

How to Deal with Difficult People

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Difficult people can be anywhere: at home, school, work, and play—and sometimes, even in the mirror! A difficult person often tries to dominate or control others, with actions and attitudes ranging from aggression to manipulation to passivity or passive-aggression. This person typically resists healthy communication and/or growth.

Conversely, “a healthy adult relationship is one where both people in the relationship give and both receive. There is a safe and open exchange of ideas, feelings and thoughts and all perspectives are considered safe and valued. There is also the freedom to respectfully challenge, confront and strengthen one another” (Leslie Vernick).

We can't stop people from being “difficult,” but we can make wise, godly choices to reduce the suffering their behaviors generate in us. Here are specific action steps that can help you wisely face these challenges:

1. When you feel attacked by a difficult person, pause to **pray**, choosing to **respond rather than react**. Ask God to show you if there's any truth in what the other person is saying about you; allow Him to help you change and grow, if needed.

Look for a biblical principle to comfort you during the challenges of dealing with difficult people. If you're with someone who, as Proverbs 6:12-14 describes, generates evil or sows discord, take a moment to step back emotionally and mentally, making time to choose an appropriate response.

Viktor Frankl said, “Between a stimulus and a response, there is space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

No matter what someone else is doing, we can allow the Holy Spirit to enable us to honor God in each daily interaction. Thus empowered by God, we'll exhibit “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (**Galatians 5:22-23**) instead of annoyance, rage, bitterness, frustration, or revenge.

2. **Keep falling in love with Jesus**, allowing His love to stimulate your thoughts, words, and actions. Otherwise, someone else's evil patterns and human passions might be deciding how you live (see James 4:1-4).

Do what you can do rather than helplessly suffering because of what you *can't* do. Jesus commands us to “love one another” so that “all men will know you are my disciples” (see John 13:34-35). Look for eternal purposes in your choice to show love. Realize, too, there will be times when it's essential to courageously demonstrate “tough love” rather than appeasement, especially if you're being treated with contempt or disrespect.

3. **You will be at peace with other people when both you and they are at peace with God.** You *can* pray specific Scriptures for the other person, releasing each aspect of the challenging relationship to God. Daily develop new skills to respond biblically instead of reacting selfishly. Instead of being discouraged until there's a *state change*, perhaps it's time for a *heart change*. “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life” (Proverbs 4:23, NASU).

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men” (Romans 12:18, NASB). Facing conflict in a healthy way includes listening to the other person's concerns, speaking assertively, and being open to another perspective. We who have “tasted that the Lord is good,” have the opportunity to follow the freeing instruction to “rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit” (see 1 Peter 2:1-3). Even when others refuse to be at peace with us, we can choose to honor God, praying for God to bless them (per Matthew 5:44), releasing them (and any difficulties we experience with them) to the Lord, relying on Him for wisdom and hope.

If you're in a relationship with someone who has borderline personality disorder, you could frequently feel confused, especially when the borderline's emotions fluctuate between adoring and detesting you. Be careful and get help if your challenging person has this cunning mental disorder. Stay alert, since a borderline can usually lie so effectively that his or her lies are more believable to others than the truth.

4. What can you do if the person you love erects walls, refuses to talk, or believes (or tells) lies about you? When people “stonewall,” blocking all communication attempts, it's easy to focus on finding a way to cross that divide. Although it's good to be a bridge-builder, that only works if both parties want to work on the relationship. Instead of spending your life trying to scale impassable walls, **yield** every one of your concerns to the LORD! **Pray**, asking God to show you how to **cast your cares on Him**, allowing Him to sustain you while thanking Him that He cares for you (see Psalm 55:22 and 1 Peter 5:6-7).

Joshua 6 tells the incredible true story of how God broke down the walls of Jericho. For six days, the people of Israel were told to march around the city without saying a word! On “the seventh day, they marched around the city seven times ... the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, ‘Shout, for the LORD has given you the city’” (Joshua 6:15-16, ESV).

Some relationships are as “tightly shut” (Joshua 6:1) as was the city of Jericho. Instead of putting your hope in that relationship, you can entrust your sorrow and relational “walls” to God. His limitless strength and hope will not fail. **Rely on Him** during painful seasons when friends or family members refuse to be at peace.

5. **Wait.** One of the most difficult things for any of us to do is wait; it's an almost-insurmountable challenge for some of us to be *quiet* and wait! Yet God says, “It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD” (Lamentations 3:26). If He asks us to do something, He can also empower us to do what He asks.

Look at relational “waiting rooms” as an invitation to grow in your relationship with the Lord, to hear His loving voice. When people shut you out, you can safely rely on Jesus' promise, “**Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid**” (John 14:27, ESV). Relinquish your anguish to God. He cares. “... Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5, AMP). The interpersonal pain you're experiencing will *not* last forever.

6. Each of us needs to remember to *own your own response*. In every area of life, God urges us to “**Be angry, and yet do not sin**; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (Ephesians 4:26-27, ESV). Notice that God doesn't say we're never to get angry; He knows we can feel irritated, annoyed, frustrated, or hurt in this sinful world. [Someone said, “If we're to be angry and not sin, we must be angry at nothing but sin.”] We are called to release anything that offends us into God's loving care before the day ends so we won't become bitter people, useless for God's good purposes, choked by attitudes of accusation or criticism. As we yield each hurt to the Lord, we'll experience His limitless strength, enabling us to supernaturally move beyond others' harmful attitudes, words, or actions—without being controlled by them.
7. Has it been impossible to change the difficult people in your life? Instead of being discouraged, angry, anxious, or depressed [which sometimes is anger turned inward], why not **allow difficult people to become vehicles of growth**? Choose gratitude for how they illumine the utter necessity of relying on Christ's strength amidst human weaknesses, per 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. How good to know that God never changes; His love never fails!

What if you're married to a difficult person who is verbally, mentally, physically, or emotionally abusive? To ensure your safety, **ask someone if it's time to get help**. That could be a trusted pastor, counselor, police officer, teacher, or mentor who can help you courageously say “no” to further abuse or help you go somewhere where you'll be safe. Abusive people can be like “ferocious wolves” with their families (see Matthew 7:15) while looking like gentle lambs to others. You can't rely on an abusive person's promises of change—words don't prove anything. “... faith without works is dead” (James 2:14, NKJV).

8. Instead of putting your hope in a person, you can **steadfastly hope in God**. Since “Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men” (John 2:24, NIV), we can follow His example, shifting our focus from people to a steadfast determination to obey God, in His strength. “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8, ESV). If we are misunderstood, misrepresented, or maligned; our job is to entrust our reputations to God. He created us for a good purpose, His purpose.
9. What if your friend or family member is sarcastic, critical, demanding, demeaning, or narcissistic? If the person isn’t an immediate family member, you can limit the time you spend together, setting healthy boundaries so your life isn’t shattered in the vortex of someone’s bad choices. **It’s better to be kind** [doing the right thing, obeying God] **than nice** [conforming to someone’s selfish demands]. It’s OK to say “no” to people’s expectations.

If you live with a person who systematically devastates you by word and action, it’s vital to learn to **make healthy choices so you can enjoy life**. That could include (but is not limited to) listening to worship music instead of that person’s tirades; reading good books; spending time with healthy Christians whose words and actions encourage you, or participating in service activities where you can use your God-given gifts and talents.

10. Rather than allowing someone to rob you of your worth—or your hope, ask God how He wants you to exhibit His love *today*, allowing Him to lead you to people whose hearts are open. Any time you feel unloved or misunderstood, please remember that **your life matters to God**. We can yield every action and interaction to Him, aware that “he who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10, NASU). As Mother Teresa said, “In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love.” Motivated by God’s love, we can choose to do the right thing even when others do wrong.

Instead of constantly struggling because of choices made by someone else, take time to enjoy God’s creation. Plunge into the depths of His love (read Romans 8:31-38), experiencing the sweet fellowship of His suffering per Philippians 3:10. He knows your needs and will not allow pain to be wasted as you intentionally entrust that pain to Him, for His glory (see Romans 8:28). That doesn’t mean you allow others to continue hurting you! You can use your words, actions, and choices to say “no” to abusive mistreatment. **Created in God’s image, you are designed to be treated with dignity and respect—and to treat others with dignity and respect, too.**

Books that offer additional ideas as you continue thinking and wondering:

- *Bold Love*, by Dan Allender & Tremper Longman III
- *Emotional Vampires: Dealing with People Who Drain You Dry**, by Albert Bernstein
- *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, by Paul Brand & Philip Yancey
- *Foolproofing Your Life*, by Jan Silvious
- *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong*, by Leslie Vernick
- *Speaking the Truth in Love*, by Henry Virkler
- *The Anger Workbook*, by Les Carter and Frank Minirth
- *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage*, by Leslie Vernick
- *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship*, by Leslie Vernick
- *The Sociopath Next Door**, by Martha Stout
- *Unoffendable*, by Brant Hansen
- *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, by Edward T. Welch

Though the two books indicated with * are not *Christian* books, they contain practical ideas depicting how to be guarded with some people—such as “the shocking 4% of ordinary people [with] undetected mental disorder, the chief symptom of which is the complete absence of conscience” (*The Sociopath Next Door*).