PEOPLE YOU CAN'T ESCAPE

Emotional Survival in Unavoidable Relationships

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For people who have tried everything —
and still have to show up tomorrow.

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Introduction:
Some People You Cannot Leave

There is a particular kind of exhaustion that doesn't have a clean name yet. It's not burnout — you haven't been working too hard. It's not depression, exactly, though it can feel that way on the bad days. It's not grief, though something has quietly been lost. It's the tiredness that comes from spending prolonged time around a person who, for reasons you can't always articulate clearly, costs you something every single time.

Maybe it's the colleague in the open-plan office who makes every meeting feel like an ambush. Maybe it's the family member at the dinner table whose presence makes your shoulders climb toward your ears before they've said a single word. Maybe it's the neighbor, the roommate, the in-law, the boss — someone you didn't choose and cannot easily escape, someone whose number appears on your phone and makes your stomach drop a little.

You're not irrational. You're not too sensitive. You are not making it up.

That is where this book starts.

Why This Book Is Not About 'Toxic People'

I want to be upfront about something: this is not another book about toxic people. That term, as useful as it once was, has

become a kind of psychological shorthand that mostly lets us off the hook. It's clean. It implies a clear category — over there, the toxic ones; over here, the rest of us who are just fine. Set a boundary. Go no-contact. Heal.

Real life is rarely that tidy.

The person who drains you might also be the person who shows up when something goes wrong. The coworker you dread might be, by every HR standard, doing nothing wrong. The family member who leaves you feeling scraped hollow every holiday might genuinely love you in whatever limited way they know how. And you — you might love them back, or need them economically, or share a lease, or simply have no viable exit. These are not failure states. They're just human situations.

What this book is actually about is friction. Chronic, low-grade, structurally unavoidable friction — and what that friction does to your nervous system, your sense of self, your attention, your capacity to be present in your own life. And then, more importantly, what you can do about it without needing the other person to change, without cutting everyone off, and without performing a version of serenity you don't actually feel.

Why Common Advice Falls Short

The advice you'll find in most self-help books, therapy podcasts, and wellness-forward Instagram accounts is not

wrong, exactly. Set boundaries. Communicate clearly. Practice self-compassion. Limit exposure. These things matter. But they are also built on a foundational assumption that is quietly devastating to a lot of people: the assumption that you can leave.

'Just remove them from your life' is not advice — it's a privilege dressed up as wisdom. It doesn't account for the woman who can't leave a job she needs because she has a kid at home and no other income. It doesn't account for the man who lives three time zones away from his family but still has to fly home twice a year because cultural obligation and genuine love are tangled together in ways he can't surgically separate. It doesn't account for the person whose difficult relationship is with someone who is also, in some ways, their lifeline.

The gap between what we're told we should do and what we can actually do is where a lot of suffering quietly lives. I wrote this book for that gap.

When Escape Is Not Possible

There's a specific psychological cost to being unable to leave a situation that is hurting you. Research in stress physiology shows that the perception of uncontrollability is one of the most reliably damaging aspects of chronic stress — not the stressor itself, but the feeling that you cannot get away from it. When someone tells you 'just leave,' and leaving is not genuinely

available to you, they are, unintentionally, handing you evidence of your own helplessness.

This book does not assume you can leave. It assumes you might be staying — for now, or for a long time, or permanently — and that staying does not mean surrendering. Proximity is not the same as permeability. Being near someone is not the same as being consumed by them. That distinction is the whole project of this book.

Proximity as Psychological Pressure

When I started paying close attention to this particular kind of difficulty — difficult relationships with unavoidable people — I noticed something interesting. The suffering rarely came from the dramatic moments. It came from the ordinary ones. The sound of a key in the lock. The notification sound of a specific number. The particular way a person clears their throat before they begin a sentence you already know you're not going to enjoy. The way a room changes, slightly, when a specific person walks into it.

This is proximity pressure. It's the ambient weight of being near someone who your nervous system has learned to classify as a threat — even when nothing is technically happening. Your body doesn't wait for the incident. It begins preparing the moment the possibility of the person becomes real. And that preparation, maintained over months and years, is its own form of harm.

Understanding this is not about pathologizing normal human reactions. It's about recognizing that what you're carrying is real, that it has a physiological basis, and that you deserve tools that match the actual problem — not the sanitized version of it.

The Difference Between Conflict and Erosion

I want to draw a distinction that I think gets collapsed too often: the difference between conflict and erosion. Conflict is an event. It has a beginning, a middle, and usually some kind of end — a fight, an argument, a confrontation. It can be painful, but it's contained in time.

Erosion is different. Erosion has no dramatic peak. It's the slow, steady wearing away that happens when friction is constant and small. You might go months without a single visible argument and still feel, at the end of those months, like something important has been rubbed away. Your spontaneity. Your comfort being yourself. Your ability to relax in a room. Your willingness to speak freely. These things disappear not in explosions but in accumulations.

A lot of the people I have spoken to about this kind of relationship describe something similar: nothing big happened. But they feel worse than if something big had happened, because at least then they'd have something to point to. Erosion leaves no obvious evidence. That makes it harder to take seriously, harder to explain to others, and, critically, harder to ask for help around.

This book takes erosion seriously.

What This Book Will Actually Help You Do

Let me tell you plainly what you will find here, and what you won't.

You will find: a real account of what happens to your nervous system and your psychology when you're in sustained proximity to someone who costs you something. You'll find frameworks for understanding why some people affect you more than others, and why that is not a character flaw. You'll find practical tools — internal and relational — for reducing the damage without requiring either sainthood or estrangement. You'll find a section on reclaiming your mental attention, your sense of self, and your capacity for ease in your own life.

You won't find: a tidy set of scripts that will magically de-escalate difficult dynamics. You won't find a framework that turns every difficult person into someone whose behavior you'll eventually understand and forgive and transcend. You won't find permission to stay in something genuinely dangerous in the name of resilience. And you won't find a narrative that turns you into a passive victim of other people's behavior — because you're not.

What you are is a person navigating a genuinely hard situation. That deserves a serious, honest, somewhat irreverent book. Which is what this is.

You rehearsed the conversation in the shower again this morning. You didn't mean to. You were just standing there, thinking about nothing, and suddenly you were three exchanges in — what they'd say, what you'd say, what you should have said last Tuesday. The water went cold before you noticed.

That's where we start.

Diletta Armstrong

PART ONE

Why Some People Affect Us This Deeply

The Psychology and Neuroscience of Being Near the Wrong Person

Chapter 1:
Presences That Tighten the Body

Before they say a word, you already know. You can feel it in your chest — a slight constriction, a subtle raising of the shoulders, a change in the quality of your breathing. Sometimes it's the sound of their car in the driveway. Sometimes it's seeing their name on a group chat. Sometimes it's something even more diffuse: the time of day, the day of the week, a specific room that belongs to them in some ambient way. Your body knows before your brain has had time to form a complete sentence about what's happening.

This is not a character flaw or a tendency toward drama. This is your nervous system doing precisely what it was designed to do: scanning the environment for patterns associated with past threat, and responding before conscious thought has a chance to weigh in. The fact that this person has not physically harmed you, has not done anything legally actionable, may even genuinely care about you — none of that changes what your nervous system has recorded about them. The body is not a court of law. It doesn't require evidence beyond a reasonable doubt. It just responds to patterns.

The Nervous System Doesn't Wait for Permission

Here is something worth understanding about how threat detection works in the human body: it is fast, unconscious, and deeply conservative. Your autonomic nervous system — the

part of you that regulates heart rate, muscle tension, digestion, breathing — is constantly monitoring the environment through inputs that bypass your rational mind entirely. A particular tone of voice. A facial micro-expression. Subtle postural changes in another person. The emotional residue of dozens of previous interactions with this specific human.

Stephen Porges's Polyvagal Theory offers a useful way of thinking about this. The theory describes how our nervous system has evolved three hierarchical states of response to the environment: a ventral vagal state of safety and social engagement, a sympathetic state of mobilization (fight or flight), and a dorsal vagal state of immobilization (collapse, shutdown). The movement between these states happens outside conscious control. You don't decide to go on alert. You are put on alert — by your own nervous system, working faster than thought.

What's particularly relevant here is that the nervous system does not only respond to actual threats. It responds to cues associated with past threat — cues that predict, based on accumulated experience, that a threat may be incoming. This is called neuroception, Porges's term for the process by which the nervous system evaluates safety and danger below conscious awareness. Your neuroception can be triggered by a tone of voice, a phrase, a behavioral pattern — all of which it has been quietly cataloguing and cross-referencing, probably for years.

The person you dread doesn't need to be actively menacing you right now. They just need to be someone your body has learned to prepare for.

What 'Unsafe' Looks Like When Nothing Dramatic Is Happening

When most people hear the word 'unsafe,' they picture something extreme — physical danger, overt violence, explicit threat. But the nervous system's threshold for registering threat is considerably lower than that. Unpredictability is a threat cue. Chronic criticism is a threat cue. The feeling that you must monitor your own behavior very carefully in someone's presence is a threat cue. Being regularly misread, dismissed, or treated as less capable or intelligent than you are — these register in the nervous system as signals of potential danger, and the body responds accordingly.

The result can look like anxiety, but it's not quite anxiety in the clinical sense. It's more like a persistent low-level activation — a readiness that never fully discharges. You're not panicking. You're just never quite relaxed. There's a difference between those states, and the second one is in some ways more wearing precisely because it doesn't feel dramatic enough to justify the cost.

Anticipatory Stress: The Body Preparing for Someone Who Hasn't Arrived Yet

One of the more underappreciated aspects of difficult close

relationships is anticipatory stress — the activation that begins not when the difficult person is present, but when their arrival becomes likely. Research on chronic stressors consistently shows that anticipation of a negative event can be as physiologically costly as the event itself. In some cases, more costly, because the anticipation has no clear end point.

If you live with someone difficult, this can mean that the entire period before they come home — the last hour of your workday, the commute, the quiet of the empty apartment — is shadowed by low-grade dread. You are technically alone. But you're not free. You're in the pre-game, and your body knows it.

I have spoken to people who describe doing a specific kind of mental calculation every morning: what mood are they in? What time will they be home? What happened yesterday that might still be in the air today? This is not catastrophizing. This is intelligence gathering — a survival strategy developed in response to a genuinely variable and sometimes threatening environment. The problem is that survival strategies have costs, and running this kind of calculation every day is exhausting in ways that don't show up on any visible metric.

Life in a Brace

There's a particular posture — physical and psychological — that develops in people who spend a lot of time in environments they find unsafe or destabilizing. I think of it as