing my character growth, but I needed some practice and used my imagination to do so *prior* to actually seeing her.

In the past, if you have been reactive when someone pushes your buttons, step back both physically and emotionally in order to distance yourself. Treat the provocative person much like you would treat a stranger. Have no expectations of a positive encounter. Be cordial, respectful, and kind, but don't get too close. You'd be especially wary if you suspected that the stranger may be carrying a weapon. For destructive people, their tongues are their weapons.

If you have had difficulty implementing some of the steps outlined in chapters eight and nine, enlist the help of a trusted friend or counselor in order to role play speaking up, standing up, and stepping back. Doing so will help you get used to saying the things you want to say and, as with everything else, the more you practice something, the more natural it becomes.

Prayer

The most important part of our preparation and protection against a destructive person isn't mental, it's spiritual. As we've already seen in chapter six, behind every destructive individual stands a much bigger Enemy. Satan wants to destroy us, and he'll use anyone who is available. Destructive individuals may not even be aware that they are his pawn, but we must be aware and on guard. The apostle Paul advises believers how to stand against evil. He writes:



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Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

Therefore, put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm. Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere. Ephesians 6:10–18

Spiritual armor protects us against evil, much like a hazmat suit protects its wearer from toxins in the environment. It's a good practice to remember to put it on every day, but intentionally put it on, piece by piece, when you know you will be in contact with a destructive person.

Remember, one of the surest signs of your own emotional and spiritual growth and maturity is that you no longer retaliate when someone hurts you or does wrong to you. One of the most natural things we feel when someone hurts us is to want vengeance or respond to evil with more evil of our own. But Jesus specifically commands us to respond radically differently than our natural selves would. He calls us to love our enemies and do them good, not harm (Matthew 5:43–45).

Overcoming Evil with Good

Throughout his epistles, the apostle Paul gives us specific instructions on dealing with all kinds of people and relationship problems, but he sums up much of his teaching with this powerful advice, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21 NIV). Let's look



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more specifically at this command and how we can implement it while relating with a destructive person.

Overcome is a fighting word. It means to “prevail” or “conquer.” I believe that’s what Abigail learned to do. (See story in 1 Samuel 25). Her humble hospitality in response to David’s threat of vengeance influenced him to change his mind. On the other hand, we have no evidence that her goodness ever changed her husband’s ways. (Neither do we know what he would have been like without Abigail’s presence in his life.) But the person most changed by Abigail’s decision to overcome evil with good was Abigail. She was not embittered by her husband’s destructiveness, nor was she intimidated or paralyzed with fear by her husband’s foolishness or David’s thirst for vengeance. She handled herself with a wise combination of grace and truth.

There are times when doing good will influence others to stop or pause to think about their destructive behaviors. Other times, doing good won’t seem to make any difference at all, and in fact, circumstances may actually get worse. However, like an effective antidote neutralizes poison’s toxic effects in the body, doing good will always help to conquer evil’s effects in you.

The healthier you become, the more patient and merciful you will be toward broken and even destructive people. (See Jesus’ instructions on how to love these kinds of people in Luke 6:27–36.) The apostle Paul says, “We bless those who curse us. We are patient with those who abuse us. We appeal gently when evil things are said about us. Yet we are treated like the world’s garbage, like everybody’s trash—right up to the present moment” (1 Corinthians 4:12–13).

Paul learned how to keep people from pushing his emotional buttons and how to respond with goodness when they were destructive toward him. Loving his enemies didn’t mean Paul had a close personal relationship with them, nor did he ever minimize their destructiveness. But he didn’t attack them or treat them as he was treated. He genuinely desired what was best for them, which was their repentance. Both Jesus and Paul taught these difficult lessons, and it is for our absolute good that we learn them. Otherwise, evil will quickly overtake us and we will become like the very thing



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we hate. The psalmist cried out, “Guide my steps by your word, so I will not be overcome by evil.”
(Psalm 119:133)

Beyond Victim to Victor

I hope that you’re beginning to make some changes in the way you’re handling the destructive relationships you’re in. Maybe everything’s not quite the way you want it and you still have things to change, but you’re moving forward. A crucial part of your healing will occur when you no longer see yourself as a victim but begin learning how you can become the victor.

In the history of the Jews, God often promised Israel she would defeat her opponents, but he still required her participation. God has laid out a battle plan for you to overcome evil; are you willing to do battle and fight? Are you willing to put on your armor and let go of your own destructive ways? Are you willing to abandon thoughts and feelings that are contrary to God’s best for your healing and growth? Or, like the ten spies who doubted God’s promises, are you too afraid of the giants in your landscape to believe that God will help you and give you the victory?

Throughout the biblical narrative, we read of individuals who were healed and changed by God’s loving grace. Many of them begin their stories by saying something like, “Once I was lost, but now I’m found.” Or, “Once I was blind, but now I can see.”

Take a moment and look back over your life. See where you were and how far you’ve come. What strengths have you gained? What hindrances have you let go of? In what areas do you need more practice, so that you can stand stronger in the future? Name some specific ways that you are overcoming evil with good, not only for your own benefit, but also for the future of your children, as well as for the glory of God.

Your story is only a part of a much bigger drama. God is using *you* to show people what he is like. Are you beginning to resemble him? Someone once said that we are what we are not because of what happens to us, but because of what we do with what happens to us. My friend, choose to do good with what’s happened to you, and you will be better for it.



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Recently one of my friends shared with me a short poem summarizing where she was in her journey toward healing and wholeness. She gave me permission to share it with you. She wrote,

The legacy I'd like to leave behind
Is that I've helped one life at a time
Beginning with mine. —Donna Upson, 2006

It is my prayer that you too will practice what you've learned. Allow God to love you, strengthen you, and heal you, so that your life might be and become all it was meant to be.