

What to expect when you leave a toxic leader

By Nathalie Martinek, PhD



Congratulations on leaving a toxic leader!

If your exit went smoothly and you were able to leave in peace, there's a good chance you will be able to recover and move onto another position elsewhere without any drama.

A more common scenario is that the toxic leader (ie. boss, supervisor, manager) took the news of your departure personally and acted as if you betrayed them, throwing the professional opportunities they gave (or withheld from) you back in their face. You

might have been blamed, shamed and had to witness their display of unprofessional and inappropriate conduct, affirming your decision to leave. Leaving a toxic boss has similarities to leaving an abusive relationship that involves backlash for leaving. The aftermath of your physical exit involves your recovery process alongside the multi-stage relationship exit and backlash management process.

What to expect from the leader after you leave

1 Impression management

The toxic leader will be friendly and generous to your remaining peers, colleagues and mutual connections in your professional network/industry to show their best self. The purpose is to override any negative impressions others have of the toxic leader because of your influence. As you're no longer there, they have power by proximity to influence other's impressions of them. If you still follow them on social media, you will see them posting virtue signaling content, such as attributes of effective leaders and the importance of emotional intelligence as a leader.

2 Reputation damage

You can expect that the toxic leader will be sowing doubt about you. They will position themselves as the victim to invite sympathy and pity, priming colleagues, peers and mutuals to believe propaganda about you, capitalizing on your absence and inability to defend against false accusations. If they're completely unethical, they will try to use content from communication between you two against you. This can result in promised opportunities being withdrawn by colleagues within your industry and shunning by peers over a short period of time after leaving.

3 Deploy double agents

Remaining staff and mutual connections will reach out to express their concern and support. Few, if any, will be genuine and most will be fishing for intel they can bring back to their toxic leader for gold stars and favouritism. Some will have you under surveillance to see if you're going to disclose anything about the toxic leader and the workplace publicly or privately. No one can be trusted in a workplace led by a toxic leader because you can't be sure that they will be loyal to you, regardless of the relationship you think you have. A toxic culture is not a trustworthy one especially when the toxic leader has already been impression managing and reputation damaging.

4 Intimidation and veiled threats

In some cases, employees who leave a toxic leader receive communication from the workplace via an ex-colleague or HR asking you to sign a waiver, return specific content, come in for an exit interview or informal chat, or suggest that future opportunities are at stake if you don't comply. You are not obligated to respond to any of these messages once you've officially left regardless of the threat factor.

5 Attempt to restore power

You leaving will have bruised the ego of a toxic leader, giving you the last word. They will need a way to restore their preferred self-image by having the final say. They might do this by reaching out to you with a lovely message as if the awful resignation conversation never happened, inviting you for coffee or a reconciliatory meal. Their intent is to humiliate you and/or shift the power imbalance in their favour. Be suspicious of their change in tone and feel free to ignore their request.

What to expect from yourself and what to do about it

1 Emotional rollercoaster

You might experience a range of emotional states that will fluctuate between peace, anger and confusion about your decision to leave. This can be seen as the emotional symptoms of loss after leaving a stressful situation that was under the control of a toxic leader, and the betrayals you experienced. The promises and hopes you held about the job begin to disintegrate once you've achieved a safe distance from the workplace and you're finally able to properly confront the impact of working in that toxic environment. Make sure you have someone who can effectively listen to you talk about your experiences so that you can properly process the impact of working there. Make sure those supports are completely unrelated to that workplace and the toxic leader.

2 Desire for justice

You might be curious about what's being said about you by the toxic leader and what's happening in the workplace since you left. Exiting means leaving completely, including any interest in the people and the work while you're trying to recover. You might hope that someone will stick up for you there or that you'll be remembered for your effort. You will feel tempted to speak with remaining colleagues to manage and restore the impression they have of you. **Preserve your energy because those colleagues are already compromised.** Your recovery will take longer as long as you're mentally and emotionally connected to the workplace. You got out and it's important you do everything possible to create emotional and mental distance between yourself and everyone you left behind during the early recovery period.

3 Hypervigilance

You will be on alert about what's being discussed online and in your professional networks by the toxic leader and others connected to the workplace and industry. This can exacerbate the emotional and psychological symptoms of grief after leaving, making recovery challenging. Hide their posts and ensure you only put benign content online until you settled into a stable emotional state and job. Consider blocking some connections if they are harassing you or closely monitoring your online posts. The less you know and see will be difficult at first but will eventually become easier as you get used to not being reminded of their past betrayals and mistreatment.

4 Urgency

Depending on your personal situation, you might feel desperate to find a new role and a sense of urgency to move on. You can't rush recovery. You're at risk of entering a similar dynamic to the one you just left if you don't give yourself the space to process what happened, grieve, learn from the experience and apply those insights to your next steps.

Resist the sensation to hustle and run to preserve your reputation faster than the toxic leader and double agents can hurt it, and opt to rest and reflect, focusing on the nurturing and being nurtured by the relationships that matter.

5 Network shrinkage and new connections

As you leave any toxic relationship, it's necessary to break ties with anyone still associated with the person responsible for harming you. This, in addition to the smear campaign by

the toxic leader, will contribute to shrinkage of your network. You can see this as a necessary, albeit painful consequence of severing ties that creates space for new connections that reflect the new direction your life is taking. You will be in a better position to judge the quality of new connections once you restabilised and feel emotionally secure again.

This transition period from ending, uncoupling to new reality doesn't happen overnight. It can take some time until the dust settles and you regain stability so you can recover from the toxicity that occurred during the relationship with the toxic leader and the aftermath. Having a trusted, stable support team is vital for getting through this transition without further injury to your wellbeing.

THE AUTHOR



Nathalie Martinek, PhD

Nathalie is an ex-systems biologist and cancer researcher turned consultant, group facilitator & independent medical culture researcher. She specialises in helping individuals and groups navigate professional relationships and workplaces that feature burnout, bullying and narcissistic leadership. Her clients develop interpersonal skills that facilitate leadership, psychological safety, conflict resolution and functional relationships. To learn more about power dynamics and narcissism to understand why and how unhealthy relationships develop and how to navigate them follow Nathalie's blog: <https://substack.com/@nathaliemartinekphd>