

Working with Difficult People

Unless you are among the luckiest people in the world, or you are totally free of all relationships in the real world, you have to cope with difficult people in the course of your work.

Difficult people are everywhere. Some are habitually late for work. Customers are often rude. Co-workers can be abusive and uncooperative as they guard their turf. Others may goof off leaving you to pick up the slack. There are bosses who consistently make unreasonable demands and never have a kind word to say.

Don't waste your time searching for a paradise where there are no difficult people. The wise, truly ambitious job seeker spends his or her time figuring out how to manage these relationships so that they don't become roadblocks to personal progress.

Once you find a job in healthcare you will be working with people all day; these people will be co-workers, residents, family, visitors, doctors, etc. Getting along with these people is part of your job. It is natural to get along better with some people than others. For example: some people rub you the wrong way, other seem to complain all the time, and it may seem like others take pleasure in giving you a hard time. It may seem to some that these people are "difficult", but what do we really mean when we say someone is being difficult? Usually people are "difficult" when they get in the way of what we want or need to do. For example: you have just told a co-worker that you will be taking your lunch break when she asks you to help her transfer a resident. You have transferred this resident many times by yourself, and you are irritated because this is taking time away from your lunch break. You help the co-worker but are mad because she is being difficult!

STOP AND THINK: It is your opinion that this co-worker is being "difficult". Would you still think this co-worker being "difficult" if you knew she is pregnant and her doctor told her to always have help when transferring residents? Take a minute and write down all the words you can think of to describe a difficult person.

How easy was that? For most of us, it is very easy to pick out what is wrong with someone rather than find the good. Remember that it takes more energy to be negative than it does to be positive.

Think of a situation where you thought someone was being "difficult" and later found out that something else was going on. Write your thoughts below.

Think about the "difficult" people in your life, now write down all the words you can think of to describe them

Remember that calling someone "difficult" is a matter of opinion, not a fact!

Describing Difficult People –

Did you come up with any of the following words to describe the “difficult” people you know?

- Demanding
- Irritable
- Nasty
- Rude
- Aggressive
- Depressed
- Abusive
- Scary
- Sarcastic
- Hostile
- Uncooperative
- Angry
- Complaining
- Pushy
- Mean
- Argumentative

Try to think positively about all your residents and co-workers. It may be difficult, but try to think of three things that are good about each person you think is difficult. Try to think of those things when you are working with that person.

Now write down three qualities you have that make you easy to get along with. _____→

1.
2.
3.

Why Are Some People Difficult?

We are all individuals, with our own likes and dislikes, personal habits, and ways of communicating. Sometimes it seems that some people have a hard time getting along with others. Remember there may be reasons for this:

- Recovering from stress or tragedy
- Scared
- Suffering from an illness
- Dealing with a disability
- In pain, all day every day
- Feeling lonely, or depressed
- Taking medications that make them act differently

Be Careful Who You Call Difficult

Remember rumors are one of the worst things you can start at work!

STOP AND THINK: Imagine this: you have been assigned to work with a new resident, Mary. Yesterday, a co-worker who worked with her was telling you during break that Mary was rude, mean, and uncooperative. Today, Mary is on your assignment sheet. You haven't even met Mary and you are already prepared for her to give you a hard time. You may not even want to work with Mary because of the rumors. Will this affect the way you treat Mary? It is best to avoid rumors. Mary might have been scared or in pain yesterday, or the other nursing assistant may have been having a bad day herself.

Explain what you would do in the STOP AND THINK situation: _____

Aggressive Personalities –

People with aggressive personalities may be loud, rude, bossy, and sometimes intimidating. Aggressive people may also tend to interrupt others instead of listening; make sarcastic remarks about others, stand too close, stare, or glare. When talking, they may point or shake their fingers, raise their voice, or complain a lot.

A person with an aggressive personality may seem too concerned with their own needs and wants, and not seem to care at all about others.

What makes the aggressive person “difficult”?

- They may demand a lot of your time
- They may blame you or others for things that aren’t your fault
- They may try to control the situation and your behavior
- They may say things like “you always...” or “you never...”
- They may try to put you down to make themselves feel better
- They may try to start arguments by saying hurtful things
- They may be stubborn about their schedule and activities

How should you communicate with an aggressive person?

Stay calm; aggressive people will try to upset you. They will try to control the situation. Remember, no one can make you feel bad unless you let them.

Don’t be afraid to stand up for yourself, but make sure you do it respectfully.

Try to listen to what the person is really saying. For example: if John is complaining all the time that the food is cold, try asking him if he needs help with anything. John may not know how to ask for help. Try to stay calm, smile, and relax. Remember, if you add anger to the resident’s frustration, you might have an explosion!

Passive Personalities –

People with passive personalities may tend to be quiet, agreeable all the time, or apologetic for things that are not their fault. They may also be intimidated by others, shy or scared. Passive people may tend to avoid speaking up, or let others make decisions for them. They may be overwhelmed, or afraid to say “no”. They may also be ashamed of themselves, avoid eye contact, and allow others to be rude.

Passive people may seem to be concerned with other people’s needs, sometimes feel silently overwhelmed, and don’t get their own needs met.

What makes passive people “difficult”?

- They may blame others for everything, but never change the situation
- They may waste time by not asking for what they need...You may have to play the guessing game
- They may expect others to read their mind, or just “know” what they want, and are unhappy if you can’t
- They may have trouble making decisions, even little ones
- They may talk negatively about people behind their backs

How should you communicate with a passive person?

Ask open-ended questions. For example: “What was your daughter like?” Not, “Do you like peas?” Don’t stand over a passive person; this may make them feel scared, or shy. Praise passive people when they stand up for themselves. Help them make decisions by giving them choices and information. For example: ask a resident if they would like the green blouse or the red sweater. Tell them it is a bit chilly today. Hopefully they will choose the sweater.

Tips for Dealing with Difficult People –

- Since you spend so much time taking care of your residents, their negative behavior is often directed at you. Try not to take their comments or behaviors personally.
- Remember, it is only your opinion that someone at work is difficult. A person who seems difficult to you may get along fine with everyone else. Or, you may get along great with a resident that no one else seems to like to work with. Sometimes it is all about personality.
- Try hard not to overreact when dealing with a difficult person. Ask yourself, “Is this really worth fighting about?”
- When you work with someone who has given you trouble in the past, try and make a fresh start every day.
- Tell your resident what you are going to do before you do it. This will decrease the chance that they will react negatively.
- If someone is yelling or crying, try standing still, looking at the person, and waiting for them to calm down before you talk.
- If a person is yelling or crying in an area that is very busy, try asking them to move to their room, so as to not disturb others. Let them vent, and listen.

- Remember, there may be many reasons for a resident's behavior. Most of the time, their behavior is not intended to make your life miserable. They may be feeling sick, on a new medication, or depressed.
- Be patient with your co-workers, too; don't take everything personally. For example: you say "hi" to Tom and he does not respond. You may think "Tom is mad at me", or "What did I do"? The reality could be that Tom didn't hear you because he just got some bad news from home.
- Remember, the old rule of counting to ten...it really works. If ten is not long enough for you, count to twenty. Do this when you are dealing with a difficult resident or coworker. If you count before you answer or talk with them, your response will probably sound much more professional.
- Don't allow others to control your moods. Come into work happy, and tell yourself that you are not going to let others make you mad. Give yourself a pep talk if you have to work with a difficult person. For example: "I am ready for this, I can handle this, and I am not going to get upset". This is better than saying "Oh, I hate this job. It is terrible working for these rude residents." Your happiness may help others be happy!
- Don't waste your energy trying to change people who behave in a difficult manner, just change how you react to them.
- Watch your body language. If you tell someone you are listening, but you are looking at a clipboard, the resident will know you are not listening.

Conditions that Cause Behavior Changes –

- COPD –a lung disease that may prevent the brain from getting enough oxygen. This could make a person anxious or agitated
- STROKE –can cause damage to the brain, causing a change in your resident's personality
- URINARY TRACT INFECTION – an infection in or near the bladder that may cause confusion or agitation
- PAIN –If a client is in a lot of pain they may become frustrated, and lash out at those who care for them
- DEMENTIA & ALZHEIMER'S –while very rare, a person can sometimes become violent in the middle stages of the disease (and the middle stages can last for years)
- BRAIN TUMOR –an abnormal growth can cause a personality change, depending on the location in the brain
- SUBSTANCE ABUSE – alcohol or drugs (prescription or not) may make a person combative, or violent
- DREPRESSION or MENTAL ILLNESS – a person may not be thinking clearly, and may get easily frustrated

Seven Types of Difficult People in the Workplace –

1. Hostile-Aggressive: The bullies, or “walking time bombs”, who throw tantrums and try to “muscle” their way through.
2. Complainers: They gripe incessantly, but never try to make things better.
3. Silent and Unresponsive: They only answer, “yeah,” “nope,” or just grunt and stare.
4. Super-Agreeables: Very likable, outgoing people who will agree to anything, but rarely produce what they promise.
5. Negativists: For them, “It won't work, it's impossible.” They are always complaining; always ready to criticize everything about the job; always gossiping.
6. Know-It-All Experts: These are superior types who want you to know how smart they are and to realize how incompetent you are.
7. Indecisives: They wait for someone else to make the decisions; if they do have to decide, they want to wait until everything is perfect. If things go wrong, someone else is at fault.

Ten Ways to Deal with Difficult People in the Workplace –

Here are 10 common sense suggestions that should help in dealing at the workplace.

1. Recognize you are not “just being negative and difficult” yourself when you acknowledge the reality that the world is brim full of difficult people.
2. Keep your eyes on your personal goals. Don't let hard-to-get-along-with people become a personal issue. Put them in the proper perspective. They are not your personal problem unless they hold back your progress.
3. You don't have to like a person to get along with him or her. Working relationships are not like marriages. They are transient connections in the process of reaching your objective.
4. Recognize you can be difficult, too.
5. Try to understand why difficult people are difficult. Are they always hard to get along with, or just on those “bad days” everyone, including you, has?
6. Be big enough to accommodate the difficult person, up to a point.
7. When you do have to butt heads, be firm. Don't argue. Don't get personal. State your case and move on. Be ready to let the difficult person back off the limb he has gone out on.
8. However, try as you might, there may come a time when it makes common sense to recognize that some relationships are too difficult to live with. Go to your boss, explain the situation and ask him to resolve it by moving you to another position away from the trouble-maker or by correcting or removing that person. Keep in mind this can backfire unless you are clearly in the right.
9. Finally, if you have made your best effort along the lines discussed here and the difficulty still exists and it is hurting your personal life and career, you have to make a choice. Learn to live with it, or leave for another position.
10. Keep in mind; however, there will be difficult people wherever you go. You'll have to deal with them or surrender.

Difficult People Quiz

1. _____ Difficult people are often:
 - a. Women
 - b. Scared
 - c. Old
 - d. Men
2. _____ Must people with disabilities are violent?
 - a. True
 - b. False
3. _____ A person who gets along great with a difficult resident is a difficult person too.
 - c. True
 - d. False
4. _____ To get along with a Difficult co-workers, you should:
 - a. Get offended
 - b. Let them yell at you all they want
 - c. Stay calm and listen
 - d. Blame them, to get them fired
5. _____ Passive people are great to work with because you can get them to do all your work.
 - a. True
 - b. False
6. _____ Aggressive people may:
 - a. Blame others
 - b. Expect you to read their mind
 - c. Be shy
 - d. Avoid decisions
7. _____ Strokes and Substance abuse can cause a resident's behavior to change.
 - a. True
 - b. False
8. _____ If you yell louder than the person yelling at you they will probably listen to you.
 - a. True
 - b. False
9. _____ You have to like everyone you work with.
 - a. True
 - b. False
10. _____ Body language is important when dealing with a difficult resident, or co-worker.
 - a. True
 - b. False

