



# Selected Papers of William L. White

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## Avoiding Toxic Relationships in Recovery

**William L. White**

Emeritus Senior Research Consultant  
Chestnut Health Systems  
[bwhite@chestnut.org](mailto:bwhite@chestnut.org)

Navigating one's way through intimate relationships can be difficult regardless of one's circumstances. Marital and long-term intimate relationships must go through major reconstruction during recovery or face collapsing. This reconstruction often involves healing past wounds to the relationship, redefining role responsibilities, altering daily rituals of communication, and developing new patterns of sexual intimacy. It also involves shedding self-defeating patterns of speaking and acting toward one another that have often become deeply ingrained during the addiction years.

Here are six principles and prescriptions that might be of help.

1. Individual healing must precede relationship healing. Encourage your partner to get help for herself or himself via counseling or participation in groups like Al-Anon or Nar-Anon so that he or she can relearn to trust, forgive past injuries, and resist the urge to control your recovery efforts.

2. The very thing everyone has been hoping and praying for—RECOVERY—can threaten an intimate relationship. Because of all the feelings and patterns of behaviors that developed during the addiction years, the adjustment to recovery can exert great strain on intimate and family relationships. Expect such strain. It is a normal part of the recovery process.

3. Relational healing takes time. Remind yourselves to be patient with one another through this process. All that is wrong with the relationship does not reverse itself the moment recovery begins. The relationship must recover also, and this will proceed, like personal recovery, in ebbs and flows over time.

4. Relational healing may require outside professional help. Such help may increase the prospects of successful recovery and the prospects of salvaging the relationship.

6. Some relationships are not salvageable in recovery. In spite of the best efforts of those involved, not all intimate relationships will survive the recovery process. When it is

clear a relationship will not survive, find a way to disengage from the relationship with as little damage to all involved. This disengagement process may also require outside professional help.

For those entering recovery not in a committed relationship, there are the twin pitfalls of getting involved in another relationship too quickly and getting involved in relationships that are destructive to your personal health, safety and recovery. These pitfalls can be a particular problem for those who have come out of a turbulent family background or who have a history of stormy relationships. The process of selecting intimate partners is complicated by assortative mating.

Assortative mating is the process through which we select intimate partners based on similarities or differences with ourselves. This is a natural process, but can get complicated when we've developed a pattern of picking individuals who mirror our own destructive processes. Selecting partners that consistently mirror our own problems or abuse and/or abandon us brings chaos and emotional distress to an already fragile situation—early recovery. Needless to say, the drama and disruption of such relationships can undermine the most sincere recovery efforts.

Here are some suggested guidelines that may be of help.

1. Inventory your past relationships. Are there common patterns to how these relationships begin and end? Are you drawn to partners that also have severe alcohol and/or other drug problems? Do you seem to be drawn to a particular type of partner that ends up hurting you emotionally or physically? Does it feel like you keep re-enacting the same painful dramas in your life?

2. Define your pattern of vulnerability in relationships. It is good to get to know yourself as a person in recovery before getting into new relationships. Based on the

above inventory, complete the following sentence: I need to avoid getting into relationships with individuals who \_\_\_\_\_.

3. Define early warning signs. It may be helpful to work with a counselor or others who have had similar relationship problems.

Warning signs that tell me I want to avoid starting a relationship with someone.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Early warning signs that tell me I need to get out of a relationship that has begun

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

4. Consider remaining out of a serious relationship through your early months of recovery. This is one way to avoid “jumping from the frying pan into the fire.” Early recovery requires enormous energy. This is a time requiring a great deal of focus on yourself. If you are not in a serious relationship, consider this as a “time-out” period to get yourself together.

5. Define what you do want in a relationship. Complete the following sentence.

What I am seeking in a relationship is someone who has the following characteristics:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

5. Seek a relationship coach (a counselor, friend or peer in recovery) to guide you through your first relationships in recovery.

6. If you find your old relationship pattern continuing, get into a long-term therapy relationship that focuses on breaking this pattern.

7. Assertively manage your own safety and the safety of your children at all times.