



Handling the Different Types of Difficult People

1. *A Hostile-Aggressive Trio: Sherman Tanks, Snipers, and Exploders*

Coping with Sherman Tanks:

- Give them a little time to run down.
- Don't worry about being polite; get in any way you can.
- Get their attention, perhaps by calling them by name or sitting or standing deliberately.
- If possible, get them to sit down.
- Maintain eye contact.
- State your own opinions and perceptions forcefully.
- Don't argue with what the other person says or try to cut him or her down.
- Be ready to be friendly.

Coping with Snipers:

- Smoke them out. Don't let social convention stop you.
- Provide the Sniper with an alternative to a direct contest.
- Don't capitulate to the Sniper's view of the situation. Get other points of view.
- Do move on to try to solve any problems that are uncovered.
- Prevent sniping by setting up regular problem-solving meetings.
- If you are a third party to the sniping, stay out of the middle but do insist that it stop in front of you.

Coping with Exploders:

- Give them time to run down and regain self-control on their own.
- If they don't, break into their tantrum state by saying or shouting a neutral phrase such as "Stop!"
- Show that you take them seriously.
- If needed and possible, get a breather and get some privacy with them.

2. *"And Another Thing" - The Complete Complainer*

- Listen attentively to their complaints even if you feel guilty or impatient.
- Acknowledge what they're saying by paraphrasing and checking out your perception of how they feel about it.
- Don't agree with or apologize for their allegation even if, at the moment, you accept them as true.
- Avoid the accusation-defense-reaccusation pattern.
- State and acknowledge facts without comment.
- Try to move to a problem-solving mode by asking specific, informational questions, assigning limited fact-finding tasks, or asking for the complaints in writing, but be serious and supportive about it.
- If all else fails, ask the Complainer: "How do you want this discussion to end?"

3. *Clamming up: The Silent and Unresponsive Person*

- Rather than trying to interpret what the silence means, get the Clam to open up.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Wait as calmly as you can for a response. Use counseling questions to help reticent Clams.
- Do not fill in the silence with your conversation.
- Plan enough time to allow you to wait with composure.
- Get agreement on or state clearly how much time is set aside for your "conversation."
- If you get no response, comment on what's happening. End your comment with an open-ended question.
- Again, wait as long as you can, then: comment on what's happening and wait again. try to keep control of the interaction by dealing matter-of-factly with "Can I go now?" and "I don't know" responses.
- When the Clam opens up: be attentive and watch your own impulse to gush. flow with tangential comments. They may lead to something relevant and important. If they don't, state your own need to return to the original topic.
- If the Clam stays closed: avoid a polite ending, terminate the meeting yourself and set up another appointment, at length, inform the Clam what you must and will do, since a discussion has not occurred.

4. *Super-Agreeables and Other Wonderfully Nice People*

- You must work hard to surface the underlying facts and issues that prevent the Super-Agreeables from taking action.
- Let them know that you value them as people by telling them directly. asking or remarking about family, hobbies, wearing apparel. Do this only if you mean it, at least a little.
- Ask them to tell you about those things that might interfere with your good relationship.
- Ask them to talk about any aspect of your product, service, or self (if appropriate, only) that is not as good as the best.
- Be ready to compromise and negotiate if open conflict is in the wind.
- Listen to a Super-Agreeable's humor. There may be hidden messages in those quips or teasing remarks.

5. *Wet Blanket Power: The Negativist at Work*

- Be alert to the potential, in yourself and in others in your group, for being dragged down into despair.
- Make optimistic but realistic statements about past successes in solving similar problems.
- Don't try to argue Negativists out of their pessimism.
- Do not offer solution-alternatives yourself until the problem has been thoroughly discussed.
- When an alternative solution is being seriously considered, quickly raise the question yourself of negative events that might occur if the alternative were implemented.
- See the doomsayings of the Negativist in perspective as potential problems to be overcome.
- At length, be ready to take action on your own. Announce your plans to do this

without equivocation.

- Beware of eliciting negativistic responses from highly analytical people by asking them to act before they feel ready.

6. *Bulldozers and Balloons: The Know-It-All Experts*

Coping with Bulldozers:

- Make sure you have done a thorough job of preparing yourself; carefully review all pertinent materials and check them for accuracy.
- Listen carefully and paraphrase back the main points of the Bulldozer's proposals, thus avoiding over-explanation.
- Avoid dogmatic statements.
- To disagree be tentative, yet don't equivocate; use the questioning form to raise problems.
- Ask extensional questions to assist in the re-examination of plans.
- Watch your own bulldozing tendencies by: listening for Know-It-All behavior in yourself; conveying your appreciation of the Bulldozer's knowledge; proposing delays in action to gain time for each to review the other's proposals.
- As a last resort, choose to subordinate yourself to avoid static and perhaps to build a relationship of equality in the future.

Coping with Balloons:

- State correct facts or alternative opinions as descriptively as possible and as your own perceptions of reality.
- Provide a means for the Balloon to save face.
- Be ready to fill the conversation gap yourself.
- Cope with a Balloon when he or she is alone, when possible.

7. *Indecisive Stallers:*

- Make it easy for Stallers to tell you about conflicts or reservations that prevent the decision.
- Listen for indirect words, hesitations, and omissions that may provide clues to problem areas.
- When you have surfaced the issues, help Stallers solve their problems with the decision.
- At times, the Staller's reservation will be about you. If so: acknowledge any past problem; state relevant data nondefensively; propose a plan; ask for help.
- If you are not part of the problem, concentrate on helping the Staller examine facts. Use the facts to place alternative solutions in priority order. This makes it easier if the Staller has to turn someone else down.
- If real, emphasize the quality and service aspects of your proposal.
- Give support after the decision seems to have been made.
- If possible, keep the action steps in your hands.
- Watch for signs of abrupt anger or withdrawal from the conversation. If you see them, try to remove the Staller from the decision situation.

Reference: Bramson, Robert M. *Coping With Difficult People*, Doubleday, New York,



Dealing with Difficult Behaviors

Behavior	Tactic
<p>Hostile-Aggressive: This can take the form of overtly abusive behavior, tantrums, rage, and bullying, or it can be disguised with non-playful teasing, innuendoes, and digs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen without returning anger. • Take unpredictable actions – become nicer as they escalate, quieter as they become louder. • Do not try to argue; instead focus on any point you can agree with them on – most aggressive people will calm down if they feel someone is really listening to what they have to say. • Give them time to run down. • Maintain assertive (not aggressive) posture and body language. • State your own opinions assertively while not dismissing theirs.
<p>Complaining: Chronic complaining without a desire to find a solution</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't agree, but paraphrase what they say. • Avoid the accusation-defense-reaccusation pattern. • Try to move to a problem-solving mode by asking them to suggest alternatives with questions like "What results are you trying to achieve?" or "How would you like to see this resolved?" Complaining tends to stop when they are put in a position of responsibility for solving the problem.
<p>Unresponsiveness/Passivity: Unresponsiveness can be the result of discomfort with revealing oneself, or it can be used passive-aggressively as a way to deny someone needed information, or to avoid reprimand.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask open-ended questions that require more than a <i>yes</i> or <i>no</i> response. • Wait calmly for a response and don't fill the silence with conversation. • Be attentive when they do speak or participate. • Assign tasks rather than wait for them to volunteer. • Ask them for their feedback/opinions in writing instead of face-to-face – sometimes unresponsiveness is due to shyness, not avoidance.
<p>Overly-agreeable but doesn't deliver: This tends to be the result of someone who wants to be liked and will make promises to gain approval, but can't deliver on those promises.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not allow them to over-commit. • Give false deadlines. • Make sure they are clear on rewards for following through and the consequences for not. • Tie personal honor into the agreement – "Do I have your word...?" • Get it in writing – even an informal follow-up memo can prevent misunderstandings and make their verbal commitment binding.



<p>Opinionated/Condescending: Behavior that suggests that someone is always an expert (even if they aren't) or knows best (even if they don't)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge their accomplishments, show them you respect what they know. • Bond with them on the premise that “great minds think alike.” • Rather than negate their idea, just add yours: “That’s good – here’s what I’m thinking.” • Be very prepared and have all your facts when meeting. • Question them with confidence – do not allow yourself to be intimidated.
<p>Negative/Pessimistic: Tendency toward disagreeing with group consensus or regularly criticizing decisions; finds reasons why something will fail; negative opinions usually go beyond constructive criticism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be assertive about your optimism. • Don't argue. • Invite them to suggest alternatives. • Beat them to the punch – anticipate and voice any possible problems before they do, and then problem solve. • See their negativist perspective as a valuable resource for determining possible problems to be overcome. • Rather than being annoyed by their inevitable negativity, actually seek it out or make them <i>responsible</i> for ferreting out any potential problems. This will give them a sense of control while also putting some boundaries around their criticism. • Be ready with examples of past successes.
<p>Hesitant to make a decision, won't take initiative: Playing it safe to the point that they won't “go out on a limb” and make decisions or take initiative to do things without being asked or told to</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give them a set of choices and offer your opinions on the pros and cons of each. • Empower them to make decisions by pointing out that mistakes are okay and can be used to their advantage. • When they make a successful decision, recognize their accomplishment.
<p>Not trustworthy: Sabotaging, talking negatively about others, saying one thing and doing another</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on making sure your relationships with others around you are healthy. This way, any attempts to sabotage you will be out of alignment with others' perceptions of you and put the backstabber into question, not you. • Be direct with them. They have back-door motives – make sure you use the front door. Using a calm voice tone, describe the behavior that is unacceptable to you (stay away from judgmental terms – just state the facts) and ask that it stop. When the behavior is brought out into the open, you take away their ability to “sneak,” and therefore, their power.



Effective Communication and Listening Techniques

- Give up the need to be right
- First seek to understand, then to be understood
- Avoid acting defensively
- Listen for some truth in what they say
- Paraphrase the issue from their point of view and ask for clarification
- Use “I-statements”
- Ask for additional information if needed
- Explore options
- Look for workable, realistic options; recognize that compromise may be necessary
- Under-promise and over-deliver, but honor your agreements
- Take a “time-out” if necessary



Faulty Thinking That Can Contribute to Our Impressions of People as “Difficult”

Adapted from The Feeling Good Handbook by David. D. Burns, M.D.

- **All-or-nothing thinking:** You see things in “black or white” categories only. If something is not perfect, then it is a disaster by default. You have difficulty recognizing the “gray areas.” When dealing with difficult people, you may have problems seeing their “good side” or giving them the benefit of the doubt.
- **Overgeneralization:** You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat by using words like “always” or “never.” You may have one negative interaction with someone and over-generalize it to the point that you have “pegged” that person as impossible to deal with.
- **Mental filter:** You pick out a single negative detail and dwell solely on that, ignoring anything positive that may contradict it. For example, someone you know is actually a very nice person with one particular habit that annoys you. Instead of benefiting from their good qualities, you see the relationship as negative because of you choose to focus on their annoying habit instead.
- **Discounting the positive:** you reject positive experiences by insisting they don’t count. If someone who usually irritates you actually *doesn’t* irritate you one day, you tell yourself that it must be a fluke and continue to focus on their annoying qualities.
- **Mind-reading:** Without checking it out, you arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you. You then continue to respond to that person as if they “have it in for you,” thus creating a difficult relationship that is based on false assumptions.
- **Fortune telling:** You predict things will turn out badly. You assume the worst about someone and go into interactions with them already convinced that it will go horribly.
- **Magnification:** You exaggerate the importance of someone’s shortcomings and minimize their desirable qualities.
- **Emotional reasoning:** You assume that your negative reaction to someone accurately reflects the way they really are. If someone annoys you, then they must be annoying. If someone creates feelings of anger in you, then you assume they must be a cruel and negative person, without considering that your emotional reaction could have nothing to do with them and everything to do with you.
- **“Should statements”:** You tell yourself that someone “should” act differently. “He shouldn’t be so stubborn and argumentative.” *Should statements* lead to frustration and anger, because they set up a false expectation. Just because we think something “should” happen doesn’t mean it will. Life isn’t always fair that way.



- **Labeling:** This is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. Instead of separating a negative quality from the person, you label the whole person. “He’s a loser,” “She’s a jerk.” This leaves little room for improvement since you are labeling someone’s character, not just a behavior.
- **Personalization and blame:** You blame others for your problems, and overlook things you may be doing to contribute. “My performance review was so low because she’s making my job so hard to do.”

To Change Your Thinking...

- **Examine the evidence:** Instead of assuming that your impressions of someone are valid, examine the actual evidence for it. Take a look around at how other people are responding to the same behaviors. Is it possible that your assessment of that person is off base?
- **The double-standard method:** Instead of putting someone down in a harsh, critical way, try to look at and respond to their behaviors as if your best friend were exhibiting them. You might find that if the same behaviors were displayed by someone you love, you would be more willing to overlook them.
- **Thinking in shades of gray:** Instead of thinking about your interactions with someone in all-or-nothing terms, rate them on a scale from 0-100. Something that is not a complete success may still be rated as an 80—far from the big fat zero you may have given it before. Rating your interactions with your difficult person this way may cause you to realize that things aren’t as bad as you thought.
- **Define terms:** When you catch yourself labeling a whole person with a word like “loser” or “jerk,” define your terms. You’ll find there is no clear definition for loser or jerk, or many of the other negative labels we apply to people. Be more specific and behavioral – this will force you to factor out specific behaviors and leave the whole person alone.
- **The semantic method:** When you find yourself using words like “always,” “never,” or “should,” substitute language that is not so strong or emotionally loaded, like “sometimes” or “it would be better if.”
- **Re-attribution:** Instead of automatically assuming that someone is “bad,” and blaming them entirely for the problem, think about the many factors that have contributed to it. Then focus on solving the problem rather than blaming someone for creating it.
- **Cost analysis:** Make a list of what someone’s negative behavior *really* costs you. Is it keeping you from doing your job? Affecting your health? Ruining relationships? Or is it only a problem when you focus on it? For example, Joe annoys those around him at work by talking too loudly on the phone. A close

