

Names used in this column are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Refuse the Poison

He offers her poison and she takes it.

Deanna's partner, Robert, handed her a candy bar, saying, "Here, ...I bought this for you." Deanna was reluctant to take it at first.

"I have been trying to lose weight, and he knew that," she explained in our counseling session.

His offer caused her to be suspicious of his motives. But despite her intuitive sense of caution, she accepted the gift.

Later that day, Robert asked her if she had eaten it yet.

"Yes," she replied.

He laughed sarcastically, saying, "I knew it. I knew you couldn't resist."

Deanna's drained and despairing demeanor as she discussed the incident, revealed volumes about the depth of her distress. I learned that the candy bar scenario was one of several cruel examples she has endured over the years. Over time, continual exposure to his toxic treatment has taken a toll on her spirit.

The lesson is clear: We shouldn't accept the things that poison our spirit. If we do, we send the message that we're a consenting party. By accepting cruel or disrespectful treatment, we inadvertently participate in a profound violation of our dignity.

The candy bar incident is symbolic of the unhealthy nature of their relationship. Robert repeatedly offers Deanna poison in the form of ridicule and debasing treatment and she—in effect—consumes it.

"Don't count on Robert changing unless you change how you contribute to it," I told Deanna. "He needs someone to play along with his cruel little games, and if you don't, he has no choice but to go off and play solitaire."

I asked Deanna a vital question: "If he doesn't change, do you really want to be around someone who treats you like this forever?"

"But, I love him," she said tearfully. "I know you're right, but how do I deal with the love I have for him?"

"Love yourself more," I said. "You and your partner have one thing in common: You both love Robert more than Deanna. If he's treating you like this, he doesn't love you. And if he's ignoring the effect he has on you, his heart is shut off. And that's not love either. Love shouldn't be the sole criteria for staying with someone or enduring the intolerable. I love sugar cream pie, but that doesn't mean it's good for me. I also love to swim, but I'm not about to swim in polluted water."

We have to be discriminating with our love. Yes, love is an important factor when deciding to be in a relationship, but equally important is whether the object of our love is good for us. Is the person positive or negative for you? Do the negative or destructive aspects outweigh the uplifting aspects?

The sad part of this all-too common story is that it wouldn't be happening if Deanna possessed abundant love for herself. At some point in her life, the natural instinct to take care

of herself—to defend herself when wronged—was turned off. Had it not been, she would instinctively distance herself from such treatment. Robert’s cruelty just couldn’t take hold in the presence of self-caring.

Therapy for Deanna will entail switching on the valve of self-love. That act will give her the immunity and strength she needs for dealing with unkind and insensitive people like Robert. Had she been armed with self-love, she would have dealt with the candy bar incident quite differently. When it was offered, she would have remained true to herself, saying, “No thanks. As you know, I’m on a diet.” She would have respected her reluctance and sense of caution.

When we love ourselves, healthy boundaries are a natural byproduct. We automatically object to ill treatment. Our survival instinct, devoted to self-preservation, is fully intact. Creating boundaries doesn’t assure Deanna that Robert will change for the better. In fact, it’s likely he’ll continue to drain and undermine her spirit. In that case, if Deanna doesn’t distance herself from this emotionally abusive partner, she will continue to suffer. She will continue to feel that familiar knot of pain in her stomach, go to bed miserable, and wake up in a dismal state, dreading her days and waiting for the next sarcastic jab.

Saying, “no more!” to someone who has a negative effect on your well-being is an act of compassion—self-compassion.

It’s a whole lot better than ingesting poison, isn’t it?