

Options for Dealing With Difficult People

We always have choices when confronted with difficult people. Basically we have six possible options.

1. Say and do nothing.

People who choose this option either “let it go” or choose to suffer, alone or by complaining to someone else who may not be able to do anything about the situation.

If there is no hope of improving a difficult relationship, there is no point in trying to make it better.

Doing nothing can be a self-defeating choice because:

- People problems usually don't get better by themselves, and we perpetuate the problem by doing nothing.
- Frustration builds up over a period of time, which can make matters worse and delay taking more effective actions.

2. Get even.

Three basic motives for seeking revenge are to:

- Make ourselves feel better.
- Send a message.
- Prevent further harm.

The problems with getting even are:

- The good feelings are only temporary.
- Difficult people rarely see the error of their ways.
- Revenge can escalate.
- Revenge can do permanent damage.

3. Walk away.

Walking away may be the most effective option when:

- Emotions are out of control.
- The relationship or situation is not resolvable.
- The outcome may not be worth the energy required to redirect the conflict.

Continually walking away when conflicts occur can be a less than ideal response. When we walk away, we don't have a chance to get our needs met in the relationship, and we often carry our frustrations with us.

The reasons people often stay in undesirable situations are:

- Fear of the unknown.
- Longstanding commitment to the person or the situation.
- Economic reasons.
- Low self-esteem.

Ask yourself the following questions when deciding whether to leave or to stay:

- Is leaving the best and only way to resolve the difficulties?
- Do the benefits of leaving outweigh the costs?
- Are the issues similar to those I have encountered in other places?
- Which choice gives me more of an opportunity to learn about myself and how I function in relationships?
- Which choice will help me grow and overcome my limitations?
- Can I endure the discomfort in order to gain the wisdom from the situation?
- If I were to leave, how much would remain unresolved between me and the other person or situation?
- If I were to leave, would the person or situation and the problems continue to live inside my head?

4. Respectfully request a behavior or attitude change in the other person.

Requesting a change in another person is more likely to be well received if we are also willing to examine our behavior or attitudes in the context of the conflict.

For people to change, they must:

- Be aware that their behavior or attitude is causing problems for others.
- Be able to change.
- Want to change.

Being respectful means:

- Addressing the person in a way that maintains his/her dignity.
- Assuming positive intentions, no matter what the outcome.
- Requesting a change without being attached to the change being just the way you requested.

Guidelines for approaching others about making changes:

- Being direct and reasonable usually works better than being indirect and unreasonable.
- People prefer logical approaches, honesty, and negotiation, and dislike threats, manipulation, hints, and deceit.

5. Change our attitude.

An attitudinal shift on our part means that we choose to see and hear a person in a completely different way, even when the person continues to be difficult. Changing our attitude allows us to get past the person's behavior to get a closer look at what the person's real intentions are.

6. Change our behavior.

We cannot successfully predict and influence how another person will act, but we can influence how we act. Changing our behavior in response to a difficult person or situation is a powerful way to redirect the energy and emotion being experienced by everyone.

When we change our behavior, the other person has no choice but to respond in a different way, which creates the opening for a more constructive response for the conflict to surface.

We always struggle more with our own emotions than we struggle with another person. To change ourselves, we have to change our perspective and way of seeing difficulties. We can receive great benefit if we reframe situations and view them as opportunities to learn about ourselves and become better people.

Think back to your last few encounters with difficult people. Did you:

1. Say and do nothing?
2. Get even?
3. Walk away?
4. Respectfully request an attitude or behavior change in the other person?
5. Change your attitude?
6. Change your behavior?

Would a different option work better for you?