



The Relationship Analogy

Comparing a substance use issue with a bad relationship can be really helpful when it comes to getting a good grasp on what it is like to be dependent upon a substance and to be unable to break free even when it is obvious that a change is needed. Most people have been in a bad relationship or know someone who has been in one so it is really a global analogy that people from just about any background can identify with.

Why do people stay in bad relationships? For one thing, most bad relationships don't usually start bad, (although some relationships start out bad and only get worse.) Usually, the reason a relationship is formed is because it's fun at first. Then, in a bad relationship, things gradually (or suddenly) take a turn for the worse. Some people see the signs of trouble and get out early but others stay in the relationship despite the signs that things aren't going so well. Perhaps the good outweighs the bad for a while or at least that may seem to be the case. A lot of people stay in bad relationships simply based on the fact that the good times are really good and they can tolerate some stress and problems in order to continue to maintain the good chemistry that exists and draws us to another person, even if that other person starts to seem like maybe they aren't so good overall. Their remains for some, that ever-present hope that things will get better and go back to the way things were at the beginning during that lovely "honeymoon" phase early on in the relationship. That's the time when everything was fun, exciting, new and easy. If only that could last!

At their worst, relationships for some can become hurtful. A once supportive, kind, loving partner may start becoming not so kind, supportive and loving any more. In serious cases, relationships can become abusive. Yet still, some people stay in the relationship, holding on to those memories of better times and hoping things will get better and go back to the good times. It is not uncommon for an individual who remains in an abusive relationship to recall how loving and wonderful their partner is during those times when they are not being abusive. For others, they may get repeatedly cheated on yet they still stay in the relationship with the hope that the person who they are with will one day see the light and then decide to commit. They too focus on the good points for staying together despite the infidelity. Most people reading this are probably saying "no way, not me – I would be out of there" which is true – most people at some point or another see the signs and have the sense to get out of a bad relationship before it gets too far. Nevertheless, it is the people who do not get out of bad relationships who are the ones we want to look at in order to understand substance use disorders. Those who stay and make excuses despite being in a bad relationship are the ones represented in this illustration.

Now compare a "bad relationship" situation as outlined above with substance use issues. There often is a direct parallel. At first, a person may start using substances and getting high and it feels great and it's a lot of fun. The user feels good with their substance, has rewarding and exciting times, and it's relaxing fun and easy – much like a new relationship. Gradually or on occasion things may eventually start to go wrong. Getting high is still fun most of the time but soon there are occasions when use of this substance starts causing problems in other life areas. Those problems may be hangovers, lateness to work, complaints from family, legal situations, etc. The good times may still be just too good to stop getting high and despite these problems, therefore the person stays in the substance using "relationship" with the ever-present hope that everything will get better. For some, substance use starts to demand a steady increase in the investment of time and money. The substance can eventually become "abusive" in that periodically in between periods of good times associated with the "high" there start to be regular consequences, thereby harming that person's progress in life. Yet still the person stays in the "relationship" with the substance under the guise of the fantasy that the "abuse" (in the form of repeated consequences) will stop and they can just go back to being happy with their substances of choice (using socially without consequences). Friends and family may start pointing out that maybe it's time to end the relationship with the substance but it feels to the person like no one else understands the good times like they do. Finally, over time for some that substance starts taking more and more leaving them with less and less. Some people keep going back after "breakups" (in this case periods of abstinence) when after a while things seem better again. However, not too much later after getting back together (using again) the problems soon come back.

Obviously the above is an over the top dramatization but the point is clear. The relationship analogy is effective and makes sense and it is real. The relationship analogy can be an effective way to understand the nature of substance use issues and why many people continue to use substances even in spite of repeated consequences.