



How to Distance Yourself From Difficult People

You aren't being mean or making a scene, just minding your mental health.

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With toxic people – a neighbor who routinely lashes out in anger, for instance – the need to steer clear can be pretty apparent. But with difficult people in your daily life, problems can be more insidious and subtle. Maybe it's a friend, whose negativity is now dragging you down. It might be a mercurial co-worker you can't always avoid. Or it could be a close family member who thinks blood excuses bad behavior.

Whoever it is, when encounters routinely leave you stressed out, demoralized and uncomfortable, it's time to distance yourself for the sake of mental health and peace of mind. Read on for expert tips on setting boundaries and separating with firmness and grace.

You might recognize some of the following people in your life:

The narcissist. The world calls her "wonderful," acquaintances call her "charming" and therapists call her "narcissistic." You, however, just call her "Mom."

Narcissists can be some of the toughest types for family members to deal with, says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a psychotherapist who practices in the District of Columbia and Bethesda, Maryland. Gaslighting, or denying reality, is a hallmark of these challenging people.

"If you're involved with a narcissist, you're always questioning yourself because you don't get much empathy; you don't get much validation," she says. "You have your reality discounted, and you start to wonder whether you're crazy."

Gadhia-Smith describes how one young woman finally took a break from a difficult relationship with her mother by temporarily limiting contact to text messages. "That gave her a sense of empowerment, because she felt like she was in charge of her relationship, and it was no longer totally about her mother," she says.

People who sense they're being kept at a distance often push back in these situations, Gadhia-Smith says, and this [narcissistic parent](#) was no exception. How do you handle people who will not be ignored? "If you repeatedly send mixed messages, they're more likely to hang on," she says. "It's your responsibility to be clear and consistent and kind. And if they still won't get it, then they need to go and get some help for themselves."

In this case, the daughter held her ground. After that period of separation, she was eventually able to set her own terms to resume the relationship, with a new sense of autonomy, agency and personal power.

The chaos lover. It goes way beyond not being a good team player in the workplace. "These people really just enjoy chaos – that's sort of their mode of operating," says Travis Bradberry, author of "Emotional Intelligence 2.0." "That's really their orientation to the world and other people. You don't need to worry about them – you just need to worry about yourself." As you present a well-researched plan in a meeting, for instance, it's that person who makes irrational objections, just because. "It's one thing to argue the point," Bradberry says. "It's another thing to be pushing people's buttons and creating unnecessary difficulty."

Don't add fuel to the fire by engaging, Bradberry advises. Instead, remove yourself from the situation so you can see it as an objective third party. "Because that allows you to approach it rationally and see that kind of obvious, hovering solution that you can't see when you're really pissed off, and you're trying to fight crazy with crazy," he says. Stepping back allows you to see the long-term view and come back with a better battle plan.

The negativity spreader. Having good boundaries can keep you out of the emotional clutches of a chronic complainer, Bradberry says. This is the person around whom the water-cooler conversation always turns negative. You don't have to be sucked into the vortex, he says. Instead, simply opt not to join in – head back to your desk or take a quick walk. "You're

able to set limits – you have complete control over that," he says. "You just have to stick to them." It's not about stonewalling or shutting the person out, he adds. "A lot of it is not participating in conversations you normally participate in." Setting limits in a matter-of-fact way reaps big benefits in lowering your stress levels, he says.

The dependent. A needy, clingy friend drags you down, but you don't want to hurt his or her feelings by putting space between you. "We can just feel really tired around certain people," Gadhia-Smith says. "I call these people 'spiritual vampires' who drain us. They might not be doing anything overtly bad but some people just suck the life out of us, and we don't know why."

That can be a case for "portion control," she says – spacing out interactions and keeping them within time limits you've set. "If a relationship is too expensive, then you practice portion control if you want to stay in it," she says. "And figure out how much of that person works for you. How much is good for you. If you don't want to stay in a relationship, you find a way to graciously move on."

There are two basic ways to do that, according to Gadhia-Smith. "You can gradually wean yourself from a relationship and become slowly less and less available and kind of phase them out and phase it down," she says. "Or you can talk to them and say, 'I don't really think this is a great fit. I respect you, and I appreciate you, but I think it's best we go our separate ways.'"

Everyone is needy at some level, Gadhia-Smith says. Still, she adds, "We have to learn how to get our needs met without overwhelming any one person in our lives, to spread out our dependency needs." As the person seeking distance, she says, you must look out for your emotional health: "You limit the time; you limit the conversations. You give from your bounty and not your reserve."

The odd man out. Triangles can be tricky, and it's not always clear whom in a relationship, if anyone, is at fault. But when the three-way dynamic shifts from comfortable to [awkward](#), it's might be time to move on. Gadhia-Smith describes a common scenario: Someone is upset with their husband or wife, so they vent and unload to a friend, filling in the details.

"But then they make up, and they're back in love with the spouse," she says. "But they've talked to the friend, who becomes negative about the spouse." While the couple moves forward, she says, the friend may not forgive or forget. "[The friend] might not go back to liking the person quite as much," she says. "They can hold a grudge." That leaves the confider feeling uncomfortable, and the friendship may suffer.

In cases like this, it's not really about a single difficult person, but a difficult situation. One way to keep a healthy distance is to not treat friends or family members as neutral counselors. That, Gadhia-Smith says, is why people see therapists – there's no aftermath.

It's not just them. When every interaction leaves you [impatient](#) or irritated, and when you judge those around you and find most of them wanting, the [common denominator](#) is likely staring back at you in the mirror. You have met the difficult person – and it is you.

Or maybe it's a case of mutual bad behavior. It's important to make sure you're contributing to a situation, Gadhia-Smith says, instead of contaminating it. "It's being able to show up to the degree that you can and practice principles of courtesy, kindness, respect and tolerance," she says. "These are often the spiritual muscles that are being worked by difficult people. They give us a spiritual workout. It's a spiritual workout to build our muscles of courtesy, kindness, tolerance and love. And patience."

It doesn't have to be all or nothing, she says, and sometimes creating distance now can mean a better relationship later. "It could be days, weeks, months – sometimes even years," she says. "But while everyone is going through the process of life, we're all growing and changing. And sometimes you can go back, and things are different with the same person."