



## Are You in a Healthy Dating Relationship?

Linda glanced at the caller ID. John was calling her again. This was the 3<sup>rd</sup> time tonight, and Linda felt flattered. “He must really like me,” Linda mused as she answered John’s call.

John was Linda’s new beau. They had been dating for four months when she began to wonder if John might be “the one.” Later during one of her coaching sessions, Linda shared with me some of her feelings about John. “He’s wonderful”, she gushed. “He’s so attentive and nice. Yet something bothers me a little.”

“Tell me what doesn’t feel right,” I said.

“Sometimes I just need time to be alone,” Linda said. “I like my space and I like doing things with my friends, but John gets hurt and feels I’m being selfish. He says if we’re going to make this relationship work, he should be my number one priority. If I really cared about him, John said I should want to spend all my free time with him. What do you think? Am I just being selfish?”

Linda still wrestled with plenty of debris left over from a previous marriage that had been destructive, and she didn’t want to repeat that in her relationship with John. She longed to have a healthy and godly dating relationship so that she might someday marry again. John seemed right, yet Linda had a gut feeling that something wasn’t right. It was good that she listened to herself.

I find that many singles don’t pay enough attention to the early warning signs of a potentially destructive relationship. After marriage, hind sight is often 20/20. But what are some of the clues we can watch for early in our relationships so that we will not make costly mistakes?

As I’ve blogged about before, there are three essential ingredients that must be present in order to have a healthy relationship with someone. When any one of them is missing or not practiced mutually, the relationship becomes unhealthy and may turn destructive. They are:

**Mutuality** – as in mutual caring, honesty, respect, repentance and responsibility

**Reciprocity** – as in both give in the relationship and both receive.

**Freedom** – as in the freedom to be yourself and speak honestly about who you are, what you think and feel, and what you want/need.

As Linda and I looked at how these elements were demonstrated over time in her relationship with John, it became obvious that several important ingredients were consistently shaky. First, John obviously cared for Linda and she cared for him, but, if we examine John's caring closely, we see that he really isn't caring about Linda much at all. What John is caring about is John. He wants Linda's time and attention, and he shows signs of not caring about her feelings when she expresses a desire to be with other friends or time to be alone. She's not free to honestly share without an emotional price to pay.

He's also not respecting her boundaries or her needs. Instead he's accusing her of being selfish when she honestly expresses her feelings and her needs. When she asks him to care about what she wants, he says his feelings and needs should always come first.

When Linda's eyes opened and she saw these unhealthy patterns in her relationship with John, she became distraught. "I really like him," she cried. "What should I do now?"

I encouraged her to have an honest conversation with him. Linda needed to speak up and share with John some of the things she learned in her session in the hopes that he would see this unhealthy pattern too and want to change it.

The Bible tells us that we all stumble in many ways (James 3:2). Therefore we will never find a perfect person. We are all broken and sinful. Yet, the difference between a broken healthy person and a broken unhealthy person is the willingness to see your own hurtful patterns and take personal responsibility to change them. As Linda honestly risked sharing with John ways she felt he wasn't respecting her feelings or caring for her needs, she would quickly be able to see whether John could hear her as well as whether he was willing to look at and change these patterns in himself (repentance).

When dating, practice honesty early. Don't pretend things don't bother you when they do or try to make yourself into the person that you think the other wants you to be. Be yourself and also be open to seeing areas in your life that need to change in order to become a more mature, healthy self. However, when you consistently experience a lack of caring, a lack of respect or a lack of honesty, pay attention! This is not a healthy relationship. Stop it before it becomes destructive.

Parents, it's important that you teach your teen healthy dating skills.