

*Maryland State Bar Association Lawyer Assistance Program
Wellness Tip Sheet*

Coping with Difficult People

Everyone has someone in their life that is difficult. Difficult people we encounter may include clients, bosses, co-workers, family members, and people in our personal lives. It would be easy to say just remove yourself from the situation, but that's not always possible.

When dealing with difficult people, it is helpful to understand that there is a correlation between your mental and physical health and the people in your life. Studies have shown that positive, supportive relationships can be good for your mental and physical health. However, negative relationships cause a lot of stress and can actually be detrimental to your mental and physical health. It causes emotional wear and tear and therefore affects your physical wellbeing. So, how do you deal with these people?

Difficult relationships are often due to the interactions between two people. It is usually caused by a pattern of communication that fuels the conflict. You can't change or control someone else, but you can look at how you react to that person and your role in the relationship.

Tips to help you cope with difficult people:

- **Have a positive attitude** – start off each day, before you get out of bed, visualizing how you want your day to look and how you want your interactions with other people to be. For example, you have a meeting with a difficult client. Going into that meeting with a negative attitude will produce a negative outcome. Looking ahead and changing your reactions and communication, with that person, can result in a positive outcome.
- **Be calm**– Getting upset just fuels the fire. When you remain calm, you can remain in control.
- **Practice stress management** – Deep breathing is a very easy technique to use, but you need to practice it to be able to use it when you need it. It goes like this – inhale through your nose for 5 seconds - trying to fill yourself with air from your toes up. Hold for 5 seconds. Exhale through your mouth or nose for 5 seconds. Repeat 2 more times. Put a sticky note where you feel stressed to remind you to breath. For example, if talking on the phone makes you anxious. Put a sticky note on your phone to remind you to breath.
- **Don't take behavior personally** – Behavior patterns begin in childhood and probably affect most of the people they have contact with.
- **Avoid "hot" topics** – Keep conversations neutral. Don't push someone's buttons discussing topics you know they are passionate about.
- **Watch out for someone who is inconsistent** – Someone who is nice to you but trashes other people, or who is short, rude or impatient is very likely someone you may not want to trust. This behavior is a red flag. This person can't be trusted and can turn this behavior on you too.
- **Focus on the positive** – This can be helpful especially when dealing with family, and can make the time together more enjoyable.
- **Get support** – Rely on people who have proven that they are there for you. Talk to someone who you trust and who is a good listener to help you deal with your situation. Look at the pattern of your relationships and behavior and make sure you are choosing healthy people to be in your life. Don't rely on someone who has let you down or causes a lot of drama and stress.

- **Let go** – Don't wait until you are so beaten down to make a change in your life. When you can, end relationships that are no longer healthy for you. If you don't know how, ask for help. Learning to take care of yourself isn't selfish; it's how you stay healthy. If you can't end the relationship, give yourself space when dealing with a difficult person and learn techniques to cope.

Understanding different personalities can help you cope with difficult people in your life.

Passive-Aggressive- This is the person who is upset and angry but instead of expressing how they feel they let you know in a passive destructive way. For example someone is upset with you and instead of talking to you walks away without saying a word and doesn't talk to you for the rest of the day or night. This person is passively resistant and negative to following through with expectations in interpersonal or occupational situations. This behavior can manifest itself as helplessness, procrastination, stubbornness, resentment, and sullenness.

This is a very difficult person to deal with. The best way is to be calm and confront the behavior.

Complainers – This person is very fearful, insecure and has no faith in themselves or others. This person can bring down the morale of the entire office. Don't try to convince them to be positive, you will only become exhausted. Instead, look at things objectively and share your optimistic point of view.

Aggressive – This is the person who may yell, be demanding, and expect people to run away from them or react with their own anger. Don't fight or argue with this person, instead stand up to them by assertively expressing your ideas and views.

Snipers – These people are insecure and make themselves feel better by putting others down in subtle ways and by taking potshots. They may make comments, jokes, and give disapproving looks. They are trying to gain control. The best way to deal with this person is to ask a question to clarify their comment or behavior. For example, "Are you putting me down?" Usually they will try to put it off on you and say, "I'm just kidding." Questioning this behavior will usually cut down on these kinds of attacks.

Drama – Everyone has problems and real issues in life, but this is the person who always makes an issue out of everything. At work they often have an excuse for why they can't do what they need to. Everything, big and small, is an issue. This person will drain you of all your energy. The best way to deal with this person is to limit your time with them. Plan your interactions with them to have very clear, concise communication. Be assertive and set limits on how much drama you are willing to listen to.

Silent People – These are timid people who may ignore you, or respond by saying, "I don't know". The best way to deal with this person is to ask questions that don't require a yes or no answer and then wait for a response. You may need to be assertive and ask them why they are not responding to your question.

Don't give up on dealing with difficult people. It can take getting help to learn communication techniques and new ways of coping. Remember you can't change someone else but you do have control over yourself and your choices.

Call the Lawyer Assistance Program for free, confidential assistance at 410-685-7878 x3041

