

Isolation, control, and fear:

A self-assessment guide for recognising risk in toxic relationships

What are the signs of a toxic relationship?

Violence is not only physical, sexual or economic – it can also be psychological and digital. It manifests in many ways, often escalating through threats and controlling behaviours that create fear. Your choices are no longer free, but conditioned.

“Many cases of femicide have occurred without previous physical or sexual violence, but rather through escalating verbal threats and controlling demands, often reinforced online and via social media,” explains **Marina Calloni**, professor of Political and Social Philosophy at the University of Milano-Bicocca, and director of the research centre **ADV (Against Domestic Violence)** and of the national academic network **UN.I.RE (Universities United Against Gender-Based Violence)**.

How can you self-assess your level of risk?

And when should you ask for help (since the end of a relationship, unfortunately, does not always mean the end of the danger – quite the opposite, at times)?

Here is *when* a relationship becomes toxic:

1. When the relationship is seen as exclusive possession, and jealousy becomes obsessive and constantly justified.
2. When your presence is demanded continuously and exclusively.
3. When you are constantly suspected.
4. When you are repeatedly blamed or criticised.
5. When your friendships are controlled or restricted, and you are prevented from seeing others.
6. When you are increasingly isolated, heightening your dependence on your partner.
7. When your words are twisted to make you feel guilty or at fault.
8. When your partner begins to monitor your messages, phone, and social media activity.
9. When they demand that you dress a certain way, according to their preferences.
10. When they are indifferent to your needs or desires.
11. When they make unpleasant comments about your body or behaviour, even in front of others.

12. When they prevent you from studying or pursuing a career.
13. When they give you false information to make you doubt yourself, your memory, your perception – leaving you disoriented and questioning your identity.
14. When they begin to intimidate or threaten you.
15. When you are humiliated with degrading criticism, sarcasm, unpleasant remarks, or offensive language.
16. When you begin experiencing anxiety attacks, PTSD symptoms, depression or suicidal thoughts, putting your physical and mental health at risk.

“A man who exhibits these behaviours is a pathological narcissist,” explains Professor Calloni. “He feels grandiose, has a constant need for admiration, and lacks empathy. He treats others as objects to control and manipulate. Don’t be fooled – this is not love.”

Gender-based violence often follows a cyclical pattern, beginning with a gradual build-up of tension, followed by aggression, and then a phase of regret or reconciliation, with promises of change or by blaming the woman for what happened. However, after the *love bombing*, new threats and abuse often follow.

If you begin to feel fear, it’s a sign that the risk of more serious harm is increasing — and the danger is real.

The appeal of Professor Calloni, who has worked for years on gender-based violence, is clear: **ask for help.**

“Contact anti-violence centres, specialised social services, or call **1522**, the Italian anti-violence and anti-stalking helpline, available 24/7 and free of charge. You can also report the abuse to law enforcement and request protection.”

The Signal for Help is an international gesture to silently ask for help in situations of violence – it can save a life.



1. **Raise your hand with your palm facing out and tuck your thumb into your palm.**
2. **Fold your four fingers down over your thumb.**

Ending the relationship does not necessarily mean the danger is over, especially when the ex-partner cannot accept the separation and harbours frustration, anger, and resentment.

Here are some risks that may continue even after the relationship has ended:

1. When your ex continues to feel jealousy and a sense of ownership, preventing others from getting close to you.
2. When they follow you or show up unexpectedly at your workplace or place of study.
3. When they contact your friends to get information about you.
4. When they begin monitoring your activity on social media.
5. When they continue to intimidate or threaten you, either in person or online, via phone or social media.
6. When they spread false information or share images of you — even intimate ones.
7. When you start suffering from anxiety, depression, or guilt for having left them, to the point that your physical and mental health are at risk.
8. When they repeatedly ask to meet up for “closure” or to get back together.

If any of this happens and your sense of fear increases, it means you are truly in danger.

If you need help, please contact the Anti-Violence Support Service.