



Dealing with Difficult People

How do you deal with a difficult person?

The fact is, in life, we're always going to encounter difficult people. But when we understand how their behavior and attitudes affect us, we can prepare ourselves to deal with them. Here are 8 ways to deal with difficult people:

1. Listen to them

When faced with a challenging person or situation, start by just listening. Look at it as an exercise in curiosity. Try to understand — as much as possible — what they want and why they're giving you a hard time.

If they're upset, avoid trying to placate them or shut them down. Telling someone to "calm down" usually has the opposite effect — especially if they think you're not too fond of them.

2. Get into their shoes

From there, try to imagine things from their point of view. If you were this person, and you were behaving in this way, what would justify your behavior? What would have to be happening to convince you that you were right? That may give you insight into how the other person feels.

Looking at things from their perspective doesn't necessarily mean that you have to agree with them. But it will help you develop compassion for them. Once you develop a bit of empathy for them, you open the way to communicating with compassion and respect.

3. Honor both of your needs

Many people take a dim view of compromise, feeling that when people seek a middle ground, no one gets what they want. However, that is the least fulfilling version of compromise.

What works better — and feels a little more satisfying — is to come to an agreement that honors both of your needs. Find a way (if you have to spend time around each other) that you can do so with respect. Even if that person doesn't change their ways, they can become a little more pleasant to deal with. Mutual understanding (and some [boundary-setting](#)) can help accomplish that.

4. Use humor

Sometimes, we get into difficult conversations because we take things too seriously. If you're in conflict with another person, [using \(appropriate\) humor can help diffuse tension](#). Cracking a joke — or even a smile — can help lower the stakes. It can remind you of shared common ground and even shift you into a more collaborative mood.

5. Practice

If you're a little conflict-avoidant, you may be hesitant to even get into conversations with difficult people. If that's the case, try practicing what you want to say first. Coaching sessions are a helpful space to run through conversations with different personas. You can try having the intended conversation, recapping previous exchanges, or talking through different resolutions.

6. When all else fails, eject

If you ever find yourself stuck dealing with someone you really can't stand, get out of there. Sometimes it's just not worth engaging. When our feelings are involved, we often feel drawn into the exchange. We're so absorbed that we forget we can just leave.

Years ago, I heard some advice from a sales trainer. He said that if the reps were ever on a sales call that was going badly, they should just hang up. He explained that a swift disconnection could be glossed over as "tech issues." It would be much harder to unsay anything that you might regret after a moment's reflection.

The same is true for difficult people. If you're having a hard time dealing with them, hang up (log off, walk away, or whatever applies). Even if you're talking face-to-face, you can find a way to leave. Invent an emergency or important phone call, and offer to pick up the conversation later.

7. Create a buffer

Set limits on the amount of time you spend engaging with [emotional vampires](#) and other difficult types. If you have to meet with them, do it in a neutral space, connect virtually, or schedule something directly after so they don't take up much of your time.

If you can, try not to interact with them alone. Bring a friend, colleague, or another person to help buffer your interactions with them. If you start getting upset or the situation starts to go south, this person can help you eject before things get too rough.

8. Practice self-care

Being around difficult people — even if everything looks calm on the surface — is [emotionally exhausting](#). If you're going to deal with it on a regular basis (for example, as a [caregiver](#) or in other relationships), you need to be sure to refill your cup. *Inner Work* can give you some distance and perspective as you reflect.

It's also important, though, to [practice other kinds of self-care](#). Ensuring that you feel physically and mentally cared for will help you feel more emotionally resilient, as well.

When to escalate a conflict to HR

While it's to be expected that you won't get along with everyone at work all the time, there are certain situations that should be handled by human resources. Don't hesitate to reach out to your manager, leader, or administrative team if a situation feels like it's getting out of control.

You should escalate conflicts with coworkers to HR when they involve:

- Bullying
- Harassment
- Inappropriate sexual conduct or advances
- Threats against you, your family, or your livelihood
- Other coworkers
- Violations of discrimination, disability, equal employment, or equal pay laws

In any of these instances, please contact human resources right away. Refrain from engaging with that person if you don't feel safe.