

# Slow-burn crazy-making behaviours: recognising and responding

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Do you know someone who seems to have drama and problems constantly appear around them? Whenever you relate to this person, perhaps you find yourself feeling vaguely guilty, or uncomfortable, or put down, or obligated to affirm them? Do you often feel like you're questioning yourself and your actions because of what they say and do? You don't feel the same way around other people; it's just this individual who seems to attract these dramas and give rise to these feelings in you. If that's the case, the chances are *it's not you* who is the problem. It's quite possible that the person you're thinking of is exhibiting a pattern of behaviours that can be significantly detrimental to you and to others. This pattern of behaviours is hard to pin down; it doesn't seem too serious in the short term, and indeed it might appear quite normal to a casual acquaintance. However, over the long term, it can cause serious problems for you and others. That's especially true in close-knit communities, like families, churches and other Christian ministries.

This paper is a reflection on our personal experience with a small handful of people—some of whom we know well, and some of whom we know less well. Some of these people have been leaders or influential figures in various Christian ministries, which is why we believe it is especially important for us to share this (though please note that none of them are people that either of us have ever worked with in a paid capacity). This small handful of people have each exhibited a pattern of behaviours that we have chosen to call *slow-burn crazy-making behaviours* (SBCMB).

Slow-burn crazy-making behaviours (SBCMB) is a term that we've made up ourselves. That's quite deliberate, because we're not writing as experts, and we're not psychological practitioners. While we believe that psychological expertise can be greatly beneficial (see, for example, the courses available at the [Mental Health and Pastoral Care Institute](https://www.mentalhealthandpastoralcareinstitute.com/)), we believe there is also a place for personal stories and reflections. The latter is what we're doing here: giving some reflections from our personal experience in Christian ministry and

other relationships on recognising and responding to a particular pattern of behaviour that we have identified.<sup>1</sup>

Why have we chosen to use this label “slow-burn crazy-making behaviours”? Firstly, we want to focus on the *behaviours*, not diagnose anybody with anything.<sup>2</sup> We’re writing this to help you to identify behaviours that may be at work in interactions with people you are in relationship with, and to describe some strategies that we have found helpful in responding to those behaviours. We want to help you to act in a way that is rightly loving both to the person exhibiting the pattern of behaviours and also (importantly) to those people whom their behaviours may be harming.

We’re calling it *crazy-making* because we want to focus here primarily on the negative effects of these behaviours on *you and others*, and how to deal with those effects. In our experience, people who exhibit SBCMB can end up causing a great deal of confusion, emotional turmoil and pain to those who are in their spheres of influence. This can lead to particularly damaging consequences, especially when the person exhibiting SBCMB is a leader or influential figure in a Christian ministry context (which is why we feel it particularly important to write this).

*(Note: Help for survivors (and their supporters) of complex or childhood trauma is beyond the scope of this paper, but is available at the [Blue Knot Foundation](#)).*

We’re calling this pattern of behaviours *slow-burn* because the behaviours can seem harmless at first, but have significant detrimental consequences over the long term. It normally takes some time for the confusion, turmoil and pain to come to light. As we have tried to deal with—and help others deal with—the problems that keep surfacing in interactions with the small handful of people we are thinking of, we and others have experienced significant emotional dissonance and confusion. We have also prayed and reflected in great depth. Through this, we have been able to employ strategies of responding to the behaviours that, while not always easy, have been effective at limiting the damage both to ourselves and to others, and which we want to share here.

Please note that we are not trying here to provide a solution for all relational problems. We recognise there is an implicit danger in writing this paper. The label we have

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<sup>1</sup> We’re deeply grateful to various psychological and ministry practitioners, and others, who have provided valuable insights on prior drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Psychological practitioners who have seen prior drafts of this paper have identified a diverse range of possible causes for this behaviour, which we understand will be different for different people. The possible causes include such things as complex trauma, childhood trauma, borderline personality disorder (which itself can be caused by complex/childhood trauma), and the “vulnerable/sensitive” manifestation of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, among others.

created here (SBCMB) *could* be illegitimately and indiscriminately weaponised. That is, it's possible to wrongly apply the label SBCMB to anyone who has caused you pain and difficulty. But this is *not* what we intend. The pattern of behaviours consists of a set of specific and observable features, and only applies to a small handful of people we know. If somebody you know fits just one or two of the features we outline here, or if they seem to fit the pattern only occasionally (e.g. when under high stress), they are not the kind of people we are describing here.

We are also not trying to publicly “cancel” individuals (in the modern sense of boycotting, publicly shaming, or withdrawing support from them). In fact, it would probably be impossible even if we wanted to “cancel” such people. That is because, in our experience, when those who exhibit SBCMB are criticised or challenged, they tend to devote so much energy to portraying themselves as being unfairly victimised that the effects of their behaviours just become worse and more widespread. So our primary aim here is to provide advice for you to *personally* recognise and respond to this pattern of behaviours.

Having said this, we understand that it is possible that *some* (not all) people who exhibit the kinds of behaviours we will describe here may be engaging in abuse. Such actions need to be stopped and exposed, for the sake of protecting victims. Thus, we hope and pray that if enough people are aware of this pattern of behaviours, any particularly destructive (i.e. abusive) instances might be able to be more easily recognised more publicly and called to account where necessary.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The importance of doing this has been recently highlighted by cases of high-profile Christian leaders who have displayed truly abusive patterns of behaviour that went unacknowledged for a significant period of time because of an inability or unwillingness of others to recognise and name the issues (Jonathan Fletcher; Steve Timmis; Ravi Zacharias). We are not here claiming that these individuals exhibited what we are calling SBCMB; we are simply highlighting the fact that it is important for Christians to recognise destructive patterns of behaviour, including SBCMB, and deal with them appropriately.

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## ***A roadmap for this paper***

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Here is a roadmap for the paper. *(If you are reading this as a PDF, you can click on each of the headings below to take you to the relevant section.)*

**Part A: Recognising the pattern of behaviours.** In the first part of the paper, we will describe how to recognise the SBCMB pattern of behaviours. We'll move from the general to the specific. We will describe:

- How these behaviours fit into the Bible's teaching on sin and the gospel
- General indications that a person may be exhibiting SBCMB:
  - Strange inconsistencies in the person's relating and speaking
  - Crazy-making: Increasing confusion among people in the person's sphere of influence (including reports of "gaslighting")
  - People in the person's sphere of influence identifying their experiences as "abuse"
- Some broad underlying patterns of SBCMB:
  - Defining morality in terms of themselves
  - Redefining personal/relational reality to suit their view of themselves
- Some specific features of SBCMB:
  - Fraught relationships with peers
  - Excessive reactions to praise and sympathy
  - Initial (selective) love-bombing
  - Making themselves the greatest victim
  - Resisting and transgressing personal boundaries
  - Using words persuasively but untruthfully
  - Creating a relational climate that revolves around themselves
  - Self-affirming reactions to criticism
  - Energetically co-opting others to affirm themselves
  - Expressing feelings of betrayal when serious action is taken
  - What if this describes me?
  - Summary: a consistent pattern
- The effect of SBCMB on others

**Part B: Responding to SBCMB.** In the second part of the paper, we will provide some principles in responding to the SBCMB pattern of behaviours. We want to share what we have discovered through our own experiences, so you can better care for all people involved, whether they exhibit SBCMB or have been hurt by it. We hope this will help you both to avoid potential problems, and—if you have suffered from past experiences—to move towards greater understanding and recovery for yourself and for others. The key principles we identify are:

- Pray
- Be careful of your own wellbeing
- Allow the Bible to define love, not the person exhibiting SBCMB
- Realise that normal social rules may not apply
- Be very clear on your personal boundaries
- Be very clear on the truth—don't let them define reality
- Recognise illegitimate guilt—don't let them define morality
- Don't be afraid of disengaging
- If you believe there is actually abuse, take further action

**Part C: If you have an accountability or potential endorsement role for a person in Christian leadership who may be exhibiting SBCMB.** This final part of the paper is more specific in its application, but still critical for those who are in a situation where they are being used by a person exhibiting SBCMB to provide “accountability” or endorsement for them. We will address the following:

- If you have a true accountability role
- If you find yourself in a quasi-accountability role
- If you hear many people criticising the person
- If you need to say something publicly

**Resources to help.** Because we're **not personally able to respond to queries you may have about this paper**, we have provided further links for you to follow up.

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## Part A: Recognising the pattern of behaviours

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In this first part of the paper, we will focus primarily on how to *recognise* the SBCMB pattern of behaviours. We will move here from the general to the specific:

- How these behaviours fit into the Bible's teaching on sin and the gospel
- General indications that a person may be exhibiting SBCMB
- Some broad underlying patterns of SBCMB
- Some specific features of SBCMB
- The effect of SBCMB on others

Throughout Part A, we will focus on *recognising* the behaviours. Later, in Part B: Responding to SBCMB (and Part C: If you have an accountability or potential endorsement role for a person in Christian leadership who may be exhibiting SBCMB) we will focus on how to *respond*.

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### ***How these behaviours fit into the Bible's teaching on sin and the gospel***

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We are writing this paper as Christians, fully convinced of the gospel of Jesus Christ. One of the important truths of the gospel is that all of us are sinners, and so all of us are in need of grace and salvation through Jesus' atoning death for us. So why are we giving a special label "SBCMB" to this particular pattern of behaviours, and treating it as a special problem that only affects some people? Why not just call it "sin," and simply recognise that all people are sinners?

The reason is that sin manifests in different ways in different people. Some people, whether through something inherent in themselves or through something in their experience (or both), have particular propensities to sin in certain areas, with particularly significant effects on others.

For example, drunkenness is wrong for anyone, because it involves losing self-control and thus it negatively and profoundly affects how we treat other people. However, for a particular subset of people, there are specific struggles and dangers above and beyond those that others face in this area. People with alcohol use disorders normally need to take special measures in order to protect themselves and those they love, for example, by avoiding alcohol altogether; when they do not take these extraordinary measures, the effects on those in their circle of influence can be quite severe, and indeed can be devastating and last for generations.

This is similar to the situation with SBCMB (though we need to stress again that the label SBCMB is not meant to describe a "disorder"—it's simply a pattern of behaviours that

we have noticed in a small handful of people known to us). While of course all of us make mistakes, and all of us are inconsistent to a greater or lesser extent, SBCMB is more than making occasional mistakes. It is a more consistent pattern of behaviours that some people exhibit that can be especially destructive, especially over the long term. In our experience, this pattern of behaviours creates complex problems for groups, which require us to take special measures in response. These measures involve strategies of relating that we wouldn't necessarily apply to others, such as very strictly enforcing personal and emotional boundaries (we'll explore this more below).

In all of this, we need to remember that it is important to show love to those who exhibit SBCMB. However, we need to be very careful here. Loving such a person—in a way that safeguards our own integrity as well as the wellbeing of the many potentially vulnerable people around them—does not always look like “love” at first glance. True love in this instance may involve putting more robust personal boundaries in place, and insisting on truth and consistency. Yet a person exhibiting SBCMB will often complain that doing such things is extremely “unloving”. Such a complaint has a powerful emotional appeal, but nevertheless it arises from a distorted view of reality. We need to guard against allowing this complaint to deflect us from doing what is right, and so being *truly* loving. We will return to some of these things in more detail below. For now, we want to move on to identify the general pattern of SBCMB that we have noticed.

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### ***General indications that a person may be exhibiting SBCMB***

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We'll begin by describing some of the general indications that a person *may* be exhibiting SBCMB, so you can recognise that this pattern of behaviours may be at play in a certain situation, and ask further questions if necessary.

As we mentioned above, people who exhibit SBCMB can seem to be behaving in a normal way at first. In fact, some can be quite effective in their vocations. This is especially true if they work in a field where an ability to persuade people is important. Such people can build significant and loyal followings. Indeed, through their influence they can genuinely help many people. (This is probably why some such people can end up being leaders or influential figures in churches or other Christian ministry contexts.) All of these are of course good in themselves: just because somebody is effective or influential or helpful to others doesn't mean they are exhibiting SBCMB! Furthermore, it is right to think the best of people—to take people at face value, and at their word. We all know that that's how relationships work.

After a while, however, three things tend to happen around people who exhibit SBCMB. These are:

- Strange inconsistencies in the person's relating and speaking

- Crazy-making: Increasing confusion among people in the person's sphere of influence (including reports of "gaslighting")
- People in the person's sphere of influence identifying their experiences as "abuse"

### **1 *Strange inconsistencies in the person's relating and speaking***

Firstly, strange inconsistencies start to appear in the way they relate and speak— inconsistencies that begin to accumulate and become more and more obvious over time. For example, you might observe that they will say one thing to one person, but another contradictory thing to another person. Or they will make promises and commitments to a person, and then appear entirely to forget they have done so later, especially when it is not convenient for them to follow through.

These inconsistencies are normally papered over or ignored by people close to them, because in most other ways the person seems fine, and indeed often quite gifted and effective. After all, all of us make mistakes, and all of us occasionally forget promises and commitments we have made. There is no reason to get upset about every small inconsistency, or we'd never be able to relate to anyone. Remember, we all know that relationships work when we think the best of others, even when something seems a bit odd, and when we take people at face value and at their word. Moreover, as Christians we are in the business of seeking to deal first with the plank in our own eye before the speck in someone else's eye (Matthew 7:3–5) and so we strive to be those who bear with one another and to be quick to forgive, like our Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:13). However, in the case of individuals exhibiting SBCMB, the inconsistencies begin to pile up and become more evident over time. Furthermore, when issues are raised, the individuals seem not to seriously acknowledge their inconsistencies—rather, they tend to consistently downplay them, or defend themselves and accuse others of being overly picky, or come across as simply humble and vulnerable and unfairly victimised.

### **2 *Crazy-making: Increasing confusion among people in the person's sphere of influence (including reports of "gaslighting")***

Secondly, as time goes on, people within the spheres of influence of a person exhibiting SBCMB start to become increasingly confused about their involvement with the person or with the person's plans and projects and groups. The person's behaviour is, in other words, "crazy-making". People in their sphere of influence start to experience cognitive dissonance: doubting themselves, doubting their own ability to discern reality, and feeling strangely guilty and wrong for ever criticising the person exhibiting SBCMB or questioning the culture of the group that surrounds the person.



For some, especially those who are themselves already emotionally vulnerable, or who are dependent children, or who have a high level of commitment to the person, or who have a long duration of involvement with the person, there can be increasingly serious spirals of emotional turmoil, guilt and self-doubt, sometimes involving clinical anxiety and depression. For some, these effects can end up being quite severe and in need of professional psychological help (note: if this describes you, you might want to check out the [Blue Knot Foundation](#)). This is the effect of the kind of behaviour that is often called “gaslighting”. In this case, the gaslighting behaviour may not be strictly intentional. That is, it is difficult to work out whether a person exhibiting SBCMB actually understands the effect they are having on others. Nevertheless, the effect is real and serious for a significant number in the person’s sphere of influence. Thus it ends up being similar to the effect of malicious/intentional gaslighting, whatever the label we give to it.

It is important to realise that not everybody in the person’s sphere of influence experiences such high levels of confusion and self-doubt. Some (perhaps many) people in their sphere of influence, especially those who value the person’s effectiveness and gifts or who have been specially helped by them, and who perhaps aren’t so emotionally vulnerable themselves, might continue to see the person’s inconsistencies simply as minor foibles. These people can end up being fiercely loyal supporters of the person, defending them even more vigorously as various criticisms begin to pile up over time. On the other hand, there may be others who end up realising there are significant issues with the person, and feel they need to call the person to account. Because such criticism will normally draw an extreme reaction from a person exhibiting SBCMB, this can end up being very complicated and time-consuming for all involved (we’ll explore more about why this is the case below).

This long-term confusion, self-doubt and emotional turmoil among a significant group of people in a close relationship with a person exhibiting SBCMB seems to be a consistent pattern, and is a general sign to watch out for. Note that if the person is a leader or an influential figure in a Christian ministry context, the person can project their slow-burn crazy-making behaviour onto their ministry, so that the whole organisation / church / ministry itself can start to exhibit the same kind behaviours corporately, and affect people in a similar way.

### **3 *People in the person’s sphere of influence identifying their experiences as “abuse”***

Thirdly, the negative long-term impact of such a pattern of behaviours can sometimes be identified as “abuse” by people in the person’s sphere of influence. This identification of “abuse” needs to be taken seriously. However, we need to be careful here, because there are various possible reasons why the label “abuse” might be used.

On the one hand, abuse is real, and tragically it happens far too often. Abuse can take various forms, including emotional and spiritual. Abuse should not be tolerated: it needs to be stopped and called to account for the protection of victims. Recent publications that are designed to raise awareness and help people to respond rightly include *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* by Diane Langberg and *Something's Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from its Power* by Wade Mullen.<sup>4</sup> If a person identifies themselves as being subject to “abuse”, it may well be because they are actually being abused. This possibility cannot be ignored, and books such as those we have mentioned can be helpful in understanding and responding to the situation. If you believe that the behaviour you have experienced may actually be abuse, we also strongly encourage you to report it to the appropriate authority, or do whatever action is appropriate in the situation. This may be hard, but it is important to do, not just for your sake, but for the sake of other potential victims.

On the other hand, the term “abuse” does not *necessarily* apply to all the behaviours we are identifying here as part of the pattern of SBCMB. This is not to deny that the effects of SBCMB on others are often serious and can be deeply traumatic. Furthermore, we recognise that it can be helpful for individuals who have been affected deeply by relating to a person exhibiting SBCMB to label such an experience “abuse”, because such a label assists them to come to terms with the seriousness of the situation and enables them to see that they should not feel guilty for what has happened. However, since not all SBCMB actually fits the definition of “abuse”, using the term too freely can end up being counter-productive. This is for two reasons.

Firstly, the label “abuse” is so strong and emotive that it is liable to being dismissed as over-reach. The label “abuse” normally implies (in other people’s minds) some kind of intentional, criminal or acutely malicious behaviour. However, in the case of SBCMB, that’s not necessarily what’s going on. SBCMB tends to be a drawn-out pattern of behaviours that produces effects in the long term. Any *individual* instance of behaviour will not normally obviously fit the category of “abuse” by itself, especially when it is described to an outsider. That is, an individual action may be seen as strange perhaps, or a little too callous or neglectful, but if regarded by itself it is not necessarily “abusive”. That makes it difficult to pin down or easily label the person’s behaviour as “abusive” in the classic sense. Hence, anyone who investigates such a charge will probably not see sufficient evidence for “abuse”

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<sup>4</sup> Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2020); Wade Mullen, *Something's Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from its Power* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020).

in any individual instance, and so might dismiss the charge entirely. In that case, the seriously damaging and traumatic effects of what is actually happening can easily be missed.

Secondly, using the word “abuse” too freely can enable the person exhibiting SBCMB to complain that they are being unfairly victimised. This can, in fact, further *cement* their behaviour, and enable them to co-opt others into defending them against these “unfair” charges. In that case, the charge of “abuse” can end up ultimately *amplifying* the problem rather than helping it.

This leaves us in a bit of a bind. While we do not want to dismiss either the reality of true abuse, or the reality that using the label “abuse” can help people who are affected by relating to a person exhibiting SBCMB, we also recognise that using the label too freely or imprecisely can mean that *other* serious trauma-inducing behaviours can too easily be dismissed and so not dealt with properly. In fact, we have seen this happen. Hence, in what follows, we will seek to avoid the label “abuse” as a broad term. We will primarily describe the pattern of behaviours, show the kind of serious effects it can have (including “trauma”, which is perhaps a more helpful term here), and provide our reflections on ways to respond helpfully.

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### ***Some broad underlying patterns of SBCMB***

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Note that we have so far only described some of the *general indications* that a person *may* be exhibiting SBCMB. Inconsistencies in speaking and relating, increasing confusion among people in their sphere of influence, and claims of “gaslighting” and “abuse” do not *necessarily* mean that the person is exhibiting this general pattern of SBCMB. There may be other explanations. But these general indications should prompt you to ask further questions. We will here go on to describe the actual pattern of SBCMB behaviours that we have identified.

We will now make some observations about two *broad* patterns of speaking and acting that seem to underlie various other more *specific* features of SBCMB:

- Defining morality in terms of themselves
- Redefining personal/relational reality to suit their view of themselves

We will spell out these broad patterns first in this section. In the next section, we will describe more specific ways in which these broad patterns can manifest themselves. We will also provide some (anonymised) examples from our own experience.

#### ***1 Defining morality in terms of themselves***

The first broad pattern of SBCMB is the tendency for a person exhibiting SBCMB to define morality primarily in reference to themselves. The moral world of such a person often seems divided into two kinds of people: “people who think I’m worthy” (i.e. the good

people) and “people who are against me” (i.e. the bad people). For those who are leaders of a Christian ministry or church, this might be extended to their ministry, i.e. there are two kinds of people: “people who are for my ministry/church” (i.e. the good people) and “people who are against my ministry/church” (i.e. the bad people). This is the primary category through which much of their moral conversation is filtered. Sometimes it can take a while for this pattern to become clear, but once recognised it appears to make sense of many other statements the person makes. At other times, the attitude is obvious right from the start.

### **An illustration: Defining morality in terms of themselves**

I (Lionel) once contacted an individual because I was concerned that this individual had published an unfair criticism of another person’s work. I wanted to check the accuracy of my observations before publicly defending the other person against the criticism as part of my own work. I had never met the individual who wrote the criticism before I contacted him. His response to me was quite surprising. Before getting around to talking about the issue I raised about his criticism, he began with several lengthy paragraphs, in which he:

- criticised all the other people in my circles who—he claimed—always (without exception) publicly criticised his work yet never checked with him privately first.

- commended me in strong terms for contacting him directly—implying that I was in a moral category different from everybody else in my circles.

- claimed that people in my circles had a settled policy of ignoring him and denigrating him, with a further statement that he personally could not “excuse” such behaviour (again implying a moral judgment).

- lamented that those with whom he disagreed tended not to engage with him (but hoping that I might be an exception).

- stated that it was important that I should now enter into a further public debate/discussion with him, which he said would be “healthy” and “mature”—with the obvious implication that for me not to do so would be unhealthy and immature.

Of course, such statements by themselves are not sufficient to identify the full SBCMB pattern; however, in subsequent conversation I realised that this person also displayed most of the other characteristics of SBCMB that we list below. We will return to some of these statements below, since they illustrate other features of SBCMB.

Thus, frequent statements from a person in which that person’s moral world is divided into “people who think I’m worthy” and “people who are against me” is an indicator of SBCMB, and seems to point to an underlying feature.

## 2 *Redefining personal/relational reality to suit their view of themselves*

Not only do those who exhibit SBCMB tend to describe *morality* primarily in reference to themselves (see above); it seems that they also often redefine *personal/relational reality* to suit their view of themselves. That is, their conversation and statements often suggest that their understanding of the truth about any personal relationship—how it is currently working, how it has worked in the past, and how it “should” work in the future—is significantly distorted and out of step with reality. It appears from their behaviour that they have a “reality” in their minds that is not the same as actual reality as it would be recognised by most other people. They seem to have constructed a view of personal/relational reality that revolves around themselves, and their relationship with others involves getting those others to live in their world, and not vice-versa.

This means they can sometimes display a disconcertingly loose relationship with objective truth when it comes to describing the past and present of their relationship with you. Their words—and seemingly even their thoughts—do not necessarily match reality in this area. Furthermore, they seem to change their memories of past exchanges with you—even exchanges in the recent past—to fit the reality that is in their minds. It’s difficult, and perhaps impossible, to work out whether they are deliberately lying, since they seem to firmly believe their own self-constructed reality. Nevertheless, the effect is the same as the effect of actual lying. They cannot be relied on to have a true view of reality when it comes to personal (and professional) relationships. Hence, normal categories of relating to a person—things like assuming truth, coherence and consistency in making promises and remembering to keep them or in describing past conversations—don’t necessarily apply. You can see how thinking the best of them and taking them at their word just doesn’t work at this point.

This is one reason that relating to a person exhibiting SBCMB can end up feeling like being gaslighted. Because they appear to be so firmly convinced of their own distorted reality and self-modified memories, you yourself can end up being seen as—or feeling yourself to be—the crazy one, just for trying to be consistent in your own patterns of relating and memories. And the closer you are to a person exhibiting SBCMB, the more serious the effects on you may be.

I (Bronwyn) prayerfully wrote a letter to a dearly loved person in my life in which I laid out significant areas—along with specific examples—in which their relational behaviour towards me had affected me in deeply negative ways. The person acknowledged that they had heard me, expressed sorrow, asked for forgiveness, and expressed a desire to relate well in future. I joyfully forgave them, but for some months they continued to exhibit exactly the same kind of behaviour that I had pointed out was problematic in the letter. When I briefly raised the same issues again, the person justified their behaviour as simply a “natural” way to

communicate, implying that I was being inexplicably unfair and should try to relate differently myself. This response seemed only to have in mind my most recent (brief) communication. It was as if the detailed letter I had previously written, along with their own strongly-worded expressions of acknowledgement, sorrow and a desire to change, simply did not exist. The relationship felt like it was only happening “in the present” with no reference to anything in the past—even though it was the recent past. Reality was being modified in “real time” to suit the person’s view of themselves in the moment.

So far we have described two broad patterns of SBCMB: defining morality in terms of themselves, and redefining personal/relational reality to suit themselves. These broad patterns can be better understood by describing more specific patterns.

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### ***Some specific features of SBCMB***

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Here we list some more specific features of SBCMB that we have observed. As we mentioned above, the pattern seems to be reasonably consistent across the handful of people we have identified in our own experience (again, we want to affirm that none of these are people that either of us have worked with in a paid capacity). We want to reiterate that we are *not* talking here about people here who fit just a few of the features below, or who fit the pattern only occasionally (e.g. when under high stress). Pretty much all of us do some of these things some of the time! However, if a person does *many* of these things *much* of the time, we are suggesting it should be a cause of concern.

The specific features we will discuss are:

- Fraught relationships with peers
- Excessive reactions to praise and sympathy
- Initial (selective) love-bombing
- Making themselves the greatest victim
- Resisting and transgressing personal boundaries
- Using words persuasively but untruthfully
- Creating a relational climate that revolves around themselves
- Self-affirming reactions to criticism
- Energetically co-opting others to affirm themselves
- Expressing feelings of betrayal when serious action is taken
- What if this describes me?

## **1 *Fraught relationships with peers***

Those who exhibit SBCMB do not seem to be able to collaborate easily with peers. By “peers” we mean other people on the same “level” as them within their profession/vocation or their social circle.

It is true that those who exhibit SBCMB can sometimes be regarded as “leaders” in their professional field/vocation. However, their “leadership” style is normally a lone-operator kind of leadership. That is, they tend to end up as a sole leader of a loyal group of followers, or a tight-knit team of people who don’t seriously question their leadership, or a wider loose circle of fans who approve of what they do but do not deal with the person directly. They don’t tend to lead by genuinely working in partnership with peers, or by making compromises, or by fitting in with established teams or social groups of true equals.

This needs to be spelled out a little further, because those who exhibit SBCMB may often devote much energy trying to *create* new collaborations, or form new social groups with peers. However, these collaborations tend not to last in the long term.

Indeed, those who exhibit SBCMB tend to have frequent fallings out with peers, especially those who they are seeking to collaborate or join with. Each time a falling out happens, the person who exhibits SBCMB will be able to give plausible-sounding reasons why others are to blame. Those whom they are blaming will tend not to make a fuss, normally out of concern for the person and/or a desire not to cause needless complications. Nevertheless, after a while, it becomes clearer that it is the person themselves who is the common factor in a long-term and consistent pattern of fallings out with peers.

Note that this consistently troubled relationship with peers does not necessarily carry across to the person’s relationships with those whom they are clearly “over” in terms of influence or authority. Indeed, they can be very persuasive to those whom they are leading, at least initially. Similarly, they can also be very persuasive to those who are their “seniors” in some way, i.e. they often make great efforts to present themselves as victimised heroes to those whom they see as influential or authoritative or ahead of them in the field. We will return to this below.

## **2 *Excessive reactions to praise and sympathy***

Those who exhibit SBCMB tend to display over-the-top reactions to praise and sympathy.

For example, you might mention something you appreciate about a person, in order to be affirming and thankful, or even just polite, as would be expected in a normal human interaction. Or you might give a simple expression of sympathy if you hear of a difficulty

they've experienced (e.g. "I'm sorry to hear that"). Normally, you would expect the person to respond with a simple "thanks" or similar.

However, a person exhibiting SBCMB may give a disconcerting, over-the-top response, such as "You don't realise how that much that means to me," or "People don't normally appreciate me like that," or "Thanks so much, I feel like we've really connected now." This can happen even if you have only just started to relate to the person and don't know them very well, or if you have only just reconnected with them after a prolonged period of not relating.

Note that this behaviour tends to be very one-sided. That is, the person is unlikely to exhibit the same kind of praise or empathy towards you. It is true that they might praise you, but their praise of you will likely be based primarily on how well you have responded to *them* and *their* needs rather than on anything independently praiseworthy about you or your actions (see further below).

### **3 Initial (selective) love-bombing**

Those who exhibit SBCMB may begin or renew personal relationships with selective "love-bombing."

By this, we mean that a person who exhibits SBCMB may begin a new relationship with you—or seek to re-establish a relationship with you after a period of absence—by excessively praising or commending you, or giving you gifts, or sacrificing things, or spending close personal time with you, etc. However, it soon becomes clear that there is a definite reason for their love-bombing. They are "loving" you because, in their minds, you have demonstrated, by your presence with them or your willingness to talk to them, that you support or affirm them. The love-bombing appears to be an attempt by them to reward and reinforce your support and affirmation of them.

The love-bombing behaviour can have several effects. In terms of the dynamics of your relationship with them, it feels intense and heady, it breaks down personal boundaries, and it puts you personally in their debt. It can also change your own behaviour. The love-bombing can seem very gratifying to you; it appeals to your own sense of worth, and you can enjoy the closeness and feelings of loyalty it creates. It may cause you to respond to them with excessive praise and thanks in return. Nevertheless, it is important to realise that this love-bombing is highly conditional. It is clear that they are loving you, not for your sake, but for theirs, to reward you for your response to them, and to put you further in their debt.

At this point we need to affirm, in the strongest possible terms, that this is far removed from true love as it is understood in the Bible. While the person may use the words "I love you," their actions demonstrate that what they mean is "I need you (emotionally)." This view of love is, sadly, only enabled and reinforced by the current pervasive view of



“love” in our society as a strong emotion of neediness. Jesus’ love, by contrast, is a love that demonstrates itself in true other-person-centred care and self-giving sacrifice for the sake of others (Ephesians 5:1–2). It is true that Jesus’ sacrifice should call forth a response from us. However, Jesus’ sacrifice was *not* like an act of love-bombing designed to put us in his personal debt so that we now have an obligation to repay him out of forced loyalty or guilt. Rather, Jesus’ sacrifice was the self-giving sacrifice of the divine Son, who loved us even before we had done anything good for him, and who brings us into a loving relationship with God as our true heavenly Father. This should create in us security and freedom, not a guilt-ridden form of loyal obligation. Jesus’ self-giving love enables us to love and give ourselves for others, freely and without fear.<sup>5</sup> It is *this* view of love that needs to be affirmed, over against the kind of selective and conditional love-bombing that can be practised by those who exhibit SBCMB. *Indeed, we are convinced that this message of God’s love in Jesus Christ is a primary remedy for such dysfunctional ways of relating that our world wrongly calls “love”.* We need to pray: pray that both we and the person exhibiting SBCMB might know, or know more deeply, God’s love for us in Jesus (more of this below).

#### 4 ***Making themselves the greatest victim***

Those who exhibit SBCMB tend to seek to make themselves into the greatest victim in any situation. If somebody in their sphere of influence expresses to them discomfort, emotional hurt or pain—even hurt or pain caused by the person exhibiting SBCMB themselves—they will often shift the conversation so that the “real” issue becomes their *own* hurt or pain, which they portray as bigger and more in need of empathy. This can happen either overtly—e.g. through breaking down emotionally, walking out of a room, suddenly talking about their own extreme depression or anxiety—or more subtly—e.g. through a gradual shift in the topic of conversation, so that the personal hurts expressed by others become sidelined or seemingly irrelevant and petty, and the main issue becomes the hurts experienced by the person exhibiting SBCMB.

This behaviour of portraying oneself as the greatest victim can give a person a great deal of relational power. It wins them support, sympathy, and moral authority—even more so since victimhood tends to be privileged in our modern world. Of course, it is quite right and natural to show compassion and sympathy to genuine victims. However, those who exhibit SBCMB can hijack this natural sympathy, always laying claim to the sympathy of others by portraying themselves as the greater victims over against others who might otherwise have a legitimate claim. This is not necessarily a conscious activity; as far as we can tell from our personal experience, it seems that those exhibiting SBCMB have such a

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see Lionel Windsor, “Imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1–2),” *Forget the Channel* 11 September 2019, <http://www.lionelwindsor.net/2019/09/11/ephesians-5-1-2/>

distorted view of personal reality that they truly believe that they are in need of more sympathy than anyone else in most situations. Thus, when they relate to genuine victims—including and especially victims of their own SBCMB—they tend to consistently “win” the victim game, so taking the support, sympathy and moral authority that might otherwise be given to others. Since they are so good at doing this, it is very difficult to oppose their view of themselves, and to defend other victims, without feeling (and/or being seen to be) guilty of being uncaring and ungracious towards the one who has portrayed themselves as the greatest victim.

This behaviour manifests itself in various ways and at various levels of seriousness. For example, you may notice that the person expects great empathy from you in many situations, but fails to show the same level of empathy to you when you face similar or worse situations. You may notice that when you share your own feelings of hurt or hardship or joy with them, they respond to you in a way that is entirely focused on their *own* feelings and effectively ignores what you have said about yourself. You may notice that they amplify their own personal hurts while downplaying or ignoring others’ pain. You may notice that several people in their sphere of influence who have a genuine and legitimate grievance against them don’t follow through with that grievance, because they end up regarding it as petty or illegitimate in comparison to the larger hurts being suffered by the person exhibiting SBCMB. You may notice that if you or anyone else becomes a source of frustration for the person exhibiting SBCMB, or a blockage for their plans or projects, they regard this as a morally serious issue and make a great deal of it; but conversely, if they are told that they are a similar source of frustration or blockage for others, they dismiss the issue as being unimportant or simply ignore it. You may notice that if you publicly express any legitimate concerns about their behaviour, they dismiss such concerns while quickly complaining about being victimised.

#### **An illustration: Making themselves the greatest victim**

A person involved in leadership whom we know was criticised for his leadership. In the course of defending himself, he shared a story about a woman who had broken down in tears in front of him, unable to stop crying. He then described how the woman had complained to her friends about his unreasonable demands on her. The woman’s complaints (as he described them) actually seemed quite serious, and he made no attempt to deny them. But for his purposes, the complaints against him were evidence that *he* was being treated badly. That is, he viewed the woman breaking down in tears and expressing her concerns to others about his excessive demands primarily as an important piece of evidence that, he claimed, obviously demonstrated how irrational people were victimising him and causing annoyance and problems for his leadership. He presented the story as evidence for how patient he had been with such bad behaviour, thus to elicit empathy for himself.

However, he appeared to show no empathy for the woman and her struggles, nor any sense that there might be a legitimate issue with his own behaviour that he needed to address.

## 5 *Resisting and transgressing personal boundaries*

Another feature of SBCMB is the tendency to resist or transgress the personal and relational boundaries of others. By “boundaries” we mean the things that make you, you, as an individual in relation to other, different, individuals. These include physical boundaries, but also boundaries involving your time, your personal decision-making, and your agency, such as your ability to say “no” and the right to have that decision respected by others as legitimate.<sup>6</sup> The concept of boundaries is, we believe, a biblical one, especially when it is understood as part of the broader concept of “holiness” (but this is not the place to prove that last point). However, a person who exhibits SBCMB often resists or transgresses such boundaries. They seem to have such a profound need for your approval, your time, your agency, and indeed sometimes your very self to complete themselves and their own sense of worth, that they can end up transgressing your personal boundaries—and so disrespecting your integrity as a person—in order to use you to extend and fulfil themselves.

A variant of this behaviour is when a person involved in leadership of a group (e.g. a family, church or social group) or project (e.g. an event) insists that you have a moral obligation to allow *their group or the project* to bypass or transgress your boundaries. This is especially hard to ignore when the group or project is something that by itself is a good and worthwhile thing to you (e.g. your own family or church), and the obligation is expressed in terms of larger ideals and transcendent principles (e.g. “family values”, or “the importance of the church”).

One indication that a person is consistently seeking to transgress your personal boundaries is the measure they use to evaluate their relationship with you. They may express or imply that they can only have a truly authentic relationship with you when you allow them (or their church/ministry) special access to bypass your boundaries. They may consistently praise you or demonstrate great delight when you allow them (or their church/ministry) to bypass (or transgress) your boundaries; conversely, they may state or imply that you are in fact morally obliged to allow them to bypass or transgress your boundaries, otherwise you are a bad person.

### **Illustrations: Resisting and transgressing personal boundaries**

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. H. Cloud and J. Townsend, *Boundaries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992): “Boundaries are anything that helps to differentiate you from someone else, or shows where you begin and end” (35). Examples include: skin, words, truth, geographical distance, time, emotional distance, other people, consequences (35-40).

**Example 1**

One example is a person who acts as if they (or their church/ministry) have a claim on your time at any time of the day or night, when you have not explicitly given them permission to do so. They may call or text you at work or late at night and expect you to be available for them. If you resist, they express that you are a bad person or not committed to them or to the relationship.

Another indication that a person is consistently seeking to transgress your personal boundaries is that any kind of personal / relational contact you may have with them is never “enough”. In a normal relationship, a period of personal / relational contact with a person (e.g. by talking on the phone, or email, or messaging, or visiting, etc.) should lead to a sense of fulfilment by the end of the period of contact. “It was great to see/hear from you!” is a normal response at the end of such contact. However, a person exhibiting SBCMB will often have the opposite reaction by the end of a time of contact, e.g. “It’s sad/wrong that you’re leaving me.” A time of contact never satisfies, and cannot be ended without a sense of loss. A reply to a message is never enough; it leads to a sense of further obligation, requiring more and more replies. Contact is thus not positive or fulfilling in itself; rather, it leads to the requirement for more and more intimacy, at a deeper and deeper level. A failure to provide this never-ending and ever-increasing obligation can then be seen as a betrayal.

**Example 2**

Another example is a person who will not simply accept the answer “no”, thus disrespecting personal agency. I (Lionel) once received a request by an individual who wanted me to use my personal website to create a forum for ongoing lengthy debate between me and him on a particular issue. The person was replying to an email I had sent him, where I had engaged briefly with something he had written on the issue. In the email, I had expressed that I saw the issue itself as significant. The individual based his request on this, stating that if I thought the *issue* was significant, then clearly that meant I should be willing to use my resources to debate with *him personally* about it. He did not seem to be able to see that my commitment to the *issue* was a separate matter from my commitment to *him* and his projects (and indeed, his reputation as a debater on the issue). In response, I stated a boundary: I did not see his suggested course of action as a priority, because I had other important things to do with my time. He would not accept this. He argued that if I had time to do any other activities, then clearly I had time to engage directly with him and his personal project (because it was clearly more important than anything else). Notice that he was not respecting me as a person with a right to make decisions about my own time. I repeated my boundary, and left it at that.

However, soon afterward when I went on annual leave, the person contacted me again by email. He told me had done a web search for my name combined with his, and had found other issues that he believed I was obliged to debate with him (in actuality, he had merely discovered a couple of references to his name amongst some detailed bibliographic material I had placed online years before). I had set up an out-of-office autoreply indicating that I was away on leave and would be back on a certain date. However, the person did not wait for me to return. Shortly after receiving the autoreply, while I was still on leave, he emailed me again with the subject “Where are you?”, asking me why we could not have a debate, and asking me to tell him what my issue was. That is, even though I had set up an autoreply that said that I was unavailable while on leave, his behaviour showed he regarded that this clearly did not apply to him; he could (he thought) bypass the boundary, with a right to have special access. Furthermore, he could not simply accept that I had the right to determine how I used my own time and resources; instead he believed he had a right to demand an account from me for my failure to give these over to his own agenda.

In the face of this, I realised I needed to put up a further boundary. I told him that he obviously had not read, understood, or believed my previous explanations as to why I had made this decision, and said he should go back and read those explanations; I would not repeat myself. The barrage of emails from him continued, with a similar theme: he kept implying that I was morally wrong not to debate with him (because engaging with *his project* was more important than anything else I could be doing), and asked me repeatedly to give reasons for saying no.

After this, I decided I needed to put in place yet another boundary: not to reply to him at all. This was an extraordinary boundary, above and beyond what I would put up in a regular relationship. In a regular relationship, we expect people to respect our regular boundaries (e.g. saying “no”). Since this person did not respect that boundary, but kept seeking to transgress it, I needed to put up a more extreme boundary (i.e. not replying to any of his emails).

Individuals who exhibit SBCMB will often try ways to avoid or circumvent reasonable boundaries that you have set up, in order to bypass or transgress them in a different way. A person may employ excuses or reasons why new circumstances mean that what you have clearly told them about reasonable ways you want them to behave towards you are not relevant in the new situation. To use a metaphor here: you find you need to erect, or simply point out, a boundary fence in the relationship; it is not respected, so you (sometimes reluctantly) need to build a brick wall because the boundary fence is not robust enough in your relationship with the person exhibiting SBCMB. In a normal relationship you might reasonably expect that the other person will respect the fence of your reasonable personal boundaries; a person exhibiting SBCMB will not—so the fence is at once trampled; sadly, the

boundary needs to be more like a brick wall. They will then try to get through the brick wall by trying the handle on every door they can find, and then trying any windows, or digging holes in the mortar, etc.

### **Example 3**

A third example is a person who sent emotionally-charged messages to me (Bronwyn), with ever-increasing frequency. After a time, I set up a boundary, saying that I needed some space and will not always be able to reply. The person simply modified their behaviour, sending further messages with only slightly modified content and using different messaging services. The messages were of the form: “Just want to give you some information about...”; then a little while later, “Just checking you got my information about...” Then when I didn’t respond, a little while later further messages came of the form: “Can I talk to you at all?”, “Just sending a message wondering if you’re ready for me to start messaging you again...?” The subsequent messages involved an attempt to triangulate in someone close to me, with the implication that I was being callous for not replying to these apparently reasonable requests to engage (note the portrayal of themselves as a victim).

## **6 Using words persuasively but untruthfully**

Another feature of SBCMB is a tendency to be very effective at using words to persuade people in specific situations, but without a proper regard for long-term consistency and truth. This behaviour normally only becomes obvious over the long term. In any given instance, what they say may sound very persuasive, logical, and even gracious. However, if you have a reason to compare what they have said previously with what they say subsequently, you may notice inconsistencies; and the more you look, the more inconsistencies and out-and-out contradictions arise. Of course, inconsistency is not limited to people exhibiting SBCMB. None of us is entirely consistent, and all of us can be selfish and try to justify ourselves. But for those exhibiting SBCMB, this inconsistency seems to be an entrenched pattern rather than an occasional feature.

This is especially true when the person is speaking about themselves or the way they have been treated.

### **An Illustration: Using words persuasively but untruthfully**

An individual known to me (Lionel) published a scathing critique of a group of scholars. In the opening words of his critique, he stated that he was well-qualified to write such a critique, because he had expertise in that particular scholarly field. He stressed in his critique that he held a formal high-level qualification in that scholarly field, and had been a long-term student in the field for decades. Such a prominent statement at the beginning of

his critique was obviously designed to demonstrate that what he was writing was legitimate and worthy of recognition.

However, when I read the critique, I noticed that he had made significant errors in certain statements pertaining to that particular scholarly field (in which I also happen to hold a formal high-level qualification). I contacted him to query one of these errors, as his critique of the other scholars was so scathing and dismissive.

In defending himself, he stated that he did *not* claim to be a scholar with direct expertise or mastery in that particular scholarly field (which of course was a direct contradiction to what he had said at the start of his critique). He said this to me in order to demonstrate that I was being overly harsh towards him, i.e. that I was holding him to an overly high standard and being unfair to him. Later, after a few exchanges in which other issues came to light, he claimed that he was simply a practitioner who often made mistakes (by implication, not a scholar at all).

Notice the way in which each statement from this person seemed quite specifically intended, within its own context, to portray him in a positive light. In the first context, his claims to expertise served to portray him as worthy of being heard broadly (and worthy of issuing a scathing critique against others). In the second context, his contradictory denial of such expertise enabled him to portray himself as a victim, worthy of sympathy for being unjustly criticised (and deflecting any claims that the people he had criticised were victims of his behaviour). That is, he had used words very persuasively in different contexts, but comparing the words between contexts shows they were directly contradictory of each other.

## 7 *Creating a relational climate that revolves around themselves*

Those who exhibit SBCMB tend to create a relational climate that revolves around themselves. By “relational climate” we mean the way people in a group tend to relate and speak to one another. The way a person exhibiting SBCMB tends to act and speak—especially their tendencies to use words persuasively and to portray themselves as the greatest victim in any situation—means that the relational climate of people in their spheres of influence tend to revolve around that person. The person gravitates towards the centre of everybody’s concern. The various patterns of relating and general conversation seem frequently to end up being “all about” the person rather than about other people or issues.

### **An illustration: Creating a relational climate that revolves around themselves**

A person known to me (Lionel) became involved in an online debate about a significant issue. After a while, as the person interacted with various other people, I observed that the issue itself became secondary to the conversation, while the actual topic of debate gradually became more and more about the person themselves. Commenters focused

on how clever or gracious the particular person was. Questions revolved around whether the person was being treated fairly or not. Any statements made about the issue tended to be judged on the basis of whether that one person's feelings had been taken into account.

This relational climate was clearly being “fed” by the person themselves, as they continued to interact. That is, the person kept reinforcing the climate by rewarding “good” behaviour—commending and thanking anyone who took their feelings into account, with statements like “that means a lot to me”—and criticising “bad” behaviour—i.e. complaining about anyone who happened to disagree that they had not properly understood or engaged with the person. The person kept insisting that those who disagreed with their view had a moral obligation to engage further with them, in other forums, implying that not doing so was a moral failure. The issue itself ended up being almost impossible to discuss objectively, as the personality and their feelings almost entirely overshadowed the issue.

After this online debate, I (Lionel) spoke to various people who had tried to engage in the debate but had disagreed with this individual. As a result of the interaction, many of them had increased feelings of guilty, anxiety, and self-doubt.

## 8 *Self-affirming reactions to criticism*

The way a person exhibiting SBCMB reacts to criticism is not the same in every case; it may contain one or more different elements. The elements that we have noticed in the people known to us are: ignoring, deflecting, simulating repentance, re-writing the past, endless dialogue, and explaining with conspiracy theories. While these elements seem diverse, each of them appears to be directed towards a common goal. This goal is to enable the person to continue to affirm their own worth—both to themselves and to others. Of course, to *some* extent, all of us react to criticism in this way, since we all need to feel a sense of self-worth when we are criticised. However, for a person exhibiting SBCMB, this self-affirming goal seems to be an overriding one. That is, the goal affirming their own worth can easily override other concerns that normally we would regard as important, such as concerns for truth, consistency, true repentance, love for others, and personal progress in godliness.

We will spell out these elements now:

**Ignoring:** One response to criticism by a person exhibiting SBCMB is simply to ignore it. That is, you may have a discussion with the person, and during the discussion you tell them they have done something wrong to you. For example, you may tell them that they have transgressed one of your personal boundaries, or that they have hurt you or lied about you in some significant way. The person responds to you as if they simply had not heard what you said. They may raise some other topic entirely. Or they may respond only to the positive elements of what you said. For example, if you had complimented them before



criticising them, or had told them “I care about you, but...”, they may reply as if the compliment or the affirmation was the only thing that you said, thanking you for your love and graciousness but not responding at all to the issue you raised.

**Deflecting:** Another response is to deflect the criticism by focusing on a minor issue that is not central to the criticism. For example, if you *don't* compliment them or affirm them before criticising them, they may focus on your ungracious attitude rather than on the genuine issue you raised. In this way, they can use the criticism as an opportunity to portray themselves as being further victimised.

**Simulating repentance:** Sometimes, especially when the criticism is very clear and impossible to ignore, a further behaviour manifests itself. The person can initially act as if they are truly sorry, and express plans to make genuine changes; they can make gracious-sounding concessions, and be effusive in their praise of you for pointing out their error. This behaviour may cause you to respond with gratitude and a reaffirmation of your loyalty and commitment to them or your esteem for them. However, later (and often sooner) it becomes clear their repentance was not genuine. They may forget your criticism entirely; or they may later express a view that the issue is not important; or they may make a small change, but express resentment and portray you as overly demanding or picky for requiring them to make the small change in the first place.

**Re-writing the past:** A further response to criticism by a person exhibiting SBCMB is to re-write the past. In this case, the person denies they ever did or said what they were critiqued for doing or saying. They may agree wholeheartedly with your criticism, but insist that they never thought otherwise. In fact, you may find them using your own wording in future statements of their position, as if that is what they believed all along, even though it actually contradicts previous statements of their position. They might then even criticise *you* for criticising them on this point—portraying themselves as the true victim in the situation. This behaviour can be particularly disorienting for those in their sphere of influence. It is a key form of the “gaslighting” behaviour we mentioned above. Recall, however, that it is difficult to tell whether the person is doing this intentionally. It may be the case that they have actually modified their own memories, and so genuinely believe themselves to be wronged in this situation. We cannot make any comment on what is actually happening in their minds; we simply want to point out the confounding effect this behaviour can have, which is the same effect as any kind of intentional “gaslighting.”

**Limitless dialogue:** A person exhibiting SBCMB may take a criticism from you as an opportunity to engage in (possibly limitless) dialogue. Rather than treating the criticism as a chance to rethink, repent or change themselves, they treat it as a chance to explain themselves further, and thus to increase your engagement with them. They may express a desire to change your mind so that *you* repent, and so demonstrate their value as somebody

who can make a difference to others. Indeed, they may act as if your single act of criticising them makes you morally obliged to continue a conversation with them to give them a chance to explain themselves at length.

**Explaining with conspiracy theories:** When a person exhibiting SBCMB is criticised from *multiple independent* sources, they may adopt another approach: explaining the criticism as evidence of a conspiracy against them. In this case, they seem unable to consider the possibility that multiple criticisms from different sources might mean that they are wrong and need to repent. Rather, they explain it as proof of the existence of collusion, stemming from an irrational desire by a cabal of enemies bent primarily on discrediting them. They may identify one particular critic as the source and driver of the conspiracy, and act as if all the other critics are unthinkingly echoing that one critic's views. Furthermore, they may claim the existence of such a conspiracy as a badge of honour, because it shows that they are special and making a difference because they are obviously threatening the "powerful people" in some way. After all, everyone loves an underdog sticking it to the evil establishment! Identifying the conspiracy thus enables the person to convert the criticism into an opportunity to further entrench themselves in their behaviour and to affirm their own worth.

### **9 Energetically co-opting others to affirm themselves**

Those who exhibit SBCMB also tend to devote a great deal of energy into co-opting others in a strenuous effort to elicit affirmation of their own worth (or the worth of their own plans or projects). Two different kinds of people are co-opted: those "below" and those "above" the person.

Firstly, people "below" them. By this we mean people who follow them, or who are under their authority or influence in some way. In a family, this is the child/ren and/or spouse who wants to please them; in a church, this is the church members, employees, lay leaders, etc.; in the case of an influential public figure, this is the followers or fans. They will often co-opt such people by portraying themselves as having been seriously victimised by others. This draws these people into feeling sympathy and increased devotion towards the person, and expressing disappointment or outrage against those who criticise the person. This all serves to convert any criticism into a further opportunity to cement the person's worth and status as an unfairly persecuted victim.

Secondly, a person can devote a great deal of energy into co-opting people "above" them to affirm their own worth. By this we mean people who are either in a direct position of authority over them, or those who are "senior" to them in their social group or profession or vocation, or those whose name or title or profession might have influence or gravitas among their peers (e.g. a counsellor). A person exhibiting SBCMB may, for example, seek

out such people and ask them to engage in conversation or to provide them with advice or even counselling. They then “manage upwards”, depicting themselves as worthy yet vulnerable or victimised. This elicits encouragement or sympathy or endorsements. They then “curate” these conversations and endorsements, collecting them, recording them, and frequently repeating them to others—especially their peers—often out of the original context, to demonstrate their worth and to deflect criticism. They may even co-opt some of these “seniors” into becoming active advocates or defenders for them. Even more seriously, they may use some of these conversations (often selectively) to give the impression that these people have thoroughly investigated them, or that they are in formal accountability relationships with them, thus using the people’s names and reputations to provide them with protection against criticism.

### **10 *Expressing feelings of betrayal when serious action is taken***

At times, you or others may need to take serious action in response to a person exhibiting SBCMB. For example, if the person continues to transgress your regular personal boundaries, you might need to enforce an extraordinary personal boundary (such as not responding to the person at all). Or, if a person frequently ignores or deflects your attempts to tell them you have been hurt by their actions, you may need to use very strong and uncompromising language to tell them they are wrong and must stop. Or, if the person fails to take adequate action in response to valid ongoing criticism from multiple sources, and so continues behaviour which is harmful to you and/or others, you and others might need to make a formal complaint or public statement to defend and protect people against their behaviour.

In such cases, a person exhibiting SBCMB will often express incomprehension and a deep sense of betrayal at your actions. They may complain, for example, that you have never raised the issue before, and that they cannot fathom how you could betray them in this way. This occurs even though you may have in fact raised the issue with them previously and given adequate warnings.

The only explanation we have for this behaviour is that, as we have already mentioned above, the person tends to define morality and to redefine personal/relational reality in terms of themselves. In their distorted view of the world, you have suddenly and inexplicably flipped from being on the good side of the moral divide (“people who think I’m worthy”) to being on the bad side of the moral divide (“people who are against me”). The reason they have forgotten or not taken seriously your previous expressions of hurt or criticisms is because at that point you were still on the “good” side (i.e. their side), and that was all that mattered. But by taking serious action, you have moved to the “bad” side, and so (in their minds) inexplicably betrayed them.

## 11 *What if this describes me?*

If at this point you are becoming concerned that **you yourself are exhibiting SBCMB**, we want to encourage you. The very fact that you are concerned is probably evidence that either you aren't the kind of person we are describing here, or that if you are, you are already on the road to dealing with the problem. In our experience, sadly, a key feature of those who exhibit SBCMB is a denial that they have a problem. As we have seen, those who exhibit SBCMB tend to locate the source of all of their problems in others. However, if you do admit you have a problem, then this is an encouraging sign. This is true of many kinds of problems, not just the issue we are talking about here. It is always good to pray about our problems and ask God to give us help and insight.

It is possible that the issues you are identifying in yourself are related to complex and/or childhood trauma. If so, the [Blue Knot Foundation](#) is a good place to go for counselling, help and advice.

## 12 *Summary: a consistent pattern*

At this point, it is worth recapping the general patterns of SBCMB that we have recognised. The two *broad* patterns are: defining morality in terms of themselves, and redefining personal/relational reality to suit their view of themselves. This tends to manifest in: fraught relationships with peers, excessive reactions to praise and sympathy, initial selective love-bombing, making themselves the greatest victim, resisting and transgressing personal boundaries, using words persuasively but untruthfully, creating a relational climate that revolves around themselves, reacting to criticism in a self-affirming way, energetically co-opting others to affirm themselves, and expressing feelings of betrayal when serious action is taken.

Of course, as we mentioned above, since we are all sinners, any of us can exhibit *some* of these behaviours *some* of the time. This includes Christian leaders. We are not at all suggesting that the occasional appearance of some of these behaviours, especially under stressful conditions, is an indication of SBCMB.<sup>7</sup> Rather, it is the repeated, persistent, ongoing existence of many (or at least a reasonable number) of these specific patterns of behaviour that points towards SBCMB.

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, effective leaders have to make hard decisions: decisions that may actually be right, but which those who follow them might not agree with or even understand, and which might even look wrong to someone who is not fully aware of the situation. Just because a leader has done something we do not agree with or do not understand, does not make them a person who can be labelled this way. In other words, this SBCMB pattern should not be used as a label for all the problems that can arise in life and ministry.

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## ***The effect of SBCMB on others***

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A person's SBCMB can have a significant effect on those in their sphere of influence, especially over the long term. While those who exhibit SBCMB seem to wholeheartedly believe their view of moral and personal reality, it is ultimately a distorted reality. The more you live in this reality and try to love and care for the person on their distorted terms, the more the incoherence can affect you personally. This can be very disorienting, and even—for those who live a long time in the person's world—traumatic. Both those who are sympathetic to such individuals and those who are opposed to them can end up spending inordinate amounts of time and emotional energy relating to them, or being involved with their projects or groups they lead. Some people end up confused and disoriented (“crazy-making”); others become exhausted; still others display more serious long-term effects. For those who seek to deal with the behaviour properly and maturely, the task of disentangling the issues and responding to the person themselves can take vast amounts of time, effort and emotional energy.

For those in close personal relationships with those who exhibit SBCMB, the effect can be particularly difficult, and even, in the long term, traumatic. If you are in such a relationship, you may find the person to be an “emotional black hole”: that is, the person's emotional needs and sense of vulnerability may be so strong and overpowering that they become a centre of emotional “gravity” that compels everybody else's emotions to orbit around them, or to get swallowed up entirely. No matter how much love you try to give to them, it falls into their emotional gravity well, and does not get reflected back to you in any meaningful way. They set impossibly high standards for supporting them and loving them, and when those impossible standards are not met, they express their continued disappointment with you (either to you and/or to others). To use another metaphor, a person who exhibits SBCMB can take up all the emotional “oxygen”; nobody else can breathe too deeply (i.e. express or feel their own personal emotions), for fear they'll cause that one person to suffocate. This can lead to long-term emotional issues, including trauma, for all concerned.

The behaviour is particularly problematic in the context of Christian leadership. Those who exhibit SBCMB demand very high levels of love, sacrifice, loyalty and commitment. They are also often disappointed in people when their standards are not met, and those who exit the sphere of influence because they can't cope with the demands become “the bad people”. In the context of Christian leadership, the demand for such sacrifice and loyalty and commitment is normally directed towards their ministries, i.e. the project or the church or group they are leading. These ministries are often in effect extensions of themselves; but the demand for a commitment to them is normally phrased in terms of loyalty and commitment, not to themselves, but to God. Christians desire to live

our lives out of commitment to God, and to love people sacrificially, as Jesus has loved us. However, as Christians direct their commitment towards the ministries of those who exhibit SBCMB, they are met with exceedingly high demands and frequent disappointment in them by the leader. Thus, they can end up feeling anxious, confused, wrong, and inferior as Christians, and in the end can doubt their own ability to discern reality.

In our experience, those who exhibit SBCMB create situations where significant numbers of people in their spheres of influence end up being confused, or feeling that they are going crazy, or feeling traumatised. Nevertheless, the most extreme situations of emotional confusion, while real, take quite some time to manifest. It's "slow-burn". *This is why it's so hard to see anything especially "wrong" in any individual conversation or contact with them.* It is also why it's often difficult to give it the simple label of "abuse". However, we believe the effect is real, especially over the long term. This is why we believe it is important to describe the phenomenon in such detail, so that it can be recognised.

It is also why we need to provide some further reflections on how best to respond to those who exhibit SBCMB. This is the purpose of Part B.

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## Part B: Responding to SBCMB

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We will now move on to describe some principles that we have found helpful in responding to those who exhibit SBCMB. At this point, we want to reiterate that the purpose of this paper is not to "cancel" or "expose" individuals. As we have noted, this is seldom possible anyway, because those who exhibit SBCMB are very good at turning any criticism into an opportunity to portray themselves as victims. The purpose of this paper is thus simply to help you *personally* respond to people who you think may be exhibiting SBCMB, by describing responses that have helped us personally. If it turns out that the person you are responding to is not actually exhibiting SBCMB, then these responses are good things to do anyway. Furthermore, we believe that if more people understand the possible issues associated with SBCMB and act in the ways we describe, real change can come about.

Here is a summary of key principles we identify:

- Pray
- Be careful of your own wellbeing
- Allow the Bible to define love, not the person exhibiting SBCMB
- Realise that normal social rules may not apply
- Be very clear on your personal boundaries
- Be very clear on the truth—don't let them define reality

- Recognise illegitimate guilt—don't let them define morality
- Don't be afraid of disengaging
- If you believe there is actually abuse, take further action

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## ***Pray***

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We want to begin by stressing the importance of prayer in these situations. Often the issues seem insurmountable, but God is powerful and “able to do far, far more than anything we could ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20). Pray for the person exhibiting SBCMB, that God may bring them to truly understand the love and power of the Lord Jesus for them so that they see themselves as loved and fulfilled in him and do not need to seek that love and fulfilment from others. Pray for yourself, that you are able to rest in God's love and power, and to have a right understanding of reality and of yourself in the face of the distorted understanding of reality that the person exhibiting may be perpetuating. And pray for others who are affected by the behaviour, that God's love and power may also be a reality for them.

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## ***Be careful of your own wellbeing***

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Secondly, we need to stress that you need to be careful of yourself and your own spiritual and emotional wellbeing. As we have noted, those who exhibit SBCMB can create a great deal of confusion and even long-term trauma in others, especially those who come close to them. It takes much time and effort to respond properly. This can be exhausting, and it may simply be beyond your power at times. This is OK. It's quite possible you will need to put up a firm, extraordinary boundary, such as cutting off contact in order to stop their efforts to transgress your regular boundaries. This is especially true if you have been close to them and/or if you need to criticise them. Be aware that they will claim that you are being unloving or cruel, or hurtful. But remember, while they may feel hurt, you are not the one causing any real harm to them.

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## ***Allow the Bible to define love, not the person exhibiting SBCMB***

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Having a true, biblical picture of love and grace is very important. This is because, as we have seen, the person exhibiting SBCMB will have their own, distorted view of love, which they will enforce powerfully, but which needs to be resisted.

This is where our Western world's common ideas about “love” and “grace” will completely let us down—and indeed may easily become a weapon in the hands of a person exhibiting SBCMB. In our world, for example, “love” often means complete acceptance and non-judgmentalism. That is, according to our world's common way of thinking, you are only being “loving” when you are not doing anything to upset another person's psychological wellbeing and sense of worth. If you dispute or disagree with another person's view of their

own identity or their self-worth, this is regarded as particularly “unloving” and even as a harmful act. Unfortunately, this approach to love and harm actually provides fuel for SBCMB. That is, if you act in any way that leads to the person feeling less worthy—including simply speaking the truth or asserting your own personal boundaries—a person exhibiting SBCMB will often react very strongly, expressing deep grief or even accusing you of being hateful, mean, nasty, etc. This is very difficult to overcome.

This is why it is important to go back and remind ourselves of the true biblical picture of love. As we have already described above, this is seen ultimately in the love the Lord Jesus Christ has shown us in his death on the cross for us. The way such love should be seen in our own relationships is not simply by affirming a person’s view of themselves or feeling strong feelings for them. “Love” does not mean agreeing with another person’s distorted view of reality. Rather, the reality of love in the Christian’s life is described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7: “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” In this context, the idea of bearing, believing, hoping and enduring all things does not mean simply allowing another person to define their own moral and personal reality and to use that reality to take over your life and the lives of others. This is wrongdoing, and love does *not* rejoice at wrongdoing. Rather, love rejoices with the truth. The truth matters. And love “bears” all things by not being irritable or resentful, and by turning to the Lord Jesus Christ for comfort and vindication when you find yourself being wronged and even slandered simply for speaking the truth.

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### ***Realise that normal social rules may not apply***

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As you respond to those exhibiting SBCMB, you need to realise that normal rules of social engagement may not apply. For example, a normal rule of social engagement would be that when you express something negative, you also at the same time show politeness, or express appreciation, or be gracious, as might be expected in a normal relationship. However, you may find that when you do this with a person exhibiting SBCMB, they take it far beyond what you intend. That is, the person may seize on your expression of appreciation, amplifying it and taking it as evidence that you are clearly “on their side”. Thus, they will use the expression of appreciation to ignore the critique. This means if you want to have a chance of being heard, you may need to be far more clear and direct in your critique, and forego the regular politeness or expressions of appreciation that might normally accompany that critique.

Empathy also might work along different rules than normal. That is, you may feel deeply sad for the person’s vulnerability. You may know something about their own



childhood or background or past traumatic experiences that you suspect may have been a significant factor leading them to a distorted view of themselves. If you feel such empathy, that is normal. However, unfortunately, such empathy is easily used by the person to distract from or excuse the seriousness of their own damaging behaviour towards you or others. You need to remember that the behaviour is still damaging and wrong. While you may feel empathy, you aren't being "loving" by allowing them to keep doing it. Furthermore, truly loving the person might mean doing things that they will not (nor may ever) understand as loving. They may, as we have noted, say that they feel deeply betrayed by you. This is often what is so hard. You want to love them truly, and you want them to see that you love them, but they may never accept it as love. The only thing they will accept as love is acquiescing to their will, which is actually damaging for everyone.

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### ***Be very clear on your personal boundaries***

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It is very important, when dealing with those exhibiting SBCMB, to ensure that the boundaries you have with them are reasonable and exceedingly clear. You will also need to keep reinforcing these boundaries in the face of multiple attempts to bypass or transgress them. For example, state what you are willing to do and not do in any given situation. Realise, as we have described above, that they may ignore these boundaries, or not accept them as legitimate, or forget that you have stated them, or subtly ridicule them as silly, or continue to question them as if you have some ulterior motive for stating them, or complain that they are being victimised by them, or look for alternative ways to transgress them. Thus, in the end, you may need to put up an extraordinary boundary, for example by cutting off contact.

If you do this, it is quite possible that they will then go to others and portray themselves as a victim in the situation. Thus, if you do set up an extraordinary boundary, you will probably need to be prepared to give a brief but clear explanation to anyone else who has been co-opted into their program and comes to you asking for an explanation. You don't have to explain all the details, and beware of the temptation to gossip, but remember it is not gossip to express how you are affected by a person's behaviour towards you.

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### ***Be very clear on the truth—don't let them define reality***

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This leads to a further point: be very clear on the truth. Realise that the person may well have a distorted view of reality, especially when it comes to personal relationships. When the person says something that is clearly untrue, or distorted, or inconsistent with what they have said before, don't simply accept it or let it pass by unchallenged. You may be able to question directly their version of reality, for example by reminding them of what you know to be true and stating clearly that what they have said is actually untrue. Alternatively, if direct confrontation like this is too difficult or complex, it may be easier simply to

constantly and consistently state what is true, without criticising them directly. This may mean they might slowly incorporate those truths into their own reality, and their version of reality can shift in a more truthful direction.

However, sadly, it is best never to assume you will be able to convince the person rationally or speak easily to their conscience. Since they are operating with a distorted view of reality and a distorted moral framework, such attempts rarely bring them to change in any straightforward way. We also strongly suggest that you don't try to "get into their heads" by guessing what they're thinking, or predicting their actions. This can send you even more crazy.

In a few key situations, where the behaviour has been particularly complex and damaging, we have found it helpful to keep clear, well-organised written records of things a person says over time, and compare these records side by side as time goes on. If you do this, it will help you to clearly see the shifts in truth and the direct contradictions in their communication with you and others. Without a written record, it can be very difficult to pin it down; you might have a vague feeling that things are not right, but you can't necessarily see it all together. If you put all the conversations together—e.g. taking the multiple texts or emails or messages or conversations and laying them out in one document—it can help you to see the issues more clearly. You might never show such a document to others; it may simply help you personally, to demonstrate that you're not crazy, despite the person's protests that they are being criticised unfairly and that they are innocent. It will also enable you to speak the truth where it matters, and not to be swayed by the person's attempts to redefine the truth when amongst others.

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### ***Recognise illegitimate guilt—don't let them define morality***

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We noted above that a person exhibiting SBCMB tends to define morality primarily in reference to themselves and also tends to make themselves into the greatest victim in any situation. This distorted "moral world" can exert a powerful influence on you. If you have engaged with such a person in any depth or for a significant length of time (e.g. as a child growing up in a household with a person exhibiting SBCMB), you may have had your own conscience "trained" in line with their distorted reality, so that you feel guilty when you should not. That is, you may find yourself feeling deeply guilty *whenever* you think of the person badly, or *whenever* you do anything that you think may cause them to feel any kind of pain. This may be true even in situations where you have every right to think badly of the person, e.g. if they have hurt you deeply; and it may be true even in situations where you have every right (or even a need) to act in a way that results in them feeling hurt—e.g. if you need to stand up for yourself or state personal boundaries in a way that may cause them to complain.

You might be able to recognise that this kind of guilt reaction is illegitimate by comparing it objectively to the way you feel about other people. That is, you may be perfectly capable of disapproving of certain bad behaviour amongst other people, and you may be perfectly willing to state your own regular personal boundaries to other people, without ever feeling guilty (or perhaps only feeling mildly guilty). However, you may find you cannot easily do the same thing when it comes to the person exhibiting SBCMB. Exactly the same behaviour with this particular person might provoke a strong guilt reaction in you, because your past experiences with them have trained your conscience to over-react when it comes to this person.

If this kind of reaction is deeply ingrained through long association with the person exhibiting SBCMB, you may need to seek [professional help](#). Yet even if your association with the person has been shorter or less intense, you may still find yourself experiencing illegitimate guilt reactions. If this is the case, we have found the following responses helpful.

- It can be enough simply to recognise that this reaction is happening, and name it as illegitimate.
- You could talk to others whom you trust and ask them for their objective opinion on whether you should feel guilty in the situation.
- Or, you could ask yourself whether a reasonable person who is observing your situation would think you have a reason to feel guilty.

It is helpful to remember that it is quite legitimate for you to feel pity or empathy towards a person while at the very same time naming their behaviour as wrong and asserting your own legitimate personal boundaries. This is a normal way to think and feel, but in our experience, one of the effects of SBCMB is that it can thwart people from being able to think normally when it comes to that person. People find themselves unable to *both* empathise with or pity the person *and* realise that they have been truly hurt or wronged by them. One way you might be able to overcome this is to consciously practice feeling both things at the same time—i.e. feeling pity/empathy *and* feeling legitimate grief/anger at what they have done to you or others. This can help you to “retrain” your conscience away from their distorted moral world to one that is more real and true.

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### ***Don't be afraid of disengaging***

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If you are entangled deeply in the distorted reality of a person exhibiting SBCMB and feeling significantly gaslighted, it is right to recognise it and name it. As we mentioned, you might need to cut off contact just to recover. That sounds hard, but it is actually that serious, and it is not wrong to stop relating to such a person. If you start to doubt your ability to discern reality because the other person has criticised you for criticising them, this

is certainly the time to stop relating, at least for a time. It is very helpful at this point to talk to others whom you trust. Describe your experiences and ask them to help you reflect on it all. This can help you to recalibrate your view of reality and to recover from the situation.

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***If you believe there is actually abuse, take further action***

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We noted above that the term “abuse” does not *necessarily* apply to all the behaviours we are identifying here as part of the pattern of SBCMB. However, we also noted that some instances of SBCMB *may* actually constitute abuse. As we said: Abuse is real, tragically it happens far too often, it can take various forms, including emotional and spiritual, and it should not be tolerated—it needs to be stopped and called to account for the protection of victims. We mentioned some publications that can help to understand the reality of abuse, including the books *Redeeming Power* and *Something’s Not Right*.<sup>8</sup> Again, if you believe that the behaviour you have experienced may actually be abuse, we also strongly encourage you to report it to the appropriate authority, or do whatever action is appropriate in the situation. This may be hard, but it is important to do, not just for your sake, but for the sake of other potential victims.

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**Part C: If you have an accountability or potential endorsement role for a person in Christian leadership who may be exhibiting SBCMB**

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Finally, we want to give some advice for those who find themselves with some kind of accountability, care, or potential endorsement role for a person in Christian leadership that may be exhibiting SBCMB. You may have an official role in this regard, or you may have discovered that others are assuming you have such a role even though it is not clearly defined. This advice is drawn from our own experience with some people.

There are four (related) situations that we address here:

- If you have a true accountability role
- If you find yourself in a quasi-accountability role
- If you hear many people criticising the person
- If you need to say something publicly

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***If you have a true accountability role***

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It may be that you truly have a clear, well-defined accountability role with a person exhibiting SBCMB. In this case, you need to take your role seriously. If the person is involved

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<sup>8</sup> Langberg, *Redeeming Power*; Wade Mullen, *Something’s Not Right* (see above for details).

in Christian ministry or training for such ministry, pay close attention to the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus), and any relevant codes of conduct (e.g. for Australian Anglicans, the document *Faithfulness in Service*).

Ask questions about these things, and don't accept vague answers. If you notice inconsistencies, don't just paper over them, but drill down to ask why a person said one thing in one place, and another in another place. Don't allow yourself to be indulgent towards seemingly "small" breaches. Christian leadership is a serious undertaking, and accordingly, those in Christian leadership need to be held to a higher standard of conduct. Don't overlook behaviour such as failure to keep promises, or a demonstrable lack of empathy towards others, just because you think they have a special personality and are effective ministers or gifted evangelists who have achieved great results. There is too much at stake: and by this we don't mean the reputation of the ministry or the institution, but the sheep who belong to the Lord Jesus himself.

Furthermore, you need to ensure that there actually *is* an explicit, well-defined accountability role spelled out in a document and clearly available to others. Don't accept a verbal agreement or a vague role description that can be represented in different ways to different people. You, and the person, and others, need to be very clear on the scope and limits of the role.

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### ***If you find yourself in a quasi-accountability role***

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So far we have spoken about genuine accountability roles. However, you may also come to realise that you have ended up with a quasi-accountability role in relation to a person who may be exhibiting SBCMB. We suspect this may be a very common—and potentially damaging—situation. It comes about when the person approaches you, seeking to talk to you and get your advice. They may establish an informal mentoring or advisory relationship. Or they may simply have a one-off conversation or exchange with you. However, after a while, you realise that the person is dropping your name in other situations, to give an impression that you are providing them with some level of accountability (perhaps vaguely defined). For example, when they are questioned about whether they have accountability, they mention you. You may personally feel you have just had a conversation or a chat with them, but they are using the relationship to legitimate themselves in a way that goes beyond the way you understand the relationship.

Alternatively, the person may have approached you asking you to give them a brief encouraging written or recorded message because they are finding things tough (they may even have written the message, or an outline of what they want you to say, to make it easier for you). So you give them an encouraging message. But you then find that the encouraging message is being repeated to others by way of an endorsement. Furthermore, you may find

this endorsement is being used frequently—sometimes selectively—to provide legitimacy to them, and to give the impression that you are well-acquainted with them and are very happy with them and all their actions, when in truth it may simply be that you were willing to encourage them personally from a distance.

In these cases, you need to make sure you make every effort to clarify your role with them, and question them as to their statements to others about your role. This is important, because if they are using your authority and reputation to legitimate themselves in a way that goes beyond your ability to call them to account, you will end up being seen as complicit in any damaging behaviour that might ensue.

If you discover a clear contradiction between what they are telling you privately about their relationship with you (e.g. it is just for advice and encouragement) and what they have been telling others about their relationship with you (e.g. it is for accountability), you need to make sure that you communicate with those same people to tell them that there has been a significant problem, and to tell them that the role is different to what you, and they, had been led to believe. If the person has publicised your role, then you also need to make a similar public statement clarifying the issue. This is both to protect yourself from complicity in potentially damaging behaviour, and also to protect others who may have been led to overlook such damaging behaviour because they were relying on the integrity of your accountability relationship that they (wrongly) believed existed.

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### ***If you hear many people criticising the person***

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If you are asked to provide an endorsement for a person, and you find there are various people criticising that person so that you suspect they may be displaying SBCMB, listen to the critics very carefully. That is true even if the critics are people who have been significantly involved with the other person and hurt by them. Of course, it is true that all criticism needs to be taken with a grain of salt, and there are always two sides to every story. It is also true that people who have been hurt often have an axe to grind. That is why it is always right to talk to the person themselves, and their supporters, and hear them out. But don't listen *just* to them and their supporters. Listen to supporters *and* to those who have been hurt by them. While those who have been hurt might be biased, they're not to be discounted for that reason.

As a society and as churches, we have rightly learnt through accounts of abuse not to ignore the voices of those who have been hurt. This is true in cases like this also. In fact, it is even more important to listen to others in cases where a person is exhibiting SBCMB, because a person exhibiting SBCMB is so good at portraying themselves as vulnerable. Thus, if you rely primarily on their side of the story, you may congratulate yourself on being the one who is listening to the “true victim”, when in reality you are only listening to the story of

the (possibly unintentional) perpetrator. Don't think you understand everything just because you have chatted with the person or spent some time with them in their world. Don't rely too much on your own ability to judge people on first impressions. As we have seen, those who exhibit SBCMB are very good at playing the game of creating the "right" impression.

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### ***If you need to say something publicly***

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Finally, you may be at a point where you need to say something publicly against a person exhibiting SBCMB. If this is the case, you need to be very careful and precise. All the features of SBCMB we have noted above—i.e. that they seem deeply committed to a distorted view of reality, that they are often very good with persuasive language, that they are highly skilful at portraying themselves as victims and eliciting sympathy both from crowds and from those "above" them, will work against you. Here are some suggestions.

Firstly, be very, very sure you are right and that the truth of your criticism is real.

Secondly, choose to focus on one key, big, central issue. It needs to be something that is clearly demonstrable, understandable, concrete and obvious. Don't try a shotgun approach, criticising them for small things—because any small thing you choose will probably be seized on by the person and turned into a big thing and thus an opportunity to portray themselves as a victim.

Thirdly, be prepared for an onslaught. We are not necessarily speaking about an onslaught of direct rage against you, but something more difficult to resist: an onslaught of vulnerability. The kinds of reactions to criticism we have mentioned above may all be employed. You may be covertly criticised for being mean, or for blowing up tiny things into huge things, or for not listening enough, or for being drawn into a conspiracy against them. It is likely they will then work extra hard to co-opt others in to their cause, who will act as champions for them. So do be prepared to be slandered in this way.

This is why prayer continues to be important. You may need to pour out your heart to God in prayer: prayer for the person, prayer for yourself, and prayer for others. If you have been slandered, be prepared not to receive justice in this life. That is, you may never "win" the argument on a human level. But God knows. Trust his justice and judgment, as the one who will in the end bring everything to light (Matthew 10:24–33). God willing, however, your own clear statement of the truth may help others—including even the person exhibiting SBCMB—to see the issues and avoid damaging behaviour, for the glory of the Lord Jesus.

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## Resources to help

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As we mentioned at the start, slow-burn crazy-making behaviours (SBCMB) is a term that we've made up ourselves. We're not writing this as experts or psychological practitioners. Rather, we are giving some ideas and tips from our personal experience of a small handful of people in Christian ministry and other relationships. We think that is important for us to do. However, it is limited. In other words, this paper is simply meant to be an awareness-raising tool. We're not able or qualified to provide further expert advice on these matters.

So we need to emphasise (to avoid any potential disappointment) that **we're *not* able to respond to enquiries or questions you may have about this paper.**

However, we don't just want to leave you with nowhere to go! Here are two places to check out for further help.

Firstly, if in reading this paper you have realised that somebody you know (or you yourself) are exhibiting a pattern of behaviours that might be related to complex and/or childhood trauma, help and resources for survivors and their supporters are available through the [Blue Knot Foundation](#).

Secondly, we believe that insights from psychology can be greatly beneficial for Christian ministry. As we mentioned at the start, courses are available at the [Mental Health and Pastoral Care Institute](#). We understand that some of the content from these courses will be placed on the website as resources. We commend this to you for your consideration if you would like to follow up these matters further.