



## Working with You Is Killing Me – Part #3

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### Fatal Attraction

*How did it all go so wrong?*

*It had so much promise in the beginning...*

*How can I resurrect the relationship to its former glory?*

**Credit:** This chapter draws on the work of, and gives credit to, Katherine Crowley and Kathi Elster, whose exceptional book ‘Working with You Is Killing Me’ was the inspiration for this article.

When you first met, you felt drawn to that person; you were excited at the prospect of working together – there was something about that person that fulfilled a strong inner need within you. However, over time, interactions with this person left you emotionally exhausted and professionally frustrated – by now, you are dreading the next interaction. You spend your days and sleepless nights running conversations in your head, trying to understand the other person, thinking of ways of bringing the relationships to what it was in the past – but with no avail. No matter what you do, you cannot steer the relationships back to its vibrant beginning.

Fatal attraction refers to a more complex set of work relationships than the ones described in the first two chapters. In Fatal Attraction, the difficulty in sorting out the working relationships with a colleague stems from some inherited benefits that you gain while in the relationship. Fatal attraction is about working relationship that had great promise and excitement at the beginning, but grew more difficult over time. In fatal attraction, you still get from time to time the initial spark of the earlier stage of the relationship, and that promise keeps the relationship going although you know that the relationship is wrong and has devastating consequences for you.

Fatal attractions are confusing as it is hard to accept the sharp contrast between the early stages of the relationship and the current state. At first, they made you feel so exhilarated. You felt literally charged when you interacted with the person. Something about their personality enticed you, pulled you in. You may still have the same feeling from time to time, but the frequency of it is rapidly diminishing. You entered the relationships on an emotional high, but this turned into an emotional trap for you.

In this chapter we will explore four types of fatal attractions. Each stems from fulfilling a deep inherent need. First, we will meet the ‘Exploder’ who attracts those with need for approval from authority figures. Second, we will meet the ‘Perfectionist’ who attracts those with strong sense of

insecurity about their capability, yet crave recognition to confirm their self-worth. Next, we will meet the 'Back-Stabber' who attracts those who yearn for admiration and respect from others. Finally, we will meet the 'High Maintenance' who attracts those who are natural caregivers with strong paternal instinct.

In all four cases, the build-up of the fatal attraction relationship goes through seven stages:

1. **Magnetism:** The honeymoon period, when the person is at their best and fulfil your deep inherent need
2. **Consumption:** The relationship turns a corner. The person starts displaying their dark side
3. **Admittance:** This is the first visible and undeniable downhill stage of the relationship. You have accepted that something is fundamentally wrong, and you spend your time running in your head interactions' playback, rehearsing future conversations, and licking your wounds
4. **Obsession:** This stage is the last attempt you make to recover the relationships. You become obsessed with trying to convert and change the other person. You spend hours fixated on what it will take to alter the other person's behaviour
5. **Exhaustion:** At this stage you give up the proactive change attempts. You are emotionally exhausted. Any additional interaction just adds to your emotional fatigue
6. **Avoidance:** You actively seek to avoid any further interaction. You develop the equivalent of an allergic reaction to the other person. This takes the form of an automatic physiological reaction to the other person. Your body involuntary responds when you hear their voice and get a glimpse of them. You experience physical distress in myriad of ways such as headaches, twitching, stiff muscles, neck pains...
7. **Learned Helplessness:** At this stage you surrender all control over the relationship. You feel and behave like a helpless prisoner. You resigned to the negative treatment and can't imagine a way out. You feel and become bitter and disillusioned. You are trapped in a no-win situation

Although these stages are chronological, you may experience them in and out of sequence – or going forward and backward over several stages. This will particularly apply to stages four and five, where following one single positive incident with the other person, you may still attempt to rescue the relationship, even after you have promised yourself that you have given up on the relationship.

## The Four Fatal Attractions

The fatal attractions tend develop in certain work relationships' contexts:

- ⓐ **The Exploder:** The 'Exploder' tends to have a position of formal authority; in most cases being the line manager of their 'victim'
  - *Attracts:* People who like dynamic personalities – those who need approval from authority figures
- ⓐ **The Perfectionist:** The 'Perfectionist' tends to have a position where their role is to critique the work outcomes of their victim. It is common in both client-supplier relationships and in manager-subordinate relationships
  - *Attracts:* People who like being put on a pedestal – those with strong sense of insecurity about their capability
- ⓐ **The Back-Stabber:** The 'Back-Stabber' type tends to be found in collegial relationship, where the 'Back Stabber' is somewhat junior to their victim (e.g., Junior Consultant and a Senior Consultant). In many cases the victim acts as a mentor of the 'Back Stabber'.
  - *Attracts:* People who crave praise – those who yearn for admiration and respect from others
- ⓐ **The High Maintenance:** The 'High Maintenance' is most common in collegial relationships of equals (e.g., two co-workers of the same rank)
  - *Attracts:* People who like to help others – those natural caregivers with strong parental instinct

In each case, the 'victim' experiences a key transition in the relationship:

- Ⓜ **The Exploder:** Starts out as dynamic and charming; turns out into dynamite and volatile
  - *Early symptoms:* Exhibiting sudden, unexpected, yet short-lived explosive outbursts
- Ⓜ **The Perfectionist:** Starts out as accepting and flattering; turns into pedantic control freak and fault finding
  - *Early Symptoms:* Pedantic and megalomaniac attempts to control you at the first signs of potential failure
- Ⓜ **The Back-Stabbing:** Starts out as sweet talk, admiring, and semi-worshiping, turns into sabotage, conspiring, and back-stabbing
  - *Early Symptoms:* Unverified signs of betrayal and vilification
- Ⓜ **The High Maintenance:** Starts as nice, trusting, and soul searching mate, turns into very needy and dependent
  - *Early Symptoms:* Regardless of large amounts of advice, no signs of acting on the advice

Each of the types displays elements or hints of mild clinical conditions, or what Robert Hogan calls a 'dark side'. The clinical terms and Hogan's 'dark side' terms are provided coupled with brief description of the types and their behaviour.

- Ⓜ **The Exploder = Borderline Personality**
  - Hogan's dark side term = *Excitable* >>> Inappropriate anger. Intense and unstable relationships, alternating between idealisation and devaluation.
- Ⓜ **The Perfectionist = Obsessive Compulsive**
  - Hogan's dark side term = *Diligent* >>> Obsessive occupation with structure, orderliness, process, rules, control and procedures
- Ⓜ **The Back-Stabbing = Passive-Aggressive**
  - Hogan's dark side term = *Leisurely* >>> Covert aggression and despise; Constant scheming and manipulation under a pretence of loyalty
- Ⓜ **The High Maintenance = Dependent**
  - Hogan's dark side term = *Dutiful* >>> Excessive need to please. Difficulty making simple decisions without advice or excessive reassurance. Insecurity coupled with inability expressing disagreement out of fear of loss of support.

## #1 the Exploder

The 'Exploder' is charming, charismatic, and enigmatic from the outset. They exude confidence, resolve, decisiveness, determination, and self-belief. Their dynamism, focus, and natural sense of authority draw in people to join the bandwagon of success. At the beginning the relationship is thrilling, exciting, exhilarating. You believe that together you can achieve anything you set your mind to. You cannot stop singing the praises of this person. Hence it comes as a shock when this all change very abruptly. One day this person hit a problem, and without any warning they lose their temper. In a flash a new side emerges that is emotionally volatile, harsh, hurtful, loud, accusatory and totally irrational. After the blow-up, the 'Exploder' brings back the conviction, charisma and charm, but you quickly learn that this is not long-lived. It only last until the next triggering event.

**Impact on You:** You turn into a nervous wreck – Tiptoeing around the 'Exploder' in fear of detonating them, and searching ways of deactivating the next explosion. You don't concentrate on your job anymore. Instead, you become preoccupied with trying with limited success to manage the Exploder's unpredictable behaviour.

## #2 the Perfectionist

The 'Perfectionist' makes you the 'flavour of the month' for a short period – putting you on a pedestal, only to kick it from under your feet later on. To start with, the 'Perfectionist' showers you with compliments, crowns you with more talent than anybody else, and uses you as an example to

others as someone to emulate. For a while, you can do no wrong. But, the Perfectionist's expectations are that you will act as the saviour (e.g., increase sales figures, reorganise a department, deliver all-singing-all-dancing product, etc.). However, as time passes and you appear more of a capable human being than a superhero, the Perfectionist searches and finds faults and evidence that you are not perfect.

**Impact on You:** Suddenly from the 'chosen one' you turn into the scapegoat. Instead of being a star, you are a sorry disappointment. You become confused and upset by the fall from grace, desperately try to replicate or mimic the behaviour that led to the superstar status. Yet, the pedantic and detailed bookkeeping of any little fault you make diminishes your self confidence, and reveal you most hidden insecurities.

### #3 the Back-Stabber

The Back-Stabber enters the relationship as your greatest fun and admirer and shows great hunger to learn from you, to imitate your behaviour, to become a carbon copy of you. Like 'Mini-Me' in the Austin Powers movies, the Back-Stabber becomes in the first instance a 'mini-you'. You feel admired and worshiped. This does wonders to your inflated ego, and fits well with some of your hidden narcissistic tendencies. As time progresses, you come across faint evidence that the Back-Stabber is behind activities or interactions that compromise or hurt your professional standing. Things start getting wrong for you (e.g., a large account is taken from you, people start questioning some of your practices and methods, you start getting complaints). The more you try to identify a reason for it, the more you notice that your little admirer is the common denominator in all these instances.

**Impact on you:** You get an irritating feeling that the Back-Stabber tries to undermine you in order to take over your position – yet, the Back-Stabber covers their path with great skill and your suspicions are unsubstantiated. From the outset, the Back-Stabber maintains the same pretence of loyalty, but their worship style is a bit more tamed. You do not know what or who to believe. You feel defensive and undermined. You want to believe that you can trust the Back-Stabber as your ego craves the God-like admiration, but you cannot stop the niggling feeling that you have been constantly stabbed in the back. Your attempts to confront the Back-Stabber are futile, as the Back-Stabber reacts with hurt and deny. Each attempt chips away from the amount of admiration you receive, and you are hooked – not sure if you becoming paranoid, going for a period of bad luck, or there is something in your suspicions. Rather than concentrating on your work, you spend too much of your time seeking evidence to support your conspiracy theories.

### #4 the High Maintenance

Earlier in the relationship the High-Maintenance places their trust in you, displaying honesty, vulnerability, and extreme self-disclosure. You feel worthwhile, valuable, and useful. It plays to your paternal instinct and sense of justice. The High Maintenance constantly compliments you for your wisdom, compassion, and ability to sympathise – typically using phrases like "I don't know what I would have done without you", or "you are such a good and dear friend". You want to get out of your way to show your kindness to the High Maintenance, helping them to cope with their issues or stand back on their feet. While in the beginning, you might like this sense of dependency on you; after a while you realise two things – first, that you spend enormous amount of time and energy dealing with the High Maintenance and their problems, and second, that all your suggestions and advice are never taken on board.

**Impact on you:** As the needs of the High Maintenance for time intensify, the boundaries between your work and personal life begin to blur. Out of pity, or due to your desire to free your time at work, you may start dealing with the High Maintenance problems at your non-work time. You might invite the High Maintenance to discuss their problems over the weekend, you may find yourself obliged to invite the High Maintenance to join you for family events, holidays, and the like, justifying it to yourself by saying that they don't have anyone else to turn to. When you realise that this is too

demanding and try to ease the relationship a bit, the helpless High Maintenance starts excusing you of “being just like anyone else – selfish, uncaring, heartless”. Being afraid to become the bad guy, you feel obliged to keep the relationship going – yet, you feel exhausted, drained. The High Maintenance has sapped the energy out of you. You are tired of the constant doom and gloom, the constant moaning, and the inability of the High Maintenance to help themselves.

## Unhooking

It is very hard to unhook from a fatal attraction relationships. You will probably have to go through all seven stages of the relationship before being able to move on. The unhooking goes through four phases:

First is the **detection and admittance**. This stage require you to admit to yourself that you are hooked (some push might come from those around you who can see the emotional state you are in). The admittance stage also includes an element of mourning and grief. Deep inside you are still attracted to the other person and want to experience again the feeling you had at the beginning of the relationship. Unhooking requires you to emotionally kill this relationship.

The second phase is that of **detachment**. Once you intellectually accepted that this relationship is dead and nothing will revive it, you need to separate yourself emotionally from the relationship. To do that you need to teach yourself to look at the other person from an objective perspective. This will require you to fully accept that:

- Ⓜ The other person is not going to change – any signs of change are only a manipulative attempt to re-hook you
- Ⓜ The relationship will never turn to its exciting and promising beginning – you have to let go of the assumption that this person or this relationship has potential. It never had and it never will have. What you saw as potential was sophisticated hooking
- Ⓜ You will never receive the acknowledgement or the rewards you once hoped to get from this relationships – this means that all your efforts were wasted (you simply have to cut you loses and move on)

The third phase is **depersonalisation**. This phase is about understanding that it is not about you. Forget about the phrase “it takes two to Tango”. This is one of the only instances where it is totally not your fault – there is something fundamentally wrong with the other person. The more objectively you can view the other person, the less helpless you become, and the less power the other person has over you.

The final phase is of **disassociation**. In this phase you treat the person as if you never had a meaningful relationship with them at all. You keep the relationship on a professional level, and prevent any attempts to personalise any interaction. You maintain courtesy, but keep a professional distance. You do not give anything of yourself as a person, only your expected professional skills, and even those only within the boundaries of what can be expected from an employee – so, you provide your professional opinion if requested to do so by the other person, but do not take calls (even if work related) outside working hours. You talk about the business if required, but avoid any personal or non-business questions or comments from the other person. You bring the relationship into a level of pure business transaction.

## The Way Out

- Ⓜ **The Exploder**
  - Accept that this person has unresolved rage
  - Appreciates that their volatility will occur no matter what you do
  - Learn to watch the Exploder blow up without taking it personally or being affected
- Ⓜ **The Perfectionist**
  - Accept that nothing that you will do will reinstate your former ‘Superhero’ status.

- Appreciate that the 'Perfectionist' shaky self-esteem and fear of failure are what drive the devaluing remarks about you.
- Stop trying to regain your statuesque position, neither with the 'Perfectionist' nor with anyone else. Focus on getting approval, agreement, and support from other sources

Ⓢ **The Back-Stabber**

- Accept that this person approach to further their career is by putting others down
- Appreciate that this person believe that they cannot succeed on merit alone, and they need to make others look bad
- Cut-off the relationship completely. Keep records of everything.

Ⓢ **The High Maintenance**

- Accept that this person does not want help – only attention
- Appreciate that this person's problems (either real or fictitious) will not go away no matter what you do
- Stop trying to solve the problems. Listen without giving advice. Watch your time. Start putting boundaries back in place.

## References

Crowley, K. & Elster, K. (2006). *Working with You Is Killing Me: Freeing Yourself from Emotional Traps at Work*. Warner Business Books: New York.