

*In this TED Talk, relationship revolutionary Katie Hood reveals the five signs you might be in an unhealthy relationship — with a romantic partner, a friend, a family member — and shares the things you can do every day to love with respect, kindness and joy.*

### **Katie Hood - TED Talk TRANSCRIPT**

So when you think about a child, a close friend, or a romantic partner, the word “love” probably comes to mind, and instantly other emotions rush in: joy and hope, excitement, trust and security, and yes, sometimes sadness and disappointment.

There might not be a word in the dictionary that more of us are connected to than love. Yet, given its central importance in our lives, isn't it interesting that we're never explicitly taught how to love?

We build friendships, navigate early romantic relationships, get married and bring babies home from the hospital with the expectation that we'll figure it out.

But the truth is, we often harm and disrespect the ones we love. It can be subtle things like guilt-tripping a friend into spending time with you or sneaking a peek at your partner's texts or shaming a child for their lack of effort at school.

100% of us will be on the receiving end of unhealthy relationship behaviors and 100% of us will do unhealthy things. It's part of being human. In its worst form, the harm we inflict on loved ones shows up as abuse and violence, and relationship abuse is something that one in three women and one in four men will experience in their lifetime.

Now, if you're like most people, when you hear those stats, you'll go, “Oh, no, no, no, that would never happen to me.” It's instinctual to move away from the words “abuse” and “violence,” to think that they happen to

someone else somewhere else.

But the truth is, unhealthy relationships and abuse are all around us. We just call them different things and ignore the connection. Abuse sneaks up on us disguised in unhealthy love.

I work for an organization called One Love started by a family whose daughter Yeardeley was killed by her ex-boyfriend. This was a tragedy no one saw coming, but when they looked back, they realized the warning signs were there just no one understood what they were seeing.

Called crazy or drama or too much drinking, his actions weren't understood to be what they really were, which was clear signs of danger. Her family realized that if anyone had been educated about these signs, her death could have been prevented.

So today we're on a mission to make sure that others have the information that Yeardeley and her friends didn't. We have three main goals: give all of us a language for talking about a subject that's quite awkward and uncomfortable to discuss; empower a whole front line, namely friends, to help; and, in the process, improve all of our ability to love better.

To do this, it's always important to start by illuminating the unhealthy signs that we frequently miss, and our work really focuses on creating content to start conversations with young people.

As you'd expect, most of our content is pretty serious, given the subject at hand, but today I'm going to use one of our more light-hearted yet still thought-provoking pieces, "**The Couplets**," to illuminate five markers of unhealthy love.

The first is **intensity**.

*(Video clip)*

*Blue: I haven't seen you in a couple days. I've missed you.*

*Orange: I've missed you too. (#thatslove)*

*Blue: I haven't seen you in five minutes. It feels like a lifetime.*

*What have you been doing without me for five whole minutes?*

*Orange: It's been three minutes. (#thatsnotlove)*

Anybody recognize that? I don't know. I do.

Abusive relationships don't start out abusive. They start out exciting and exhilarating. There's an intensity of affection and emotion, a rush. It feels really good. You feel so lucky, like you've hit the jackpot.

But in unhealthy love, these feelings shift over time from exciting to overwhelming and maybe a little bit suffocating. You feel it in your gut. Maybe it's when your new boyfriend or girlfriend says "I love you" faster than you were ready for or starts showing up everywhere, texting and calling a lot. Maybe they're impatient when you're slow to respond, even though they know you had other things going on that day.

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It's important to remember that it's not how a relationship starts that matters, it's how it evolves. It's important in the early days of a new relationship to pay attention to how you're feeling. Are you comfortable with the pace of intimacy? Do you feel like you have space and room to breathe?

It's also really important to start practicing using your voice to talk about your own needs. Are your requests respected?

A second marker is **isolation**.

*(Video clip)*

*Orange 2: Want to hang out?*

*Orange 1: Me and my boyfriend always have Monday Funday.*

*Orange 2: Want to hang out?*

*Orange 1: Me and my boyfriend always have Monday Funday.*

*Orange 2: Tomorrow?*

*Orange 1: It's our Tuesday Snooze Day.*

*Orange 2: Wednesday?*

*Orange 1: No Friends Day.*

If you ask me, isolation is one of the most frequently missed and misunderstood signs of unhealthy love.

## **Why?**

Because every new relationship starts out with this intense desire to spend time together, it's easy to miss when something shifts. Isolation creeps in when your new boyfriend or girlfriend starts pulling you away from your friends and family, your support system, and tethering you more tightly to them.

They might say things like, “Why do you hang out with them? They’re such losers” about your best friends, or, “They want us to break up. They’re totally against us” about your family.

Isolation is about sowing seeds of doubt about everyone from your prerelationship life. Healthy love includes independence, two people who love spending time together but who stay connected to the people and activities they cared about before.

While at first you might spend every waking minute together, over time maintaining independence is key. You do this by making plans with friends and sticking to them and encouraging your partner to do the same.

A third marker of unhealthy love is **extreme jealousy**.

*(Video clip)*

*Blue 2: What are you so happy about?*

*Blue 1: She just started following me on Instagram!*

*Blue 2: What are you so nervous about?*

*Blue 1: She, she just started following me, like, everywhere.*

*(#thatsnotlove)*

As the honeymoon period begins to fade, extreme jealousy can creep in. Your partner might become more demanding, needing to know where you are and who you’re with all the time, or they might start following you everywhere, online and off.

Extreme jealousy also brings with it possessiveness and mistrust, frequent accusations of flirting with other people or cheating, and refusal to listen

to you when you tell them they have nothing to worry about and that you only love them.

Jealousy is a part of any human relationship, but extreme jealousy is different. There's a threatening, desperate and angry edge to it. Love shouldn't feel like this.

A fourth marker is **belittling**.

*(Video clip)*

*Blue: Wanna hang out?*

*Orange: I gotta study.*

*Blue: You'll get an A anyway, A for amazing. (#thatslove)*

*Blue: Wanna hang out?*

*Orange: I gotta study.*

*Blue: You'll get an F anyway,*

*F for, F for... stupid. (#thatsnotlove)*

Yeah, hmm. In unhealthy love, words are used as weapons. Conversations that used to be fun and lighthearted turn mean and embarrassing. Maybe your partner makes fun of you in a way that hurts, or maybe they tell stories and jokes for laughs at your expense.

When you try to explain that your feelings have been hurt, they shut you down and accuse you of overreacting. "Why are you so sensitive? What's

your problem? Give me a break.” You are silenced by these words.

It seems pretty obvious, but your partner should have your back. Their words should build you up, not break you down. They should keep your secrets and be loyal. They should make you feel more confident, not less.

Finally, a fifth marker: **volatility**.

*(Video clip)*

*Orange 1: I'd be sad if we broke up.*

*Orange 2: I'd be sad too. (#thatslove)*

*Orange 1: I'd so depressed if we ever broke up. I'd throw myself off this step. I would! Don't try to stop me!*

*(#thatsnotlove)*

Frequent breakups and makeups, high highs and low lows: as tension rises, so does volatility. Tearful, frustrated fights followed by emotional makeups, hateful and hurtful comments like, “You’re worthless, I’m not even sure why I’m with you!” followed quickly by apologies and promises it will never happen again.

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By this point, you’ve been so conditioned to this relationship roller coaster that you may not realize how unhealthy and maybe even dangerous your relationship has become. It can be really hard to see when unhealthy love turns towards abuse, but it’s fair to say that the more of these markers your relationship might have, the more unhealthy and maybe dangerous your relationship could be.

And if your instinct is to break up and leave, which is advice so many of us give our friends when they're in unhealthy relationships, that's not always the best advice.

Time of breakup can be a real trigger for violence. If you fear you might be headed towards abuse or in abuse, you need to consult with experts to get the advice on how to leave safely.

But it's not just about romantic relationships and it's not just about violence. Understanding the signs of unhealthy love can help you audit and understand nearly every relationship in your life.

For the first time, you might understand why you're disappointed in a friendship or why every interaction with a certain family member leaves you discouraged and anxious. You might even begin to see how your own intensity and jealousy is causing problems with colleagues at work.

Understanding is the first step to improving, and while you can't make every unhealthy relationship healthy — some you're going to have to leave behind — you can do your part every day to do relationships better.

And here's the exciting news: it's actually not rocket science. Open communication, mutual respect, kindness, patience — we can practice these things every day.

And while practice will definitely make you better, I have to promise you it's also not going to make you perfect. I do this for a living and every day I think and talk about healthy relationships, and still I do unhealthy things.

Just the other day as I was trying to shuttle my four kids out the door amidst quarreling, squabbling and complaints about breakfast, I completely lost it. With an intentionally angry edge, I screamed, "Everybody just shut up and do what I say! You are the worst! I am going



to take away screen time and dessert and anything else you could possibly ever enjoy in life!”

Anybody been there? Volatility, belittling.

My oldest son turned around and looked at me, and said, “Mom, that’s not love.”

For a minute, I really wanted to kill him for calling me out. Trust me.

But then I gathered myself and I thought, you know what, I’m actually proud. I’m proud that he has a language to make me pause. I want all of my kids to understand what the bar should be for how they’re treated and to have a language and a voice to use when that bar is not met versus just accepting it.

For too long, we’ve treated relationships as a soft topic, when relationship skills are one of the most important and hard to build things in life. Not only can understanding unhealthy signs help you avoid the rabbit hole that leads to unhealthy love, but understanding and practicing the art of being healthy can improve nearly every aspect of your life.

I’m completely convinced that while love is an instinct and an emotion, the ability to love better is a skill we can all build and improve on over time.

Thank you.

### **For Further Reading:**

[Why We Love, Why We Cheat: Helen Fisher \(Transcript\)](#)

[Full Transcript: Esther Perel on Modern Love and Relationships at SXSW](#)



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