

Misery Stabilizers - [Terry Real](#)

Misery stabilizers are the things people turn to instead of turning to each other, staying engaged, and facing their issues. Like steam valves, they bleed off your discontent, staving off a crisis but cementing your lack of fulfillment as well.

Most of the couples who come to see me are one step away from separation. Virtually all of them have been unhappy for years, and many have run through one, two, or even six stabs at therapy. The first thing I look for in such cases is the list of misery stabilizers, because in situations of chronic displeasure, one or both partners have probably been turning for comfort or vitality to someone or something outside the relationship. If they weren't, the pain and loneliness that characterizes a long-standing dissatisfactory relationship would probably have been too hard to bear. We turn away from each other, choosing to numb the pain in lieu of addressing its cause.

RULE: TURNING TO MISERY STABILIZERS IS ONE FORM OF THE FIFTH LOSING STRATEGY, WITHDRAWAL. A PARTNER WILL NOT FULLY ENGAGE, AND REAL INTIMACY WILL BE SEVERELY COMPROMISED, IF MISERY STABILIZERS ARE NOT DEALT WITH.

HOW CAN YOU AVOID THE STALEMATE OF MISERY STABILIZERS?

From my perspective as a coach/counsellor trying to help people have great relationships, the most difficult thing about misery stabilizers is that, in a way, they often work. The Catch-22 of using misery stabilizers is that you get just enough satisfaction to be able to stand a situation you'd be better off challenging. *I've found the masculine aspects in us tend to use workaholism, substance abuse, risk taking, gambling, food, exercise, television, the Internet, and sexual compulsivity. The feminine aspects in us tend toward love dependence through overinvolvement with children, food, prescription drug abuse, spending, exercise, "busyness addiction," and love dependence on a romantic adult.*

In order to get the juices flowing in your relationship, you and your partner need to kick out the props that hold you in stasis. Let your relationship go into crisis. Deal with your own discomfort. If removing your stability props throws you into depression or anxiety, then fix it, don't mask it. Of course, the idea of doing without is frightening and unappealing for most of us. You or your partner may need support, even professional help if the dependency is significant. But the very reason we are reluctant to give up our props is the reason we should. Doing so throws us into a confrontation with each other, and with the unresolved aspects of our relationship that we've been far too comfortable avoiding.

Decades of work with couples have taught me that just because someone is miserable by no means necessarily indicates that she/he wants to change. I call this being "comfortable/miserable," and ask my clients, "You can be comfortable or you can have a great relationship; what's more important to you?" **If you're serious about changing your relationship, you need to cut back or altogether stop anything that emotionally removes you from the reality of it.** Put away your diversions. Turn around, face your partner-and deal.