

How Did One Toxic Relationship Change The Future of Felicity Shaw?

Note to readers: pseudonyms have been given to Felicity and Ciera due to safety concerns.

"Toxic relationships" is a term that we've started hearing more and more about as people are beginning to come out with their stories about how they dealt with abuse in their relationships. PhD, Elizabeth Scott, defines a toxic relationship as one that makes someone feel unsupported, attacked or misunderstood, also, if someone's well-being is threatened in an emotional, psychological or physical way. Within relationships, there's another term that has been used more often. Narcissist. When someone usually hears this word, they immediately think someone who is full of themselves which is true, but it is also someone who craves power and will put people around them down just to feel like they are the top dog. Narcissistic abuse and toxic relationship therapist Kate Deighton from Sydney, Australia states that you can spot a toxic relationship if a partner is needing to walk on eggshells so that they can ensure the other partner is okay and one partner has some form of control and hold. She says toxic behaviours can be shown through the constant invalidation of reality, the gaslighting, making you feel like you're going crazy, denial and cheating in those relationships. Now, with all of that, why wouldn't someone just leave that relationship? Who would want to endure that toxicity? The answer is no one wants to deal with that, but leaving these kinds of relationships can be one of the most difficult tasks that someone can do. People can face threats, physical abuse, and mental manipulation while in these relationships which makes it difficult. Unless one is in that kind of relationship, it's challenging to fully comprehend what someone is going through and why they are staying.

Felicity Shaw, a 28-year-old radio host, has dealt with this form of toxic relationship and abuse from her narcissistic abuser. Not only was she dealing with a toxic romantic relationship, but she also dealt with forms of toxicity from her family while growing up as well. Registered social worker, Joselin Zak from Toronto, ON., states “our past impacts our present and our present impacts our future. Thus, what we do now helps our future self, what we have in our past include our attachment style, our ability to attune, our ability to trust, our self-concept and self-esteem comes from our past.” Close to the ending of that eight year toxic relationship, Felicity realized that she needed to put herself first and not have this go on any longer so she can change her life for good. She wanted to create the changes to help her future self and be better for herself.

“When I was 18, I thought I met the love of my life. We were happy for the first year we were together, but then things took a turn for the worst as I grew more attached to him and the idea of our future,” Shaw said with sadness in her tone as she recalled the events of that relationship. “He was my everything. He was always my first choice, my first priority, the person I would drop anything and everything for, but I was never his.” After their first year of dating, they decided to break up but stay in each other’s lives for the next seven years. Throughout all the lying and deceit, she knew he was toxic but she couldn’t let go of him even though he was just using her for sex at that point.

Kate Deighton also explains how in toxic relationships there’s the experience of highs and lows all the time. When there’s a high, it’s extremely high and it produces feel good hormones but when it comes crashing down, the person will have high stress hormones. Going

through this rollercoaster of highs and lows becomes an addiction and the victim will constantly be chasing the high.

“I was hurting all of the time,” Felicity spewed out with tears in her eyes. I gave her time to collect herself and drink some of her water. “I only stayed because I held onto this false hope that one day he would recognize my worth and how much I loved him. I knew it was toxic at that point, but I didn’t want to admit it to myself even though I had everyone around me tell me. There was never one thing I would do that was right in his eyes, I was always wrong and he was always right.” After their initial break up in 2014, they had an on-and-off-unofficial relationship. In November of 2020, he decided he was ready to have another relationship with Shaw. Shaw at the time, had another relationship happening with her girlfriend Ciera Bourne, but regardless she wanted him back even though it meant leaving her girlfriend behind.

Joselin Zak details that people may stay in toxic relationships because their self-esteem and self-worth are destroyed from the relationship and the victim may now feel as though they cannot do better or that they deserve better. Because of this constant thought and sense of not being able to find something better Felicity took her abuser back into her life although she knew he was only dating her because he didn’t think he could find someone else as she was just convenient. Felicity wept as she was talking about her relationship with her abuser. She told me that when she thinks about it, her body tends to get cold so she walked away from the screen to take a breath and grab a blanket. When she came back, she was wrapped in a red plaid fleece blanket with a cup of tea in hand. She took in a deep breath, while wiping some tears away. I took a look at Felicity to ask if she was okay and if she was still willing to bring Ciera into the call.

Felicity looked directly into the camera and said “I would probably feel better talking about this if she was here.” We rang Ciera into the call and she immediately picked up.

Ciera was in her kitchen, had her hair up in a messy bun and small strands of her auburn hair was falling out of the bun. Ciera was expressing how she, at the time of their breakup, didn’t understand why she had to leave, but now fully understands. “Even though we ended our relationship, I’m glad I was the person she called that night that things took for a turn,” Ciera mentioned to me while making herself her lunch. Felicity chimed in how the night Ciera was talking about was the night that things changed for the worst. “He found a conversation that I had with one of my ex-boyfriends where he said he missed me but I didn’t engage in the conversation. When my abuser found it, he started to throw stuff in my room around, he threw my phone against my wall and started saying that I was dead to him because I was cheating on him. But that wasn’t even the worst part. He laid his hands on me for the first time out of anger. His hands were wrapped around my throat, he pushed me against a wall and began to hit my head with his fist. He left, so I chased after him because I didn’t want him to leave, but he threw my phone at my face and spit on me. Right then and there, he told me that he had slept with one of my closest friends years ago because he knew it would hurt me and he would do anything to destroy me in that moment.” Shaw clutched onto her blanket tighter and had to excuse herself.

As Shaw took her moment, Ciera mentioned that regardless of the things that happened that day and that she didn’t want to even hear anything about her abuser because she felt like she was left for a nobody, when Felicity called her to tell her he had hit her, she dropped everything she was doing to be with her and make sure she was okay. Felicity overheard the

conversation between Ciera and I and said “I knew I hurt Ciera, but I knew she loved me. I should have walked away from him for her but I couldn’t. It didn’t make sense to me then and doesn’t make sense to me now. I stayed even after that for another few months. I became anxious, suicidal and depressed. I went on anti-depressants and he made me throw them out because, and I quote, ‘if you get better, you’d probably leave me.’ That’s when something snapped in me and I made him think I threw them out by throwing out other pills I had. I started to stand up for myself. He hated how I was trying to make myself a name in the world of radio, so we constantly fought about it because he couldn’t stand the fact that I was making more money than him and because he couldn’t make it in the music world, but I still applied to jobs. I ended up moving out of my mom’s house and ended up across the country to create a name for myself in the broadcasting world.”

Deighton says because it’s like going through a drug addiction, it’s best to cut off ties when one is trying to leave and to go no contact. It would be the response that your mind needs to get the complete detox that it needs from having gone through that toxic relationship. Although removing oneself from one toxic relationship is an accomplishment, there’s also the risk of falling back into going into another toxic relationship as there’s a sense of familiarity in the new relationship.

“I haven’t been in another relationship since, and if I go on a date, I take a step back and try to see if it sits well with me or if I can sense any red flags. I rather be by myself and work on my stuff at the moment, all I know is I have a lot of healing to do and I don’t want to hurt anyone else,” Felicity let out a sigh of relief and I could sense her being calm as she was no

longer holding onto her blanket. Zak mentions the next best thing after cutting ties is to heal oneself. This will lead to healthier boundaries, self-compassion and a positive sense of self.

Sarah Fielding for Insider spoke to couple's therapist Rosara Torrisi from Long Island and compiled a short list of what to look out for:

1. Lack of trust
2. Hostile communication
3. Controlling behaviours
4. Frequent lying
5. All take, no give
6. Feeling drained
7. Making excuses for their behaviour

Please note these are not the only signs to look out for and if you feel as though you may be dealing with a narcissist, are in a toxic relationship, or are dealing with abuse, you can dial 2-1-1 for the appropriate help.