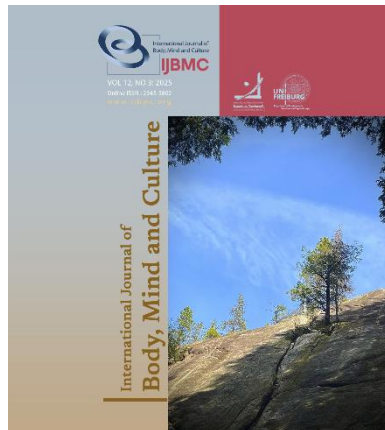1 Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University Malang, Indonesia
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Coping Strategies in the Toxic Relationships: A Phenomenological Study of Emerging Adults

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to explore how emerging adults cope with the challenges of toxic relationships, using a qualitative phenomenological approach to delve deeply into their lived experiences.

Methods and Materials: Data were collected through in-depth interviews with three participants aged 19–23, all of whom had encountered toxic relationships.

Findings: The analysis revealed that participants relied primarily on two coping strategies: emotion-focused coping and seeking social support. Emotion-focused coping included practices like journaling and self-reflection, which helped participants process their emotions. Seeking social support, on the other hand, involved confiding in close friends or family members who provided reassurance and advice.

Conclusion: These findings underline the profound impact of toxic relationships on mental health and highlight the importance of equipping individuals with tools to navigate such challenges. The results can inform the design of targeted counseling programs that address specific issues, such as emotional dependency and unhealthy attachment patterns. Moreover, they have implications for social policies aimed at fostering awareness and resilience among individuals at risk of entering or remaining in toxic relationships. By understanding how emerging adults manage these experiences, this research contributes valuable insights into the psychological and social mechanisms at play, paving the way for interventions that promote healthier relationships and emotional well-being during this pivotal life stage.

Keywords: Toxic Relationship, Coping Strategies, Early Adulthood, Emotional Manipulation, Power Dynamics.

Introduction

Early adulthood is a pivotal stage of life where individuals explore romantic relationships, which play a significant role in emotional development and personal growth. These relationships often evoke feelings of admiration, attraction, and love, shaping experiences that contribute to identity formation and social connectedness. Early adulthood is a phase often marked by the experience of romantic relationships, during which individuals tend to feel admiration, attraction, and love for the opposite sex. These relationships, which go beyond mere friendships, are often referred to as courtship and represent a significant aspect of an individual's life journey. According to Solferino & Tessitore (2021), these romantic experiences are among the most formative and impactful of one's life (Solferino & Tessitore, 2021). Rifayanti et al. (2022) explain that entering into romantic relationships during early adulthood is an essential part of exploring love (Rifayanti

et al., 2022). These relationships serve not only as a form of social interaction but also as a means of building emotional closeness with a partner. Intimacy developed in these relationships often satisfies an important psychological need for early adults (Praptiningsih et al., 2024). Typically, establishing a relationship also involves striving for relationship quality, as individuals aim to create meaningful connections that provide social support, affection, and a variety of positive experiences with their partners. However, romantic relationships are not without their challenges. Conflicts frequently arise between couples, highlighting the complexity of maintaining healthy and harmonious relationships (Anugrah et al., 2024; Handayani et al., 2024; Zikri et al., 2024).

These challenges, when left unaddressed, can lead to the development of toxic dynamics that negatively impact the individuals involved. Conflict in romantic relationships can arise from a variety of factors, including differences of opinion, unmet expectations, and miscommunication. If these conflicts are not properly managed, they can disrupt the balance of the relationship, potentially leading to feelings of resentment, frustration, or emotional exhaustion. Herdiani & Hidayat (2023) argue that a healthy relationship is characterized by the ability of both partners to maintain mutual understanding, respect, and integrity (Herdiani & Hidayat, 2023). Parinsi & Huwae (2022) further emphasize that effective communication and conflict resolution are key to sustaining positive relationship dynamics, as they help prevent misunderstandings and foster emotional closeness. Without these foundational elements, relationships may devolve into toxic environments, causing emotional harm to those involved (Parinsi & Huwae, 2022).

Young & Huwae (2022) found that some individuals experience the negative impact of their relationships, often referred to as toxic relationships. These relationships can involve both physical and emotional abuse, including verbal insults and demeaning behavior (Young & Huwae, 2022). Hombing & Sipahutar (2022) highlight that toxic relationships significantly affect an individual's psychological well-being. The impact is not limited to physical harm but also includes emotional distress, with victims often feeling depressed and losing self-confidence (Hombing & Sipahutar, 2022). Emotional distress in toxic relationships typically arises from

manipulative or degrading behaviors exhibited by the partner (Smith & Meyfroidt, 2018; Suciati & Ramadhanty, 2023). In response to such pressures, individuals often resort to coping strategies as a form of self-defense, seeking ways to manage the emotional and psychological toll of the relationship. These strategies can range from avoidance and denial to seeking support from friends, family, or professionals.

Toxic relationships are detrimental interpersonal connections marked by manipulation, control, emotional abuse, and power imbalances that harm one or both individuals involved. Emotionally, they generate feelings of fear, guilt, inadequacy, and self-doubt, often eroding trust and personal confidence. Psychologically, toxic relationships contribute to anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and diminished self-worth, leaving lasting mental health effects. Socially, they isolate individuals from support systems, disrupt friendships and family ties, and hinder the ability to form healthy, trusting relationships in the future. Coping strategies play a crucial role in helping individuals manage the stress arising from toxic relationships. One common strategy used is emotion-focused coping, where the victim may choose to remain in the relationship, hoping that the situation will improve over time. This approach reflects a desire to maintain the relationship despite its harmful dynamics. Coping strategies, in general, serve as tools for individuals to maintain psychological balance and reduce emotional distress. In many cases, these strategies involve seeking social support from friends, family, or other close individuals, which can provide a sense of security and emotional relief. Support networks play a critical role in helping victims feel understood and less isolated, thereby alleviating some of the pressures associated with toxic relationships (Azzahra & Suhadi, 2021; Lubkin & Torres, 2017; Salmatuanisa et al., 2024; Sulastri et al., 2022). This social support not only fosters emotional resilience but also helps individuals navigate the challenges of toxic relationships in healthier ways.

Toxic relationships, characterized by manipulation, abuse, and power imbalances, have significant psychological repercussions, such as anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. Understanding coping mechanisms becomes crucial, especially within specific populations, as the ways individuals respond to such challenges are often shaped by cultural norms and values. For instance, in collectivist cultures, individuals

may prioritize seeking support from family or community, while those in individualistic societies might rely more on personal introspection or professional counseling. Emerging adults, in particular, are a vulnerable group navigating developmental milestones, and their coping strategies are deeply influenced by cultural expectations surrounding relationships and emotional expression. Thus, addressing toxic relationship dynamics requires a culturally sensitive approach that considers how societal values and norms impact individuals' ability to recognize, respond to, and recover from unhealthy relational patterns. Initial interviews with victims of toxic relationships provide valuable insights into how individuals cope with the stress associated with these harmful dynamics. For example, an interview with a subject, DA, on March 25, 2023, revealed the significant mental pressure he experienced in a toxic relationship, which deeply affected his psychological well-being. The subject reported feeling isolated, frequently insulted, and subjected to verbally abusive treatment by his partner (Schumm, 2004; Soave et al., 2015). In response to these pressures, DA employed a coping strategy that involved seeking social support. He confided in his friends and family, sharing his experiences and seeking their advice to manage the emotional toll of the relationship. This strategy helped DA regulate his emotions and maintain a degree of mental stability during this challenging time (Gray, 2021).

Social support emerged as a crucial element in the coping process, offering not only moral encouragement but also practical advice and genuine help that can assist victims in coping with difficult situations. Research consistently shows that social support from family members and close friends plays a significant role in helping individuals cope with the stress of toxic relationships. However, coping strategies are not always entirely successful. Some individuals find it particularly challenging to break away from toxic relationships, largely due to the strong emotional attachment that often develops. This attachment can lead victims to feel hesitant about taking the difficult step of leaving a detrimental relationship (Aquino et al., 2024; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Soave et al., 2015; Sutrisno et al., 2024). This emotional bond, despite the harm it causes, can make it harder for individuals to recognize and take action against the toxicity of the relationship.

Previous research discussing coping strategies for victims of toxic relationships has largely focused on anxiety and coping mechanisms in women who are victims of dating violence. These studies typically employ a qualitative approach and focus on early adult women, examining how they manage anxiety within the context of abusive relationships (Gusnita & Melinda, 2023; Janeczko et al., 2019; Lahad & van Hooff, 2023). This study, however, differs by concentrating specifically on the coping strategies used by victims of toxic relationships, without linking them directly to anxiety levels. Additionally, it broadens the scope to include both male and female early adults who have experienced or are currently navigating a toxic relationship. With a more specific focus, this study aims to provide new insights into coping mechanisms employed by victims of toxic relationships. One of the key objectives is to explore the role of social support in helping individuals manage the emotional and psychological stress they face (Saskia & Idris, 2023; Young & Huwae, 2022). Toxic relationships often leave a profound impact on the victim's well-being, both physically and psychologically. Coping strategies are essential tools that help individuals manage stress and maintain emotional balance in such situations (Hombing & Sipahutar, 2022; Suciati & Ramadhanty, 2023). Moreover, toxic relationships frequently disrupt the victim's social dynamics, leading to feelings of isolation from their social environment. This sense of isolation can exacerbate psychological distress, further complicating the victim's ability to cope with the situation (Azzahra & Suhadi, 2021; Sulastri et al., 2022). Understanding these coping strategies within the broader context of social support and psychological resilience is crucial for developing effective interventions for those experiencing toxic relationships.

Existing research on coping strategies for managing toxic relationships highlights various approaches, including emotion-focused strategies like journaling, self-reflection, and mindfulness, as well as problem-focused strategies such as seeking social support, establishing boundaries, and pursuing professional counseling. These studies underscore the importance of coping mechanisms in mitigating the negative psychological effects of toxic relationships, such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and emotional exhaustion. However, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these strategies are specifically

utilized by emerging adults, a demographic characterized by unique developmental challenges, such as identity exploration, emotional vulnerability, and reliance on peer relationships. While much of the existing literature focuses on broader or more generalized populations, fewer studies delve into the nuanced ways emerging adults navigate these dynamics, leaving unanswered questions about their distinct coping needs and resources during this transformative life stage.

Based on the explanation above, a deeper understanding of how individuals manage the stress arising from toxic relationships is needed. This study explores the victim's experience implementing coping strategies through a phenomenological approach. Based on the above background, this study was conducted to explore the application of coping strategies in early adults of toxic relationship victims. This study is expected to provide a better understanding of the experiences and needs of victims in dealing with the challenges of toxic relationships. This study aims to explore how emerging adults cope with the challenges of toxic relationships, focusing on the psychological and social mechanisms they employ to navigate these experiences. By using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research seeks to uncover the lived experiences of individuals aged 19–23, shedding light on the specific coping strategies they adopt, such as

emotion-focused practices and seeking social support. The study also intends to address gaps in existing literature by examining the unique vulnerabilities and developmental context of emerging adults. Ultimately, this research aims to provide insights that can inform targeted interventions, counseling programs, and culturally sensitive policies to promote resilience and healthier relationship dynamics during this critical life stage.

Methods and Materials

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method to explore the coping strategies used by emerging adults who have experienced toxic relationships. A qualitative approach was selected as it allows for in-depth exploration of participants' natural experiences and behaviors, while the phenomenological method provides a means to understand the lived experiences of individuals in relation to the phenomenon of toxic relationships. The research was conducted online through WhatsApp and Zoom, with the participants consisting of three early adults (aged 19) who had experienced toxic relationships, along with three informants—friends or close acquaintances of the participants. The subjects were chosen using purposive sampling based on specific criteria relevant to the research (Gunawan, 2013).

Table 1

Research Subject

Subject	Date	Observation Location
DA	April 02 2023	*Zoom Meeting*
JE	April 04 2023	Gazebo Fisip Unmul
RA	April 06 2023	Gazebo Fisip Unmul

The small sample size in this study is justified by the alignment with the phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the depth of understanding rather than the breadth of data. Phenomenology seeks to explore the lived experiences of individuals in a detailed and intimate manner, allowing for a deep exploration of their perceptions, emotions, and coping strategies. In this context, a small sample size—consisting of three participants—enables a more thorough and nuanced investigation into their unique experiences with toxic relationships. By focusing on a small number of

individuals, the study can gain rich, detailed insights that would be difficult to achieve with a larger, more generalized sample. This approach ensures that the research is centered on understanding the essence of the participants' experiences, rather than simply seeking to generalize findings across a broader population.

Data is collected through three main techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were made naturally without manipulation to understand the subject's behaviour in their natural context. Structured interviews are used to dig into in-

depth data from the subject and informants, with questions that have been designed according to the focus of the research. Documentation includes recording and recording data during the information collection process to complement the data obtained from observations and interviews. The collected data is then analysed through coding, categorisation, and interpretation. This analysis includes the transcription of interviews, thorough reading of data, identification of key themes, and preparation of conclusions based on in-depth reflection and comparison with relevant theories or literature.

Participants for this study were recruited through purposive sampling, using online platforms such as WhatsApp and social media networks to reach potential candidates who met the inclusion criteria. To ensure a diverse representation of emerging adults, recruitment posts were shared on a variety of groups and forums, including those related to university communities, mental health awareness, and peer support networks. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the recruitment process. Participants were provided with clear, informed consent documents detailing the purpose of the study, their rights to confidentiality, and their ability to withdraw at any time without consequence. To further ensure ethical integrity, all data were anonymized, and personal identifiers were removed. Participants were also informed that their responses would be kept confidential and only used for research purposes. Strategies to promote participant diversity included outreach to individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds and gender identities, with an emphasis on ensuring that various perspectives on toxic relationship experiences were captured. This approach aimed to enrich the findings by reflecting a broader range of experiences and coping strategies among emerging adults.

In this study, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were carefully defined to ensure the relevance and specificity of the participants' experiences. Inclusion criteria, included individuals who were aged 19–23, identifying as emerging adults, and who had experienced a toxic romantic relationship characterized by emotional abuse, manipulation, or power imbalances. Participants had to have been in the toxic relationship for a minimum duration of six months to ensure they had sufficient experience with the dynamics of the relationship. Additionally, the study included both male and female

participants from various socioeconomic backgrounds to capture diverse perspectives. Exclusion criteria, included individuals who had never experienced a toxic relationship, those who had been in relationships lasting less than six months, or those whose relationships involved only physical abuse without the psychological components of a toxic dynamic. Participants in non-romantic relationships (e.g., familial or platonic) were also excluded, as the study focused on romantic partnerships specifically. These criteria helped ensure the study's focus on the specific experiences and coping mechanisms of emerging adults in toxic romantic relationships.

The data taken in this study is derived from the aspects of Solferino and Tessitore's (2021) toxic relationship, which consists of emotional conditions, partner pressure, fighting power and emotional support (Solferino & Tessitore, 2021). The validity of the data in this study is maintained through triangulation, namely by matching data obtained from various sources, such as the results of interviews, observations, and documentation, to ensure the validity of the information. This triangulation aims to strengthen confidence in the research findings, making the results reliable and accountable.

In this study, data collected from interviews, observations, and documentation were compared and integrated through a triangulation process to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. The interviews provided in-depth personal accounts from the participants, offering insight into their coping strategies and emotional experiences within toxic relationships. These were cross-referenced with observations made during natural interactions, which allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the participants' behaviors and emotional responses in real-life contexts. Documentation, including field notes and recorded materials, supplemented the data by providing additional context or confirming details discussed in the interviews and observations. By triangulating these multiple data sources, the researcher was able to cross-check information, identify consistent patterns, and enhance the credibility of the results. This integration of diverse data sources also allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and coping mechanisms, helping to paint a

fuller picture of how individuals navigate the challenges posed by toxic relationships.

Findings and Results

It is important to understand the context behind the research regarding toxic relationships and coping strategies used by individuals who experience them. This research departs from the high number of reports of cases of emotionally detrimental interpersonal relationships, which have a significant impact on the mental health and quality of life of individuals. Through data collection, in-depth analysis, and theory-based approaches, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of toxic relationships, their impacts, and strategies to support individuals in dealing with them. The pressures associated with toxic relationships, such as "Couple Pressure" and "Fighting Power," significantly influence participants' decision-making, self-esteem, and emotional well-being. For instance, the constant strain of managing conflict or power imbalances can lead to a diminished sense of autonomy, where individuals feel trapped in the relationship and unable to make decisions that prioritize their well-being. This decision-making paralysis is often linked to feelings of low self-worth and

the belief that their needs are secondary to maintaining the relationship. According to attachment theory, individuals with insecure attachment styles may feel a heightened fear of abandonment, which can lead them to tolerate unhealthy relationship dynamics to preserve emotional closeness, even at the cost of their own psychological health. Furthermore, the constant emotional pressure can erode self-esteem, with individuals internalizing the negative treatment they receive and feeling undeserving of healthier, more supportive relationships. This can result in emotional distress, as seen in the emotional exhaustion or depression reported by participants, aligning with the stress-coping models proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which suggest that prolonged exposure to stressors without adequate coping resources can lead to burnout. Prior research has also shown that toxic relationships often lead to social withdrawal and increased anxiety, which are key indicators of declining emotional well-being (Suciati & Ramadhanty, 2023). Expanding on how these psychological mechanisms interplay in the context of toxic relationships offers valuable insights into the emotional toll these relationships take on individuals and can inform more effective interventions for improving self-esteem and decision-making in affected populations.

Table 2

Emotional state

Emotional State	Common (DA, JE, RA)	Special		
		DA	JE	RA
Emotional instability	The subject described the complex emotional dynamics resulting from the couple's behaviour in a toxic relationship. An inconsistent change in a partner's attitude—a sudden shift from affection to a rude attitude—triggers emotional instability in the individual, which is often characterised by extreme and erratic feelings of anxiety, anger, or sadness. This creates a sense of frustration and uncertainty that worsens the individual's emotional state in the relationship.	Subjects expressed frustration regarding the couple's inconsistent behaviour in giving consent.	Individuals often experience extreme emotional fluctuations, ranging from feelings of anxiety, anger, or sadness that are erratic due to the behaviour of a partner. This instability arises from the uncertainty of relationships and inconsistent treatment.	Emotional instability in individuals in toxic relationships often arises as a result of unpredictable changes in a partner's attitude, such as a sudden shift from affection to an abusive attitude.
Emotional dependence	Emotional dependence in toxic relationships is reflected when individuals feel incapable of making decisions without the consent of their partner, losing faith in one's ability to act independently.	Emotional dependence is seen when individuals feel incapable of making decisions without input or approval from their partner. This creates a destructive pattern of dependency, where individuals lose faith in their ability to act independently.	Individuals feel emotionally incapable of functioning without a partner, even if the relationship is toxic. The partner often reinforces these feelings through manipulation or empty promises, making it difficult for the individual to break the relationship.	Individuals who are trapped in toxic relationships often feel incapable of coping with life without a partner, even if the relationship is detrimental to them. This dependence is reinforced by the partner's manipulation, which instils a fear of leaving.

Table 2 highlights two significant emotional states—Emotional Instability and Emotional Dependence—experienced by individuals in toxic relationships, as described by the three subjects (DA, JE, and RA). Emotional instability arises from the unpredictable behavior of a partner, with sudden shifts from affection to rudeness causing anxiety, anger, and sadness, leading to confusion and frustration. All subjects described how these emotional fluctuations contributed to a sense of uncertainty within the relationship, particularly DA and JE, who expressed frustration over their partner's

inconsistent behavior. Emotional dependence, on the other hand, manifests when individuals feel unable to make decisions without their partner's approval. This dependency is reinforced by manipulation, as seen in all subjects, where their partners' controlling behaviors made them feel incapable of functioning independently, even in a toxic environment. Such emotional dynamics trap individuals in unhealthy relationships, making it difficult for them to break free and regain their autonomy, further exacerbating their psychological distress.

Table 3

Couple Pressure

Couple Pressure	Common (DA, JE, RA)	Special DA	JE	RA
Pressure to fit in	Pressure to fit in a toxic relationship occurs when individuals feel they have to change their behaviours, habits, or values in order to meet their partner's expectations. These changes often conflict with the individual's true identity, leading to a loss of personal freedom and triggering emotional stress.	Pressure to fit in occurs when individuals feel compelled to change their behaviours, habits, or values to meet their partner's expectations. These changes often conflict with the individual's true identity, resulting in distress and loss of personal freedom.	Individuals often feel pressured to change their behaviours, habits, or values to meet their partner's expectations. This pressure makes individuals lose the freedom to be themselves and triggers emotional stress.	Couples pressure individuals to change themselves to fit their standards, making them feel like they are losing their identity. This pressure creates discomfort and a sense of insecurity.
Control and Domination	Control and dominance in toxic relationships occur when a partner controls aspects of an individual's life, such as associations, activities, or personal decisions, creating a detrimental dependency. Individuals feel isolated and trapped in unequal relationships, where control is often exercised with threats or emotional manipulation that deprives individuals of autonomy and freedom in their daily lives.	Control and dominance are seen in relationship patterns where couples try to control aspects of an individual's life, such as associations, activities, or personal decisions. This creates dependency and often makes individuals feel trapped in unequal relationships.	Individuals assess the actions of couples who regulate or control an individual's decisions, activities, and social relationships. This behaviour often makes individuals feel trapped and lose autonomy in their daily lives.	Individuals get excessive control, such as managing their time, activities, and social relationships, making them feel isolated. This dominance is often carried out through threats or emotional manipulation.

Table 3 outlines the concept of "Couple Pressure," distinguishing between common and special pressures experienced in toxic relationships. "Pressure to fit in" refers to the emotional strain individuals face when they feel compelled to change their behaviors, habits, or values to meet their partner's expectations, leading to a loss of personal identity and freedom. This pressure, common to all individuals (DA, JE, RA), causes distress and emotional stress. The "Control and Domination"

section highlights how one partner may try to control aspects of the other's life, including their social relationships, activities, and personal decisions. This control often results in a sense of isolation, dependency, and emotional manipulation, depriving individuals of autonomy. The table illustrates how these pressures manifest in toxic relationships, leading to discomfort, insecurity, and a loss of individuality.

Table 4

Fighting power

Fighting power	Common	Special

	(DA, JE, RA)	DA	JE	RA
Attempts to stay in a relationship	Fighting power in toxic relationships can be seen in the individual's efforts to maintain the relationship despite feeling trapped in injustice or emotional distress. They hope their partner will change or things will improve over time, although they often sacrifice personal happiness and feel emotionally exhausted in dealing with the relationship dynamics.	Fighting power in toxic relationships is often reflected in an individual's efforts to survive despite experiencing injustice or emotional distress. They feel trapped in the dynamics of the relationship, in the hope that the couple will change or things will improve over time.	Individuals who feel toxic relationships often try to maintain relationships at the expense of personal happiness. Individuals try to overcome conflict and repair relationships despite feeling emotionally exhausted.	Individuals go out of their way to maintain a relationship in the hope that the partner will change or the relationship can improve, despite often feeling emotionally exhausted. This effort is often triggered by love or fear of losing a partner.
Finding a way out	The struggle to find a way out of a toxic relationship arises when the individual begins to realise the toxicity in the relationship but feels hampered by fear of consequences, guilt, or emotional dependence on the partner.	Individuals struggle to get out of toxic relationships that often feel hampered by factors of fear of consequences, guilt, or intense emotional dependence on a partner.	As awareness of relationship toxicity increases, individuals begin to look for ways to get out despite often feeling scared or hesitant. This process requires excellent courage because of the many emotional and practical obstacles that must be faced.	Awareness of relationship toxicity encourages individuals to look for ways out despite often facing obstacles such as fear or lack of support. This step requires great courage and usually begins with prioritising yourself.

Table 4 discusses the concept of "Fighting Power" in toxic relationships, highlighting common and special pressures individuals face. The "Attempts to stay in a relationship" column reflects individuals' efforts to maintain a relationship despite emotional distress or feeling trapped in injustice. They hope for change or improvement over time, often sacrificing their personal happiness and facing emotional exhaustion. The "Finding a way out" column addresses the struggle individuals experience when they begin to recognize the toxicity of the relationship but feel hindered by fear of consequences, guilt, or emotional dependency on their partner. This realization sparks the desire to find an escape route, but individuals often face emotional and practical obstacles, requiring great courage to prioritize their well-being and seek a healthier path.

Table 5

Emotional support

Emotional support	Common (DA, JE, RA)	Special DA	JE	RA
Emotional support from friends and family	Emotional support from friends and family plays an important role in helping individuals cope with toxic relationships. This support provides a sense of security and encouragement to take healthier steps, such as prioritising well-being.	Individuals find strength through the support of friends and family who encourage them to reason and prioritise self-well-being. This support helps individuals feel accepted and cared for	Subjects felt friends and family were often sources of emotional support that helped individuals cope with stress. This support can be through listening to complaints, providing advice, or simply ensuring the individual does not feel alone.	Support from friends and family is a significant booster for individuals to cope with the stress of toxic relationships. This support provides a sense of security and encouragement to take healthier steps.
Manipulative support	Emotional support in toxic relationships is often accompanied by ulterior motives that aim to maintain control over the individual. Couples may seem caring and emotionally attentive, but behind that is an attempt to make the individual feel dependent, thus strengthening control in the relationship.	A partner's emotional support often has ulterior motives, such as maintaining control or making the individual feel dependent.	Couples in toxic relationships sometimes provide emotional support that is manipulative; that is, they seem to care but aim to maintain control. This often leaves individuals confused between feeling loved or manipulated.	Toxic couples often provide false emotional support aimed at maintaining control over the individual.

Table 5 examines the role of "Emotional Support" in toxic relationships, categorizing both common and special types of support. "Emotional support from friends and family" highlights the importance of external support in helping individuals cope with the challenges of toxic relationships. This support offers a sense of security and encouragement, enabling individuals to prioritize their well-being and take healthier steps.

Friends and family help by providing emotional comfort, listening to concerns, offering advice, and ensuring the individual feels supported. In contrast, "Manipulative support" refers to emotional support in toxic relationships that is given with hidden motives, such as controlling or making the individual feel dependent. While it may appear caring, this support aims to strengthen control over the individual, leaving them

confused about whether they are genuinely loved or being manipulated.

Emotional State

Emotional instability and dependence are often hallmarks of toxic relationships that negatively impact the psychological well-being of individuals. Emotional instability is characterised by extreme fluctuations in emotions, such as feelings of anxiety, anger, or sadness, triggered by inconsistent partner behaviour. Meanwhile, emotional dependence reflects the individual's inability to make decisions or act independently without input from the partner, often reinforced by the partner's manipulation that creates a fear of leaving the relationship. The combination of these two dynamics forms a pattern of relationships that are difficult to end, even if they are detrimental. The following interview results evidence this:

Well, I feel frustrated because my partner is often inconsistent in giving consent. In addition, I felt like I could not make decisions without him, and I lost self-confidence. (W1, DA, 02-04-23, B209-211).

My feelings were always uncertain—sometimes anxious, sometimes angry, even very sad. I also feel like I cannot live without my partner, even though the relationship is unhealthy. He always said things that made me feel incapable of leaving. (W1, JE, 04-04-23, B425-433).

My partner's attitude often changes from affectionate to rude. This made me emotionally unstable. On the other hand, I also feel very dependent on him, as if I am incapable of facing the outside world without him, even though this relationship hurts me more (W1, RA, 06-04-2023, B122-131).

Emotional instability and dependence in toxic relationships significantly impact an individual's mental health, often leading to heightened anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional distress. Attachment theory helps explain how early relationships shape attachment styles, which influence how individuals cope with adult relationships. Those with anxious or avoidant attachment styles are more susceptible to experiencing emotional instability in toxic relationships. Anxiously attached individuals may feel intense fear of abandonment, leading them to cling to the relationship despite harmful dynamics, while avoidantly attached individuals may suppress their emotions, resulting in emotional numbness. These attachment styles contribute to emotional dependence, where individuals rely on their partners for validation,

even if it means sacrificing their well-being. As the toxic relationship progresses, emotional instability often intensifies, evolving into a cycle of emotional highs and lows. This emotional rollercoaster may lead to maladaptive coping strategies, such as denial, self-blame, or rumination. Initially, individuals may avoid confronting the toxicity in the relationship, hoping for change. Over time, however, they may begin seeking external support from friends or family. Despite this, emotional dependence can delay the decision to leave, as fear of consequences or guilt holds them back. The process of breaking free from the toxic relationship is complex and requires navigating stages of emotional growth and change. Support systems and therapeutic interventions are crucial for helping individuals regain autonomy and heal from the psychological effects of toxic relationships.

Couple Pressure

Toxic relationships are often characterised by pressure to fit in and excessive control exercised by the partner. Pressure to fit in occurs when individuals feel compelled to change their behaviours, habits, or values to meet their partner's expectations. This often causes individuals to lose the freedom to be themselves, triggers emotional stress, and creates deep discomfort. Meanwhile, control and dominance are shown through the couple's efforts to control various aspects of an individual's life, such as activities, social relationships, or personal decisions. This pattern causes individuals to lose autonomy and feel trapped, even isolated, with dominance often reinforced through threats or emotional manipulation.

I felt forced to change my behaviour and habits to meet my partner's expectations. It feels like I have lost my identity. My partner always tries to control my activities and decisions, even those I hang out with. I feel I have no freedom" (W1, DA, 02-04-23, B146-151).

He regulates almost everything in my life—from my time who my friends are, to my personal decisions. I felt utterly trapped. I often feel pressured to change to fit my partner's wishes, which is stressful. I could not be myself anymore. (W1, JE, 04-04-23, B117-123).

My partner controls every aspect of my life, and it makes me feel isolated. Sometimes, he uses threats or manipulation to get what he wants. My partner demanded that I be who he wanted me to be, making me

uncomfortable. I feel like I am losing my identity and confidence (W1, RA, 04-04-23, B10-113)

Control and dominance in toxic relationships often manifest through various mechanisms such as emotional manipulation, isolation, and the restriction of personal freedom. One common form of control is gaslighting, where the dominant partner distorts reality to make the other feel confused, insecure, or guilty. This creates a power imbalance, making the controlled partner question their perception and actions. Another mechanism is emotional blackmail, where a partner uses threats or guilt to enforce compliance with their desires. These mechanisms often result in the controlled individual feeling trapped, with their autonomy and sense of self eroding over time. Resistance to these forms of control can be challenging, as it often involves overcoming deep emotional dependency and fear of retaliation. However, individuals may attempt to resist by seeking support from friends, family, or therapy, reclaiming their autonomy and asserting boundaries.

Societal and gender norms can both exacerbate and mitigate the pressures of control and dominance in relationships. In many cultures, traditional gender roles place women in subordinate positions within relationships, reinforcing the power dynamics that allow control and dominance to thrive. These norms often teach women to prioritize their partner's needs over their own, perpetuating emotional dependence and vulnerability to manipulation. On the other hand, societal shifts toward gender equality and empowerment can challenge these norms, providing individuals with the tools and support to resist control. However, even in more egalitarian societies, the pressure to conform to gender expectations can still influence how control is enacted, with societal judgments often complicating the process of seeking help or leaving a toxic relationship. Ultimately, while gender norms can exacerbate the dynamics of control, awareness and societal change can offer pathways to resistance and empowerment.

Fighting Power

Individuals are often caught between trying to survive, hoping their partner will change, and the urge to find a way out. Although maintaining a relationship often comes at the expense of personal happiness, love, emotional dependence, or fear of consequences, it is difficult for individuals to take the step to leave. Finding a way out requires excellent courage because of the

many emotional and practical obstacles that must be faced. This is proven in the following interview results:

I continued hoping the couple would change despite feeling it was unfair. I wanted to get out, but fear and dependence made me doubt (W1, DA, 02-04-23, B781-789).

I sacrificed my happiness to repair this relationship, even though I often felt emotionally exhausted. I began to realise this relationship was unhealthy, but there were many obstacles I had to face (W1, JE, 04-04-23, B700-708).

I persevered out of love and was afraid of losing him, even though I felt exhausted. I wanted to prioritise myself and get out, but it took much courage to do so (W1, RA, 06-04-23, B470-484)

Participants in toxic relationships often experience profound internal conflict when deciding whether to stay or leave, torn between emotional attachment, self-preservation, and fear of the unknown. The fear of loneliness or the possibility of worsening the situation can make leaving seem daunting, while guilt may stem from concerns about abandoning a partner or failing to meet societal expectations of loyalty. Hope also plays a significant role, as individuals may believe that things will improve over time or that their partner will change, despite repeated emotional distress. This hope can be reinforced by intermittent moments of affection or apology from the partner, leading to confusion and the desire to stay. As a result, fear, guilt, and hope create a cycle that traps individuals in toxic relationships, delaying their decision to leave and making it difficult to prioritize their own well-being. These emotional struggles, often rooted in deep attachment and a desire for validation, perpetuate the cycle of staying in an unhealthy relationship despite the detrimental effects on their mental and emotional health.

Social Support

Emotional support plays an important role in the dynamics of toxic relationships. Friends and family are often a source of strength for individuals to deal with pressure, provide a sense of security, and encourage them to prioritise their well-being. In contrast, couples in toxic relationships often provide manipulative support aimed at maintaining control, leaving individuals confused between love and manipulation. These different types of support greatly influence the

individual's decision to undergo or leave a toxic relationship.

My friends and family always encouraged me to reason and prioritise myself. They made me feel welcome. My partner seems supportive, but there is often an ulterior motive to keep me dependent on him (W1, DA, 02-04-23, B241-246).

They listened to my complaints, advised me, and ensured I did not feel alone under pressure. He often looks caring, but this is how he maintains control over me (W1, JE, 04-04-23, B444-452).

Their support made me feel safe and gave me the strength to take healthier steps. His support felt fake, as his goal was to control me further (W1, RA, 06-04-23, B573-583).

Genuine support involves encouragement, empathy, and validation from friends, family, or peers, helping individuals navigate toxic relationships by reinforcing their self-worth and empowering them to make healthier choices. It promotes well-being by fostering a sense of safety and autonomy, encouraging individuals to prioritize their needs and well-being. In contrast, manipulative support may appear caring on the surface but is often driven by ulterior motives, such as controlling the individual's decisions or reinforcing dependency on the toxic partner. This type of support can exacerbate emotional instability by making the individual feel obligated to stay in the relationship, leading to confusion about their feelings and further entrenching them in unhealthy dynamics. Participants' access to strong social support systems is crucial in determining their ability to cope or leave the relationship. When individuals have a reliable network of friends, family, or professionals offering genuine support, they are more likely to recognize the toxicity of the relationship and feel empowered to seek help or leave. However, those lacking such support may struggle to break free, as they may feel isolated or overwhelmed, with manipulative support from the partner further complicating their decision-making process.

Figure 1

Findings of the Research Results
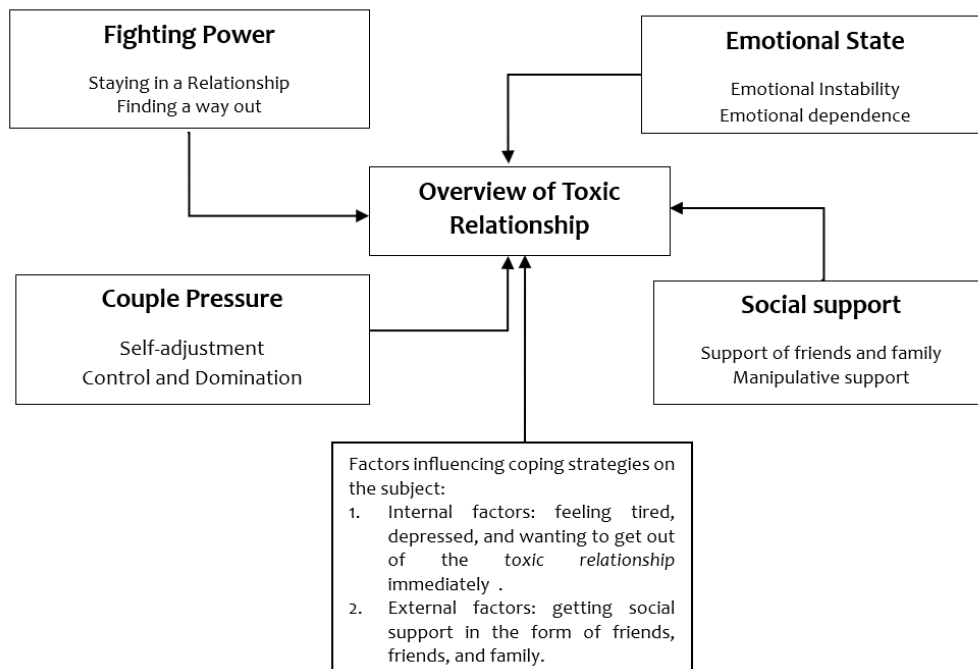
Discussion and Conclusion

Emotional instability is a key indicator of a toxic relationship, significantly impacting an individual's

psychological well-being. In such relationships, a person often experiences extreme emotional fluctuations—moments of happiness that quickly shift to anxiety, anger, or deep sadness. These mood swings are typically caused by inconsistent and manipulative behavior from the partner, which leaves the individual feeling confused, helpless, and trapped in a cycle of uncontrolled emotions. Over time, this instability can distort the individual's self-perception, causing feelings of inadequacy and persistent guilt, often linked to the conflicts within the relationship. The constant emotional upheaval exacerbates the psychological distress, making it challenging for the person to break free from the toxic dynamics (Janeczko et al., 2019; Lahad & van Hooff, 2023; Saskia & Idris, 2023).

Emotional dependence is a defining characteristic of toxic relationships, where individuals feel incapable of making decisions or taking action without their partner's approval. This dependency is often exacerbated by manipulative tactics, creating a sense of fear about the consequences if the relationship ends. Toxic partners may use threats of abandonment or manipulate guilt by blaming the individual for the relationship's issues. This results in a power imbalance, where one partner holds complete control, leaving the other without autonomy. The manipulation, including tactics like gaslighting, makes it difficult for the individual to recognize the harmful dynamics at play, as they are constantly hoping for positive change (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Daeli & Santosa, 2024; Gusnita & Melinda, 2023; Sulastri et al., 2022).

The pressure to conform is another key element of toxic relationships, where individuals are often coerced into changing their behaviors, values, or habits to meet their partner's expectations. This pressure leads to internal conflicts, as individuals sacrifice their own identity to maintain the relationship, which ultimately erodes their self-esteem. Over time, they become increasingly reliant on their partner for validation, reinforcing their emotional dependence. Additionally, toxic relationships are marked by patterns of over-control, where the partner regulates various aspects of the individual's life, from social interactions to personal decisions. This control is often masked as concern, but its true intent is to assert dominance. When individuals attempt to resist or set boundaries, toxic partners may respond with threats, anger, or emotional violence,

further entrenching the sense of being trapped (Aquino et al., 2024; Gray, 2021; Schumm, 2004; Soave et al., 2015).

Dominance in toxic relationships is often sustained through threats, emotional manipulation, guilt, fear, and social isolation, which work to ensure the individual's continued dependence on the toxic partner. When one partner attempts to control conversations through disparagement or manipulation, it creates a sense of injustice and distorts communication, which should ideally foster mutual understanding. Instead, communication becomes a tool to escalate conflicts, prolong emotional tension, and solidify the power imbalance. This toxic dynamic undermines the potential for healthy dialogue, leaving the individual feeling trapped and powerless (Blum, 2017; Lubkin & Torres, 2017). Individuals often make significant efforts to maintain toxic relationships, sacrificing their personal happiness in the hope that their partner will change or that things will improve over time. These hopes are typically fueled by brief, positive moments that create the illusion of potential for improvement, but in reality, these expectations are often unrealistic and only serve to prolong the cycle of emotional distress. One of the most significant barriers to leaving a toxic relationship is the fear of loneliness. Many individuals fear losing emotional support or facing life alone, a fear that toxic partners actively exploit by reinforcing the belief that the individual cannot survive without them. This fear becomes a major obstacle, preventing them from breaking free and continuing the cycle of emotional dependence (Salmatuanisa et al., 2024; Smith & Meyfroidt, 2018; Suciati & Ramadhanty, 2023; Sulastri et al., 2022).

In toxic relationships, individuals often sacrifice their personal happiness in an effort to prioritize the needs of their partner, leading to an imbalanced dynamic where they give more than they receive. Over time, this pattern can result in emotional exhaustion, leaving individuals feeling drained, empty, and disoriented. The continuous emotional depletion makes it increasingly difficult for them to recognize their own needs or break free from the toxic cycle (Hombing & Sipahutar, 2022). Support systems, including friends and family, are vital in helping individuals cope with toxic relationships by offering new perspectives, emotional validation, and a safe space for individuals to express their feelings. These systems help individuals recognize the manipulation occurring within the relationship, providing them with the confidence to

contemplate leaving. Toxic partners often try to isolate individuals from their support networks by spreading negative narratives or creating conflicts with friends and family. Despite these efforts, the consistent emotional encouragement from supportive individuals becomes a stabilizing force, helping the individual rebuild confidence and feel empowered to take action (Anugrah et al., 2024; Handayani et al., 2024; Herdiani & Hidayat, 2023; Young & Huwae, 2022; Zikri et al., 2024). Furthermore, self-awareness is a crucial step in recognizing and breaking free from toxic relationships. By understanding that they deserve healthier relationships based on mutual respect, individuals can begin to distance themselves from harmful dynamics and rebuild their sense of self-worth (Jaya et al., 2024; Tierney & Fox, 2011). Manipulative partners often create the illusion that toxic relationships are healthy by offering sporadic affection or expressing regret after conflicts, which further traps individuals in a cycle of hope for change, despite the continuing toxicity (Praptiningsih et al., 2024; Rifayanti et al., 2022).

Education about toxic relationships plays a crucial role in helping individuals recognize early signs of manipulation, emotional instability, and control patterns. By understanding these dynamics, individuals are better equipped to make informed decisions and avoid entering or staying in harmful relationships. This awareness can prevent feelings of self-doubt, unworthiness, and the erosion of self-confidence that often accompany toxic relationships. With the right education, individuals can spot toxic behaviors early, leading to healthier relationship choices in the future (Carballido et al., 2022; Forth et al., 2022; Solferino & Tessitore, 2021). Therapy or counseling is an effective support system for individuals seeking to escape toxic relationships. Professional help provides individuals with the opportunity to explore their emotions, understand their past experiences, and develop healthy coping strategies. Therapy also plays a critical role in rebuilding the self-confidence that is often eroded in toxic environments (Herdiani & Hidayat, 2023; Parinsi & Huwae, 2022). Recovery from toxic relationships is a long and challenging process, filled with emotional and practical obstacles such as fear, doubt, and a lack of support. With a strong support system and determination, individuals can overcome these challenges and start rebuilding their lives. This recovery

period also provides an opportunity for self-discovery and alignment with one's personal values (Azzahra & Suhadi, 2021; Daeli & Santosa, 2024). Intervention theories emphasize the importance of external factors, such as social support from friends, family, and professionals, in empowering individuals to break free from destructive relationships. When given the space and support to recognize the dangers in their relationships, individuals can gain the strength to change their circumstances (Gusnita & Melinda, 2023; Lahad & van Hooff, 2023). However, significant changes in toxic relationships take time, as power dynamics and destructive behaviors don't change overnight. Exiting a toxic relationship requires personal growth, a recognition of one's strengths, and the development of strategies for handling future conflicts (Gusnita & Melinda, 2023; Saskia & Idris, 2023).

The findings of this study can provide valuable insights for designing targeted interventions to support individuals in toxic relationships. For instance, workshops and counseling methods could be tailored to raise awareness about unhealthy relationship dynamics, emotional manipulation, and the importance of setting boundaries. These programs could also offer practical tools to help individuals recognize early signs of toxic behavior and build self-confidence. Community support programs, such as peer groups or helplines, could provide a safe space for individuals to share their experiences, gain emotional support, and receive guidance on how to safely navigate leaving harmful relationships. By addressing the specific emotional and psychological challenges identified in this study, these interventions can empower individuals to make healthier relationship choices and improve their overall well-being.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings, as it may not fully represent the broader population affected by toxic relationships. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for biases, such as social desirability bias or inaccurate recall, which could affect the reliability of the responses. Furthermore, the lack of male participants in this study limits the understanding of toxic relationships from a male perspective, potentially overlooking unique dynamics and experiences specific to men. These limitations suggest

that future research should aim for larger, more diverse samples, and consider the inclusion of male participants to provide a more comprehensive view of toxic relationships.

Toxic relationships are profoundly shaped by unbalanced power dynamics, emotional manipulation, and unhealthy dependence, which can result in significant psychological consequences for the individuals involved. Victims of such relationships often find themselves trapped, as the constant cycle of emotional distress, control, and fear leaves them feeling isolated and powerless. This emotional instability and dependency not only erode the victim's sense of self-worth but also hinder their ability to break free from the relationship. However, external factors, particularly social support networks and the ability to recognize harmful patterns, can serve as critical interventions in disrupting this cycle. Support from friends, family, or even professional counseling can empower individuals to regain control over their lives and make healthier decisions. Moreover, the recognition of toxic relationship patterns and understanding the psychological mechanisms at play are crucial first steps toward recovery. Although victims may be aware, on some level, of the unhealthy dynamics, it often takes outside perspectives or interventions to help them see the full scope of the damage and motivate change. Future research could play a pivotal role in further exploring the effectiveness of psychological interventions or therapies designed to assist individuals in leaving toxic relationships. Additionally, investigating the implementation of prevention programs to educate individuals about the early signs of toxic relationships could significantly reduce the negative impact such relationships have on mental health and well-being.

The implications of this research extend far beyond individual experiences, offering valuable insights into how educational programs and social policies can be developed to better support those in at-risk relationships. Such programs could focus on building resilience, enhancing emotional intelligence, and offering resources for those experiencing or at risk of entering toxic relationships. Furthermore, the research could inform professionals, such as counselors, social workers, and healthcare providers, about the nuances of toxic relationships, equipping them with the tools to recognize, address, and support individuals trapped in

such harmful cycles. In conclusion, while toxic relationships present substantial challenges, with the right support and interventions, it is possible for individuals to break free and rebuild healthier, more fulfilling lives.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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