

10 Strategies for Handling Aggressive or Problem Personalities

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Most of us encounter unreasonable people in our lives. We may be “stuck” with a difficult individual at work or at home. It’s easy to let a challenging person affect us and ruin our day. What are some of the keys to empowering yourself in such situations? Below are ten keys to handling unreasonable and difficult people. Keep in mind that these are general rules of thumb, and not all of the tips may apply to your particular situation. Simply utilize what works and leave the rest.

1. Keep Your Cool

Benefits: Maintain self-control. Avoid escalation of problem.

How: The first rule in the face of an unreasonable person is to maintain your composure; the less reactive you are, the more you can use your better judgment to handle the situation.

When you feel angry or upset with someone, before you say something you might later regret, take a deep breath and count slowly to ten. In most circumstances, by the time you reach ten, you would have figured out a better way of communicating the issue, so that you can reduce, instead of escalate the problem. If you're still upset after counting to ten, take a time out if possible, and revisit the issue after you calm down.

2. "Fly Like an Eagle"

Benefits: More peace of mind. Reduce risk of friction.

How: Some people in our lives are simply not worth tussling with. Your time is valuable, so unless there’s something important at stake, don’t waste it by trying to change or convince a person who’s negatively entrenched. As the saying goes: “You can’t fly like an eagle if you hang out with turkeys!” Whether you’re dealing with a difficult colleague or an annoying relative, be diplomatic and apply the tips from this article when you need to interact with them. The rest of the time, keep a healthy distance.

3. Shift from Being Reactive to Proactive

Benefits: Minimize misinterpretation & misunderstanding. Concentrate energy on problem-solving.

How: When you feel offended by someone’s words or deeds, come up with multiple ways of viewing the situation before reacting. For example, I may be tempted to think that my co-worker is ignoring my messages, or I can consider the possibility that she’s been very busy. When we avoid personalizing other people’s behaviors, we can perceive their expressions more objectively. People do what they do because of them more than because of us. Widening our perspective on the situation can reduce the possibility of misunderstanding.

Another way to reduce personalization is to try to put ourselves in the difficult individual’s shoes, even for just a moment. For example, consider the person you’re dealing with, and complete the sentence: “It must not be easy....”

“My child is being so resistant. It must not be easy to deal with his school and social pressures...”

“My boss is really demanding. It must not be easy to have such high expectations placed on her performance by management...”

“My partner is so emotionally distant. It must not be easy to come from a family where people don’t express affection...”

To be sure, empathetic statements do not excuse unacceptable behavior. The point is to remind yourself that people do what they do because of their own issues. As long as we're being reasonable and considerate, difficult behaviors from others say a lot more about them than they do about us. By de-personalizing, we can view the situation more objectively, and come up with better ways of solving the problem.

4. Pick Your Battles

Benefits: Save time, energy and grief. Avoid unnecessary problems and complications.

How: Not all difficult individuals we face require direct confrontation about their behavior. There are two scenarios under which you might decide not to get involved. The first is when someone has temporary, situational power over you. For example, if you're on the phone with an unfriendly customer service representative, as soon as you hang up and call another agent, this representative will no longer have power over you.

Another situation where you might want to think twice about confrontation is when, by putting up with the difficult behavior, you derive a certain benefit. An example of this would be an annoying co-worker, for although you dislike her, she's really good at providing analysis for your team, so she's worth the patience. It's helpful to remember that most difficult people have positive qualities as well, especially if you know how to elicit them (see keys #5 and 6).

In both scenarios, you have the power to decide if a situation is serious enough to confront. Think twice, and fight the battles that are truly worth fighting.

5. Separate the Person From the Issue

Benefits: Establish yourself as a strong problem solver with excellent people skills. Win more rapport, cooperation and respect.

How: In every communication situation, there are two elements present: The relationship you have with this person, and the issue you are discussing. An effective communicator knows how to separate the person from the issue, and be soft on the person and firm on the issue. For example:

"I want to talk about what's on your mind, but I can't do it when you're yelling. Let's either sit down and talk more quietly, or take a time out and come back this afternoon."

"I appreciate you putting a lot of time into this project. At the same time, I see that three of the ten requirements are still incomplete. Let's talk about how to finish the job on schedule."

"I really want you to come with us. Unfortunately, if you're going to be late like the last few times, we'll have to leave without you."

When we're soft on the person, people are more open to what we have to say. When we're firm on the issue, we show ourselves as strong problem solvers.

6. Put the Spotlight on Them

Benefits: Proactive. Equalize power in communication. Apply appropriate pressure to reduce difficult behavior.

How: A common pattern with difficult people (especially the aggressive types) is that they like to place attention on you to make you feel uncomfortable or inadequate. Typically, they're quick to point out there's something not right with you or the way you do things. The focus is consistently on "what's wrong," instead of "how to solve the problem."

This type of communication is often intended to dominate and control, rather than to sincerely take care of issues. If you react by being on the defensive, you simply fall into the trap of being scrutinized, thereby giving the aggressor more power while she or he picks on you with

impunity. A simple and powerful way to change this dynamic is to put the spotlight back on the difficult person, and the easiest way to do so is to ask questions. For example:

Aggressor: "Your proposal is not even close to what I need from you."

Response: "Have you given clear thought to the implications of what you want to do?"

Aggressor: "You're so stupid."

Response: "If you treat me with disrespect I'm not going to talk with you anymore. Is that what you want? Let me know and I will decide if I want to stay or go."

Keep your questions constructive and probing. By putting the difficult person in the spotlight, you can help neutralize her or his undue influence over you.

7. Use Appropriate Humor

Benefits: Disarm unreasonable and difficult behavior when correctly used. Show your detachment. Avoid being reactive. Problem rolls off your back.

How: Humor is a powerful communication tool. Years ago I knew a co-worker who was quite stuck up. One day a colleague of mine said "Hello, how are you?" to him. When the egotistical co-worker ignored her greeting completely, my colleague didn't feel offended. Instead, she smiled good-naturedly and quipped: "That good, huh?" This broke the ice and the two of them started a friendly conversation. Brilliant.

When appropriately used, humor can shine light on the truth, disarm difficult behavior, and show that you have superior composure. In "[How to Communicate Effectively and Handle Difficult People](#)," I explain the psychology of humor in conflict resolution, and offer a variety of ways one can use humor to reduce or eliminate difficult behavior.

8. Change from Following to Leading

Benefit: Leverage direction and flow of communication.

How: In general, whenever two people are communicating, one is usually doing more leading, while the other is doing more following. In healthy communication, two people would take turns leading and following. However, some difficult people like to take the lead, set a negative tone, and harp on "what's wrong" over and over.

You can interrupt this behavior simply by changing the topic. As mentioned earlier, utilize questions to redirect the conversation. You can also say "By the way..." and initiate a new subject. When you do so, you're taking the lead and setting a more constructive tone.

9. Confront Bullies (Safely)

Benefits: Reduce or eliminate harmful behavior. Increase confidence and peace of mind.

How: The most important thing to keep in mind about bullies is that they pick on those whom they perceive as weaker, so as long as you remain passive and compliant, you make yourself a target. Many bullies are also cowards on the inside. When their victims begin to show backbone and stand up for their rights, the bully will often back down. This is true in schoolyards, as well as in domestic and office environments.

On an empathetic note, studies show that many bullies are victims of violence themselves. This in no way excuses bullying behavior, but may help you consider the bully in a more equanimous light.

"When people don't like themselves very much, they have to make up for it. The classic bully was actually a victim first." — Tom Hiddleston

"Some people try to be tall by cutting off the heads of others." — Paramhansa Yogananda

"I realized that bullying never has to do with you. It's the bully who's insecure." — Shay Mitchell

When confronting bullies, be sure to place yourself in a position where you can safely protect yourself, whether it's standing tall on your own, having other people present to witness and support, or keeping a paper trail of the bully's inappropriate behavior. In cases of physical, verbal, or emotional abuse, consult with counseling, legal, law enforcement, or administrative professionals on the matter. It's very important to stand up to bullies, and you don't have to do it alone.

10. Set Consequence

Benefits: Proactive not reactive. Shift balance of power. Win respect and cooperation when appropriately applied.

How: The ability to identify and assert consequence(s) is one of the most important skills we can use to "stand down" a difficult person. Effectively articulated, consequence gives pause to the challenging individual, and compels her or him to shift from obstruction to cooperation. In "How to Communicate Effectively and Handle Difficult People," consequence is presented as seven different types of power you can utilize to affect positive change.

In conclusion, to know how to handle unreasonable and difficult people is to truly master the art of communication. As you utilize these skills, you may experience less grief, greater confidence, better relationships, and higher communication prowess.