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The dark side of interpersonal relationships



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When it comes to our interpersonal relationships, we have the tendency to only see them in terms of black and white, or good and bad. But according to [Brian H. Spitzberg](#), editor of *The Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication*, this dichotomy actually doesn't exist. There are positive things that we can take away from bad relationship experiences, as well as negative things that can occur from the situations that we assume are entirely positive.

"Our cultural assumptions about what is dark and what is bright are often wrong. A lot of the things that we are culturally taught to assume are bad actually serve a positive function. And many of the things that we culturally assume are good and bright actually serve dysfunctional purposes," says Spitzberg. "All social processes are functionally ambivalent, so to some degree they serve both positive and negative functions. However, as a society and culture, we tend to focus on one rather than the other."

The silver linings on dark clouds

There are several ways that the behaviors we assume are negative can actually have positive consequences. For example, although expressing anger is frowned upon in most cases, oftentimes when we do lose our tempers we feel a sense of relief afterwards. Also, in dating relationships, people report that making their partners jealous has been an effective way of improving the relationship.

Even the most horrendous interpersonal behavior that is seen in abusive relationships can yield positive results for the person on the receiving end of these negative acts. For instance, studies show that people who suffered childhood sexual abuse report that the experience has made them stronger and more resilient people, as well as better parents to their own children. Likewise, victims of stalking have also said that the experience has strengthened them psychologically—and some even say that being pursued in such a way made them feel important.

"None of this is to suggest that these are good ways for people to feel better or become more resilient—this is not an ideal approach for self-actualization," says Spitzberg. "It is to say that the common assumption that these kinds of behaviors are intrinsically evil or entirely destructive is wrong because in some ways, they can serve a positive function."

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The dark linings on silver clouds

Just as there are silver linings to dark clouds in interpersonal relationships, Spitzberg notes that there is a dark side to everything that we assume is positive in our relationships. Some examples of the dark linings on what we assume to be communicative silver clouds are:

- People who have high self-esteem are also more prone to engage in violent and aggressive behavior.
- Although those who give a lot of social support to others are exhibiting positive behaviors, they report to feeling a lot of anger, conflict and distress as a result of these good deeds.
- Very polite people often have issues related to anger and hostility—and are even prone to committing argument-related homicides.

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- The qualities that attract us to a romantic partner can actually contribute to ending the relationship.

"One third of people can report having experienced a break up from a person for reasons that are intimately associated with the reasons they got attracted to that person in the first place," says Spitzberg. "We're attracted to this person because they're kind of a bad boy or girl, but later on it just drives us crazy because they're bad. We love their spontaneity when we first start going out with them, but later it drives us crazy that we can't count on them for anything."

This article originally appeared on my [Interpersonal Relationships Examiner](#) page on August 30, 2009.

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