

Handling Difficult People: Dealing with Bullies, Tyrants, and Jerks (719 words)

Some researchers estimate that approximately 20% of the population are considered difficult. Estimates claim about 5% of the population are sociopaths. So, it seems, that no matter where you go, you will probably have to deal with at least one difficult person. The keys to minimizing the personal and professional damage they can cause you is to be prepared, know your options, and change your behavior.

Be Prepared: What are the areas of your life that when people attack them makes you mad? We all have buttons. Those buttons could be your weight, your height, your family, your masculinity or femininity, or even your areas of competence. You need to know because difficult people will find them and they don't just push your buttons, they punch them. You need to know your buttons, so that you will be prepared, ready and able to respond professionally, rather than react, and take it personally. If you monitor your emotions you will be able to handle difficult people without becoming one of them.

Know Your Options: There are really only four options that you can choose to use when dealing with difficult people. Stick with the status quo, change your attitude, change your behavior, or leave.

Stick with the Status Quo. Your first option would be to not change a thing. What you're currently doing or saying could be good enough. If you don't have a pounding headache or an upset stomach every day, maybe your coping strategies are working just fine.

Change your Attitude. This is the second option I would recommend. Try to think more positively about that person. Maybe they're a good worker, or a good writer, or a good bowler. There must be something you can appreciate about them.

Change Your Behavior: This is your third option. Make some adjustments on how you respond rather than react. Minor adjustments in communication can have a major impact on most relationships. If we know our options and modify our behavior people will be intrigued by us rather than wanting to insult us.

Here are some helpful strategies. **Move closer to them.** At the next meeting with that person, instead of sitting on the opposite side of the room, just move over one chair. Next time, move another chair closer, and repeat. Pretty soon you'll be sitting right next to them. Changing the distance changes the communication dynamics. Take control of the setting.

Think of them as a metaphor. Think of that difficult people as a metaphor, not a human being, because a decent human being wouldn't treat you this badly. Think of them as a character in a play or movie, as an ogre, or even a kangaroo. Just imagine how silly that would make them look to you. It is hard to get upset with a kangaroo.

Laugh later. When you laugh, it releases endorphins, which relieve stress. This will also

prevent you from dragging the negative feelings into the next relationship that is innocent. Make sure you don't take it too seriously.

Say something that doesn't mean anything or don't say anything at all. Say things like, "Oh, ah, eee, oeee...." Then just go silent. Don't give them any material to use against you. Let them figure out whether you agree, disagree, or don't understand.

Recite neutral phrases. Have some neutral comments in mind such as, "That's an idea." "That's interesting." "You've got a point." "I will need some time to think about that." "Let me give that some thought." Using these phrases can help neutralize the negative attacks from difficult people and help you gain control of the conversation rather than being a victim of it.

By implementing these strategies, you will be able to avoid getting into verbal fistfights with difficult people. Don't forget, you haven't been singled out, difficult people treat everybody this way.

Your Last Option is You Can Leave. It would be nice if the difficult person would leave. The problem is, they most likely won't. Your best option might be for you to leave. Consider getting a different job, or quietly lobby for a transfer to different department, where people get along and will treat you better.

Kit Welchlin, M.A., CSP, is a professional speaker and author and can be found at www.welchlin.com.