

Dealing With Difficult People

Learning to Fight Back... on Your Terms



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Imagine this scenario: You're heading into work, and you're anxious about walking in the door. It's not because you don't love your job. It's because of Phil. He constantly provokes and angers you, and you're not sure you can keep coping with the stress caused by his behavior.

Last week, he seemed to enjoy making you look bad in front of your boss. Yesterday, he was rude to you in front of your co-workers, and you didn't know what to say back. And today? You can't even guess what he's planning, but it's sure to make you miserable.

Do you have to deal with 'difficult' people at work? Do they create stress, cause negative emotions – and take up your valuable time? It's easy to feel you have no control over the situation. You may think you just have to put up with people who behave like that.

Life is far too short to accept being miserable, however. If you're faced with a difficult or rude person on a regular basis, then you must address the situation. This article will equip you with the strategies and techniques to do just that.

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Causes and Types of 'Difficult' Behavior

We've probably all wondered, at one point or another, why people have to be rude or unkind. The reasons may vary. Some people behave in a negative way to cope with stress. Others may not feel good enough at their jobs, so they act negatively to keep the attention away from their true performance (or lack of performance). Still others simply enjoy the feeling of power that comes with criticizing and being cruel to people. (See our article on [Egos at Work](#) for tips on managing a co-worker's superiority complex.)

Everyone has their own reasons and motivations for their behavior. Although the causes are relevant in some cases, it's usually more helpful to know how to react when their negative behavior is directed at you.

Rudeness – even deliberately mean or cruel behavior – can show up in many different forms. Be aware of actions and behaviors such as these:

- Making unkind and hurtful comments.
- Using a sarcastic, mocking, or cynical tone of voice.
- Making jokes about you, or jokes at your expense.
- Ignoring you.
- Constantly complaining.
- Being aggressive.
- Being deliberately uncooperative.
- Spreading rumors.
- Constantly criticizing.
- Making you look bad to your superiors or other co-workers.
- Attempting to dominate you.
- Being abrupt, or frequently interrupting you when you speak.

Strategies for Handling Negative Co-Workers

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You can control only one thing when dealing with difficult people: your reaction to them. Yes, you may want to get angry and fight back, or be equally critical of them, but this is usually the least helpful way to handle the situation.

Why? Difficult people are typically experts in that kind of behavior, and you're an 'amateur.' In other words, they're good at it, and you're probably not. Chances are high that you won't win, and the other person's behavior won't change.

It's also important to remember that it's not your job to 'fix' these people. A more constructive goal is to minimize, or neutralize, the situation – so that YOU can have some peace.

There are several effective strategies you can use with difficult co-workers. Remember, though, that everyone – and every situation – is different. Some of these strategies might be ideal for one person, but disastrous with another. Assess your own situation carefully to determine which technique might work best for you.

- **Carefully review the situation** – Before taking any action, evaluate what has happened. Is this normal behavior, or is the other person just having a bad day? If it's typical behavior, it might be time to do something about it. If it's unusual behavior, it might be best to stay out of his or her way for the rest of the day.
- **Calmly confront the person in private** – You might want to use your office, where no one else can hear. There's a chance that this person truly doesn't know he's being rude or unkind. Give him the benefit of the doubt, and address the problem privately. Explain what's bothering you, and what you'd like him to do about it. Don't go on the attack. Tell him what it feels like, from your perspective, to be on the receiving end of this type of behavior. Use 'I' statements, such as, "When you criticized me in front of the group yesterday, I felt humiliated and upset." For more on this, see our article [Dealing with Unfair Criticism](#).
- **Don't fight, and don't retreat** – If the other person is being aggressive toward you, she's probably expecting you to (a) fight back, just like her, or (b) retreat and walk away. If you want to make an impact, do neither. Stay calm, and speak plainly about her actions. For instance, say, "Are you trying to intimidate me with verbal abuse?" or "Are you trying to make fun of me?" This can be especially effective if other co-workers are listening. After you assert yourself, wait for a response. Don't be tempted to speak again; many people are uncomfortable with silence, so it may force them to respond.

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- **Use behavior modification** – This technique depends on how much leverage and control you have, and on your relationship with the difficult person. In short, behavior modification is a way to 'train' someone to act in a more civil, polite manner. When he acts negatively toward you, completely ignore him. This may help send the message that you won't tolerate that type of behavior. When he acts more politely and acceptably, 'reward' the behavior. Say 'thank you,' and respond in a positive way. This technique can also be incredibly effective in a group setting (when a team is dealing with a difficult team member).
- **Involve your boss** – If you've tried a few techniques to resolve the situation on your own, and you still haven't succeeded, it might be time to get your boss involved. Meet with him or her privately to explain the situation clearly, and what you'd like to see happen. If the difficult person works in a different department, go to your boss first, and let your boss determine what the next step should be.
- **Consider changing jobs** – If nothing works, and your life is truly miserable, you may want to seriously consider transferring to another department, or finding a new job elsewhere. It's a dramatic move, but remember what we said earlier about life being short? If you're unhappy at work, this may affect your physical and mental health. No job is worth that.

Tip:

There's a point at which unpleasantness crosses over into bullying, defined as repeated, health-harming mistreatment, and which is often directed at the brightest and best. If you suspect this is an issue, see our article on [Bullying in the Workplace](#), and listen to our Expert Interview with [Dr Gary Namie](#).

Creating an Emotionally Healthy Environment

Is there anything you can do to prevent all of this from happening in the first place? Well, there's no guaranteed way to avoid difficult people, but you can help turn your organization or department into an emotionally healthy place to work.

- **Develop rules of behavior** – Make sure there are defined values and rules of behavior for the organization, and communicate them to everyone. For example, you could put the rules on a big poster someplace where everyone can see them. Encourage [good manners in the office](#).

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- **Create a reward system** – Do the managers in your department or organization reward good ideas and behavior? All too often, negative behavior gets all the attention, while good behavior is ignored. In reality, it should be the opposite.
- **Hold people responsible for their actions** – When there's accountability and transparency, people are less likely to ignore bad behavior, or let it continue.

Key Points

Dealing with difficult people in the workplace can be incredibly stressful and frustrating. It's important to realize that the only thing you can control is your response to the situation. Address these individuals privately at first; they may not know there's a problem. If that doesn't work, use a few different strategies to neutralize or stop the behavior. If things still don't change, then it might be time to talk to management.

If you're a leader of an organization or team, take steps to create an emotionally healthy work environment. Make sure core values and behavior expectations are clearly communicated and understood, and reward good behavior.