

# Emotional Intelligence; A Key Tool in Toxic Relationships Among the Youth in Higher Learning Institutions

THEME: MENTAL HEALTH AND EMERGING ISSUES.

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**Abstract:** A toxic relationship is an unhealthy relationship where one or both individuals behave in ways that are controlling, manipulative, or abusive. From previous findings, researchers have not been able to establish effective and appropriate interventions for toxic relationships. The main objective of this study is to find out how a youth can utilize emotional intelligence in maintain healthy relationships; also examine how a youth can apply emotional intelligence in recognizing and get out of toxic relationships unharmed physically and psychologically. The study will utilize Attachment theory to explain why individuals stay in harmful relationships. The study will be based on concurrent research design. It will be a mixed approach that will utilize both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The target population include students from first year to fifth year in the University of Eldoret. Sampling techniques will be stratification followed by simple random sampling. A total of 200 students will be sampled to take part in the study. Questionnaires, focus group discussions and interview schedules will be used in data collection. Secondary data will be obtained from student counsellors' records. Data will be analyzed thematically and use of descriptive statistics and then presented in frequency tables. Toxic relationships can be due to emotional intensity, peer pressure, among others. The study will highlight possible interventions that can be provided to the victims of toxic relationships to prevent future occurrences. The study advocate that if Emotional Intelligence is used well, it can prevent harmful effects to victims of toxic relationships.

**KEY WORDS:** Emotional intelligence, Toxic relationship, Higher learning institutions, Youth.

## I. INTRODUCTION

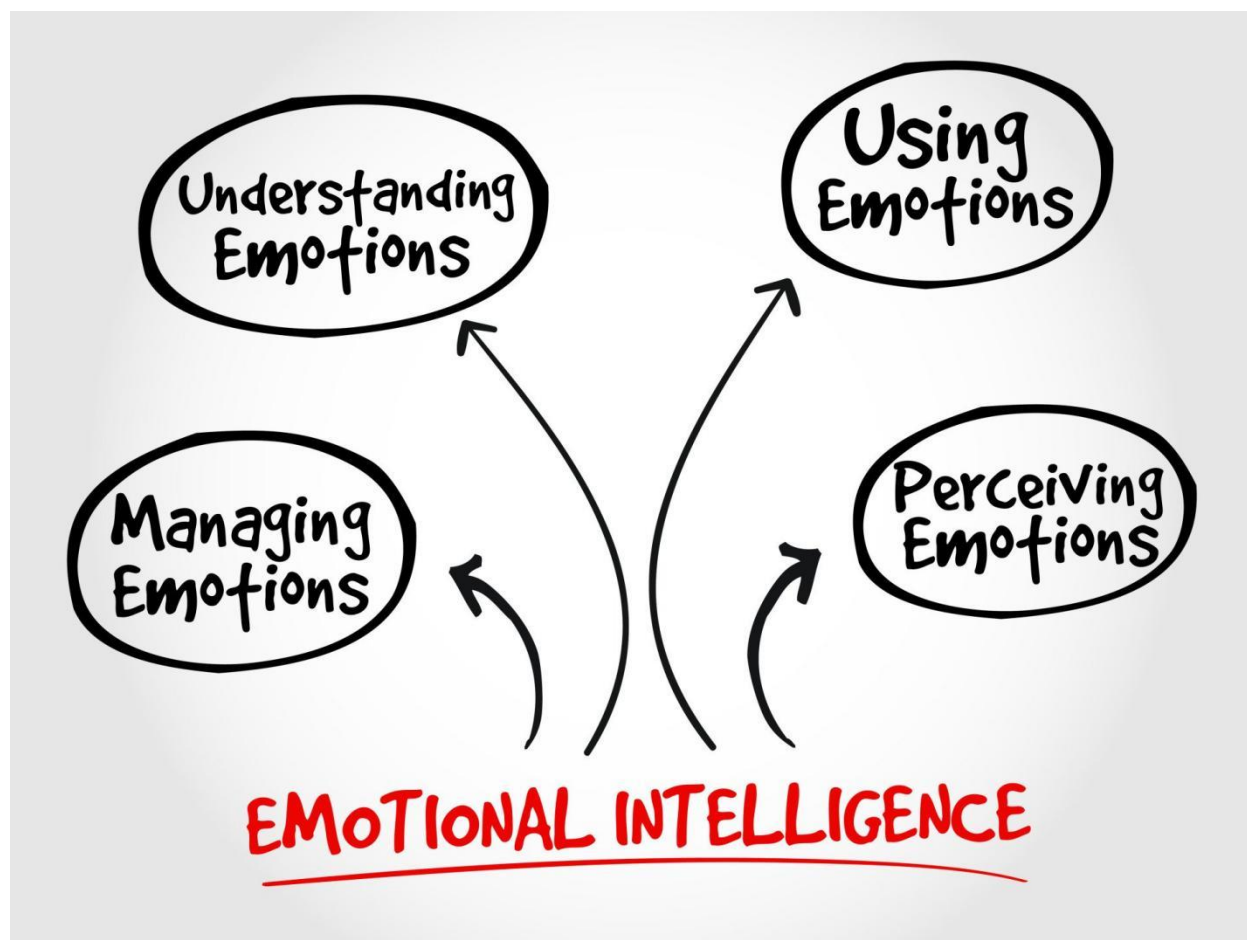
A "toxic relationship" refers to an unhealthy relationship where one or both partners exhibit manipulative, controlling, or abusive behaviors, causing significant emotional distress and negativity for those involved; essentially, a relationship that is harmful to one's mental well-being characterized by consistent disrespect, criticism, or power imbalance (Juneja, 2022). Toxic relationships can be experienced between spouses, friends, colleagues, and even family members (Ondicho, 2013). Relationships like this are very vulnerable to making the sufferer unproductive, the occurrence of mental disorders that can trigger an emotional occurrence that leads to violence (Julianto *et al.*, 2020). This unhealthy form of relationship is indeed quite difficult for us to avoid. Many people stay in toxic relationships due to several reasons such as fear of being alone, low self-esteem, emotional dependence, hope of change, guilt and obligation, fear of retaliation, financial dependence and attachment styles (Kalyani, 2023).

Many make toxic relationships as an outlet for emotions that are not channeled properly or the existence of psychic trauma that encourages a person to commit acts of retaliation (Nihaya *et al.*, 2022). An example that often occurs is in a courtship relationship, where there is a process of interaction between two individuals who are in the phase of finding the suitability of fellow individuals with the aim of building each other and supporting each other to create a sense of security, but it is possible that a conflict will arise (Adams, 2012). Toxic relationships yield a bad impact on anyone who experiences it. This condition will hurt victims and make their psychological health decrease. In line with research that has been carried out by Nihaya *et al.* (2022) which shows that toxic relationships are unhealthy relationships that trigger sadness and tension and can trigger new dilemmas and diseases. These unhealthy relationships can cause feelings of insecurity, feelings of jealousy, feelings of wanting to win by yourself, like to lie, demeaning partners, and uttering fewer positive comments which are the characteristics of toxic relationships (Effendy, 2021).

The appearance of continuous conflicts can lead to the appearance of violence committed by one of the parties to his partner (Wishesha & Suprapti, 2014). Violence in dating is an example of a toxic relationship that is included in personal violence. There are three (3) levels of violence in dating, the first is verbal and emotional abuse which is the most common type of relationship violence. At first, the victim would not believe that he had been the victim of an assault because there was no physical evidence. The second is sexual violence of a physically violent nature, but the situation of the perpetrator does not seem focused on dominating the victim, despite all the persuasions, demands of love, and promises. Finally, it is physical violence in the form of punches, slaps, kicks, and encouragement (Francis & Carter, 2022). Generally, people with a history of violence in the family, physical conflicts, and torture are perpetrators and victims of violence in dating (Astari & Santosa, 2019). Toxic relationships can be avoided by showing how to develop positive interactions and communication. Interpersonal contact such as joking correctly, understanding each other, and opening pleasant conversations and greetings can reduce the trigger elements for the emergence of toxic relationships (Praptiningsih & Putra, 2021).

Toxic relationships, whether romantic or platonic, can negatively impact students' well-being and academic performance in higher education, leading to mental health issues, relationship difficulties, academic failure and even death. Recognizing and addressing this dysfunctional relationship is caused when either of the partner has a toxic behavior, unhealthy thoughts, and toxic coping mechanisms. Such behavior of one of the partners disrupts the entire relationship. In higher learning institutions, toxic relationships can negatively impact student's well-being and academic performance, while emotional intelligence (EI) is crucial for navigating these challenges and fostering positive interactions.

Emotional intelligence (EI), also known as emotional quotient (EQ), refers to the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and use emotions effectively in oneself and others, impacting interpersonal relationships, communication, and overall well-being (Brackett *et al.*, 2011).



The way to understand emotions is through nonverbal signals such as body language and facial expressions. It is imperative to observe the body language in different situations (Goleman, 2015). Martha Graham the US dance choreographer (1894- 1991) quotes that “The body says what words cannot”. The body language may portray the attitude of an individual.

There is need to design and develop emotional intelligence curriculum for students in higher education. Emotional intelligence curriculum may be therapeutic in providing skills to manage high emotions faced by youth on daily basis (Downey, et. al 2008). For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines 'youth' as persons aged between 15 and 24. However, this definition is not universal. In Kenya, according to Article 260 of the Constitution, "youth" refers to individuals aged between 18 and 34 years. It defines youth as those who have attained the age of 18 years but have not attained the age of 35 years. (The Kenyan Constitution of 2010).

The term “institution of higher learning” means a college, university, or similar institution, including a technical or business school, offering postsecondary level academic instruction that leads to an associate or higher degree if the school is empowered by the appropriate State education authority. It's through university study that young people can develop the knowledge, skills, ideas and attitudes that will enable them to contribute to their societies and economies, and through which the state ensures it has a pipeline of professionals, able to serve the needs of business and of the public sector.

As the experience of being young can vary substantially across the world, between countries and regions, we consider 'youth' as a flexible category. Youth in higher institutions of learning are emotionally challenged with drug abuse, family abuse, sexual abuse and relationship problems and other challenges. This curriculum will assist students to boost their own emotional intelligence by learning how to cope with stresses.

## II. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study:

1. To find out how a youth can utilize Emotional Intelligence in maintaining healthy relationships
2. Examine how a youth can apply Emotional Intelligence in recognizing toxic relationships, get out of toxic relationships without both physical and psychological harm

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the context of toxic relationships, Attachment Theory can help explain why individuals may stay in harmful situations. If someone has experienced inconsistent or negative attachments in childhood, they may be more likely to seek out similar relationships in adulthood, even if they are unhealthy (Cyndly & Crystal,2024).

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby in the 1950s, explores the bond between infants and their primary caregivers and how this bond impacts relationships throughout life. It posits that early childhood experiences with caregivers shape our relationship styles, can help explain why individuals remain in toxic relationships, as insecure attachment styles (anxious or avoidant) can lead to difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy relationships. There are four types of attachment as follows:

**i). Secure Attachment:**This type of attachment posits that, if a child experiences consistent and responsive care-giving, they develop a secure attachment style, allowing them to form healthy, trusting relationships.

**ii). Insecure Attachment:**This consists of inconsistent or neglectful care-giving can lead to insecure attachment styles, such as anxious or avoidant.

**iii). Anxious Attachment:** Individuals with anxious attachment styles crave closeness and reassurance, often worrying about abandonment and seeking constant validation.

**iv). Avoidant Attachment:** Individuals with avoidant attachment styles tend to suppress their emotional needs and avoid intimacy, fearing vulnerability and rejection.

In the context of insecure attachment in connection with toxic relationships, people with anxious attachment styles may tolerate mistreatment in a relationship, hoping to gain their partner's love and validation, and may become overly clingy or needy. On the other hand, Individuals with avoidant attachment styles may distance themselves emotionally, avoiding conflict and intimacy, and may be drawn to partners who offer them a sense of independence and control.

## IV. METHODOLOGY

The study will utilize Attachment theory to explain why individuals stay in harmful relationship. The study will be based on concurrent research design. It will be a mixed approach that will utilize both quantitative and qualitative data collection and data analysis. With qualitative research methods, interpretive and subjective approaches will be utilized. The target population of approximately 14000 include students from first year to fifth year in the University of Eldoret. Sampling techniques will be stratification followed by simple random sampling. A total of 200 students will be sampled to take part in the study. The researchers can make use of primary and secondary data, whereby the primary data can be obtained through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews, and observations, Questionnaires. Secondary data will be obtained from student counsellors' records, bearing individuals who have experienced unhealthy relationships, with parents (in toxic parenting), violent lovers (verbal and/or physical violence).

Further for the secondary data, the researchers can source literature from journals, e-books/books, and documents from counsellor. Data will be analyzed thematically and use of descriptive statistics and inferential statistics, and then presented in frequency tables.

## V. TECHNIQUES OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE TO BREAK UNHEALTHY PATTERNS

1. Need to be active in a relationship. The more that an individual is realistic about relationships, the more he/she can be active and build the relationships that he/she wants
2. Create time to connect and share experiences. Consciously try to behave and listen differently and engage with your partner, share some of the things that are going on in your life.
3. Take a step back and examine your relationship objectively. Watch your emotions when interacting with your partner. Question how you think about things and how that is affecting your life and your happiness. Be more observant in each interaction.
4. Learn to have better arguments and avoid conflicts, but the truth is, well-managed conflict is part of living, arguing or having heated discussions is healthy because it means that you're speaking up on important matters. To say that you don't argue ever, would be a very quiet relationship which can also be very dangerous.

## VI. CHALLENGES OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

1. Adolescence is a critical period for identity formation. The Youth may struggle with self-esteem and self-image as they try to navigate who they are and where to fit in. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and confusion, and emotional Intelligence development may not be a priority.
2. Human beings/youth have little or no idea of how they are perceived, hence are not aware of their emotional intelligence
3. We/youth are emotional beings, and we protect self-first irrespective of the level of intelligence
4. The ability to manipulate others. When people hone their emotional skills, they become better at manipulating others. This promotes unhealthy relationship with friends and those around them
5. It can be challenging to read people's emotions, especially if they are not expressing them openly. It will be hard to manage relationship with others. This is the ability to build and maintain healthy relationships with others. It can be challenging to communicate effectively with others and resolve conflicts in a constructive way.
6. Emotional Intelligence is not a true form of intelligence. One frequent criticism of it, EI narrows down to the terminology. Critics argue that EI is not really intelligence in the same way that someone with a high Intelligence Quotient (IQ) might be proficient at processing information or solving problems.

## INTERVENTIONS

1. Provision of individual behavioural intervention (e.g., individual learning modules or apps);
2. Introduction of group or classroom-based intervention or practices (e.g., as part of Gender Based Violence (GBV) prevention content in other academic sessions; delivery of content in groups during school hours);
3. Use of network-based approaches, such as public opinion leader interventions;
4. staff training and other service provision in colleges (e.g., to recognise and respond better to sexual violence
5. local and school policy change to address structural factors relating to GBV, or to change school responses to on GBV.

## WAY FORWARD

To build and maintain healthy relationships is crucial in youth mental health. This encompasses the following;

1. The youth need to know himself/herself better. The youth should take time to appreciate himself or herself. This involves getting in touch with own emotions to be able to express himself or

herself clearly and effectively. Not knowing how to regulate your emotions and express them healthily can negatively affect your mental wellbeing.

2. There is need to put in the work more seriously. Healthy relationships are not found but built. A healthy relationship needs commitment and willingness to be accommodating to each other's needs and desires.
3. Establish and respect boundaries of each other. Setting boundaries involves what one does not want or like in a relationship. It is also about letting the people around you know what you appreciate. Let other people know your boundaries and respect your time. Doing this can take the pressure off your relationship to commit to anything unrealistic.
4. Talk and Listen to each other. All relationships have disagreements and that is very normal. What is of importance is how you talk and listen to one another. Listening is meant for understand, rather than listening to give feedback. Be free to express your emotions or vulnerabilities with people you trust/
5. Let go of control. Human life is about how we react to our experiences and encounters. Know that you can only control your actions, and not what anyone else does will save you time and daily life stress.
6. Reflect and learn from daily encounters. Have a healthy way of expressing your feelings, and you will be able to react to other people's feelings in a healthy way. Being angry with someone often comes from a point of feeling hurt and upset. If you can recognize that, you can communicate it, and build better relationships with others. Reflect on the relationships that work best in your life, their qualities, and how you can bring these qualities into other relationships.

## VII. CONCLUSION

A Toxic relationship is one that is harmful to one's mental well-being characterized by consistent disrespect, criticism, or power imbalance (Juneja, 2022). Toxic relationships can be experienced between spouses, friends, colleagues, and even family members. Toxic relationships yield a bad impact on anyone who experiences it. This condition will hurt victims and make their psychological health to decrease.

Toxic relationships, whether romantic or platonic, can negatively impact students' well-being and academic performance in higher education, leading to mental health issues, relationship difficulties, academic failure and even death. Despite the challenges experienced, the youth need to make use of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in order to cultivate health relationships in life. However, there is need for further intervention in a learning environment to inculcate mental well-being.

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