

GILL HASSON

Bestselling author of *Mindfulness* and *Emotional Intelligence*

SECOND
EDITION

HOW TO DEAL WITH **DIFFICULT PEOPLE**

Smart Tactics for Overcoming
the Problem People in Your Life

How to Deal With Difficult People

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**Smart Tactics for Overcoming the Problem
People in Your Life**

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Introduction

Difficult people are everywhere.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, ‘The single most important ingredient of success is knowing how to get along with people.’

Of course, Roosevelt never met that difficult person at work that you have to deal with every day, did he? And he certainly didn’t have your in-laws.

When people are nice to you, you can’t help but feel good and be nice back. But when they’re difficult, you’re bound to be unhappy about it and react badly.

Why do other people get to us so easily?

The reason our happiness and well-being depend so much on our relationships is because humans are social beings; we seek and enjoy the company of other people, in particular other people who are easy to get along with and whom we like.

In fact, most of us would rather experience an unpleasant event – watch our team lose, for example – with someone who shares our negative opinions about the team than experience a pleasant event – watching our team win – in the company of those who are disagreeable and difficult.

But some people know exactly how to be difficult. They're the people who bring you down with their negativity, criticism or anger. Or they refuse to cooperate. They're irritating, frustrating and often infuriating. Perhaps they're weird; their behaviour is inappropriate.

What to do? One obvious solution is to calmly walk away from them. This is easier said than done. (But not impossible: see Chapter 8.) While you can always walk away from a rude shop assistant or hang up on an unwanted sales call, it's not so easy to cut yourself off from a parent, sibling, partner, colleague or friend because you can no longer put up with their difficult behaviour.

A more practical approach to dealing with them is to start by understanding how and why other people can be so difficult. Chapter 1 will help you do just that. You'll see that difficult behaviour occurs on a continuum. At one end of the scale, difficult behaviour can be overt (hostile and aggressive); at the other end, it can be passive (uninvolved and inactive).

In the middle of this continuum is behaviour in others that can be the most difficult to deal with: passive aggressive. It is covert (dishonest and manipulative). In Chapter 1, we'll explore these patterns of behaviour in more detail.

However, knowing and understanding what's wrong with someone's behaviour doesn't change it. The thing is, you **can't** directly change other people's behaviour; the only thing you can change is how you respond and deal with it.

In Chapter 2, we will look at the different ways you may currently deal with difficult people and help you to understand why you react to them in the way you do. We consider the expectations and beliefs you may have about the ways other people 'should' behave towards you. Perhaps you blame other people for **making** you respond or behave in particular ways.

You'll learn that other people can't **make** you do anything; they're not responsible for how you feel or respond. You are. So, taking responsibility for your reactions to difficult people will help you better manage them. Why? Because if you can take responsibility for your responses then, like anything else that belongs to you, those responses are yours to manage: to influence and direct.

Having thought about how and why you and other people behave and respond to each other as you do, the next step is to learn skills, strategies and techniques to manage difficult people: to know what to say and what not to say. A good way to know what to say and what not to say to a difficult person is to start by listening to them. Really listening.

In Chapter 3, you'll learn what 'reflective listening' skills are and how to use them to your advantage. As well as

learning how to listen to other people, you'll learn to 'read' other people; you'll learn how to actually 'see' what other people's motives and intentions are.

By this point in the book, you'll certainly be ready to get on with dealing with difficult people. In the past, you may have thought that there was only one or two ways to do this: either grit your teeth and hope that they'll stop being so difficult, that things will improve; or get the difficult person to see just how difficult they're being.

Both of these approaches are unlikely to fix the problem. In the case of gritting your teeth and hoping things will improve ... they won't. In the case of getting them to see just how difficult they're being, that's unlikely too.

You need to deal with the difficult **behaviour** – not the person. Chapter 4 will really help you here. It explains how to deal with other people calmly, directly and honestly using assertiveness skills and techniques.

You'll learn that there are several aspects to being assertive. Being assertive means being honest, clear and specific about what you feel, want and don't want. You have to acknowledge and often clarify the other person's point of view. You'll need to negotiate, compromise and, when necessary, stand your ground. You need to be able to identify solutions and consequences for when the other person refuses to cooperate. You'll need to avoid 'losing it': accusing and blaming or insulting the other person when they're being difficult. Finally, you need to know how to come across with certainty and confidence.

Sound like there's a lot to learn? There is. But you don't have to learn it all at once. You don't have to put it all into practice at once, either, in an encounter with a difficult person. The good news is that you only need to remember to focus on one or two assertiveness techniques at any one time to make progress.

In Part Two of this book, you can see how, in a range of situations with a range of difficult individuals, it's possible to just use a couple of assertive strategies and techniques each time to deal with a difficult person.

In Chapter 6 of this book, the second edition of *How to Deal With Difficult People*, you will read about how to deal with gaslighting; the psychological manipulation of a person that causes them question their judgement, memory and perceptions of what has or hasn't happened between themselves and someone else.

Some people aren't just difficult, they're impossible! They drain you and can even destroy you. With these people, in order to preserve your physical and mental health, your stability and spirit there is really only one thing for you to do: withdraw completely. Chapter 8 will explain how you can do this.

Finally, Chapter 9 is a new chapter for this second edition. It looks at the concept of being an 'active bystander'. Being an active bystander means being aware of when the way one person is behaving towards another is inappropriate or threatening – and choosing to challenge it. You will read that there are five ways that you could intervene as an

active bystander: Distract, Delegate, Document, Delay and Direct. The aim of each approach is to help you think clearly and make a measured decision on what to do, prioritize safety and avoid escalating a situation.

So, as you can see, this book can help you to handle all kinds of people in all sorts of situations – to make your life less stressful and a lot easier.

Once you've read this book, you'll no longer feel that other people make you feel or behave one way or another. Instead, you'll feel that you **can** take control. You'll see that you can choose whether to tell other people what you think, how you feel and what you believe.

Even if an encounter with a difficult person doesn't turn out the way you hoped, you'll be less likely to feel guilty, angry or resentful, because you'll know to simply reflect on and identify what you would do differently next time, in a similar situation.

In short, *How to Deal With Difficult People* will help you to develop strategies to respond calmly, be able to confidently stand up to others and know when to walk away.

The result? Other people are more likely to treat you in the way you want: nicely and with respect.

PART ONE

Dealing With Difficult People

1

Difficult People and Their Difficult Behaviour

Who or what is a difficult person? It's anyone who leaves you feeling upset or let down, frustrated or angry, humiliated or confused, drained or despairing.

A difficult person can be someone who behaves in an exploitative or unethical manner; they may be someone who creates a sense of distrust because they avoid saying what they really think or feel.

A difficult person could be someone who refuses to cooperate with you. They might avoid taking responsibility and duck out of commitments.

A difficult person can also be someone who is negative and critical; they find fault easily without offering any constructive or helpful alternatives.

Whether it's a manager who keeps moving the goalposts, an uncooperative colleague or the difficult-to-please client, your negative friend, sarcastic brother-in-law, critical parent or the infuriating person at a call centre, they all have one thing in common: they can be difficult to deal with.

There are probably times when you wonder how an encounter can go awry so quickly; you start to doubt your

own perceptions, feel thrown off balance by the other person and find yourself acting crazy when, actually, you're quite a nice person!

Is it you or is it the other person? It's not always easy to tell if someone is deliberately being difficult or if it's just you who is struggling to deal with that person.

You may have no trouble dealing with a hostile teenager, but you have real difficulty with a colleague who finds fault in everything you do. Perhaps you find it easy to accept your sister's negativity (the rest of the family find her draining), but find a friend's inability to be enthusiastic about anything the most challenging.

What is difficult in one context may seem as nothing in another; an uncooperative colleague is a real struggle to deal with in a meeting, but one to one you find it quite easy to negotiate with him or her.

Sometimes, it's not clear what exactly it is you're having to deal with. For instance, although it's not pleasant, when someone is being openly aggressive and hostile, you know just what you're dealing with. Too often, though, someone else's difficult behaviour is difficult to identify; it's hard to nail down what exactly it is they're doing or saying that's so infuriating.

When does someone else's behaviour move from being irritating to infuriating? It can range from mild or transient, to difficult behaviour that is significant and persistent.

Difficult behaviour occurs on a continuum. At one end of the scale, difficult behaviour can be hostile and aggressive – at the other end, it can be passive, uninvolved and inactive.

In the middle of this continuum is behaviour in others that can be the most difficult to deal with: passive aggressive. It is covert – dishonest and manipulative.

Let's look at these patterns of behaviour in more detail.

Openly hostile, aggressive behaviour

Aggressive behaviour is the most overt, open type of difficult behaviour. At its most extreme, openly hostile, aggressive behaviour is harsh and forceful. It can be intimidating; when someone is being openly hostile, they may shout, swear and be abusive. They often overreact, even to things that are of little or no consequence to them.

An openly hostile person may talk over and interrupt you or oppose you by dismissing your ideas and opinions. They are unable to compromise with you and frequently 'lose it'. They often feel they have to prove things and push a point. They insist they are right. You are wrong. It's a 'my way or no way' approach.

They are domineering and controlling and view the world through a self-centred lens. The more self-centred they are, the more difficult they are. Their steamroller tactics can leave you feeling like you've been flattened!

Why do people behave like this?

When someone is behaving in an aggressive, hostile way, it's because they want to make sure that things happen the way they want them to happen. Sometimes, it's because their expectations have been thwarted and they are trying to claw back some control. Some people respond aggressively if they think they are being undermined or criticized; they may feel ignored, insecure, misunderstood, cheated or put upon. They may be feeling impatient, upset or just plain angry.

Anger and aggression

It's useful to understand the difference between anger and aggression. Anger is an emotional and physiological state; a person can get angry about something but not necessarily respond in an aggressive way. For example, a political situation could make someone so angry that they respond by donating money to support a related cause.

On the other hand, it's possible to be aggressive towards someone – by mugging them, for example – without being angry at that person.

Aggressive behaviour can be **instrumental** aggression or **impulsive** aggression.

When someone uses instrumental aggression, they are using their aggression as an instrument. They are using aggression in a calculating way to get what they want.

In contrast, when someone uses impulsive aggression, it's a reaction, a response to something that has happened

to them. Impulsive aggression is an automatic response, an emotion-driven reaction. It is aggression stemming from a feeling of anger.

A colleague who criticizes you in front of others is likely using instrumental aggression to put you down because, for some reason, they're jealous of you. Your desire to shout them down is impulsive aggression!

Disguised hostility: Passive aggressive behaviour

There's no mistaking openly hostile, aggressive behaviour; it's **direct** and in your face. Disguised hostility and passive aggressive behaviour, on the other hand, are an **indirect** expression of what a person does and doesn't want.

Passive aggressive behaviour can be one of the most difficult behaviours to deal with because it's expressed in obscure, underhand ways. The person may appear passive on the surface but is really acting out their resistance towards you in an indirect or hidden way.

When someone is behaving with disguised hostility, they don't reveal their true motives and you end up tying yourself in knots trying to work out what's going on. You may find yourself getting upset and angry but can't be entirely sure it is justified.

Rather than saying what they do or don't want, a person who uses disguised hostility puts up a passive resistance to your ideas and opinions, needs and expectations.

In order to get their own way, they control situations and manipulate you without actually appearing to.

Passive aggressive verbal behaviour

Typically, when a person is being passive aggressive, they are ambiguous; they give mixed messages and are unclear about what they really mean. They may use sarcasm or veiled, hostile joking and teasing – often followed by ‘just kidding’, denying there’s a problem. If you get upset or offended by what they say, they may accuse you of over-reacting or misunderstanding what they said. They may use gaslighting techniques; trying to convince you that you’re wrong about something even when you’re not.

Rather than say what they feel or think, people who disguise their hostility usually mutter their dissent to themselves or use a non-verbal way of expressing their feelings; for example, by giving you the silent treatment, dirty looks or rolling their eyes.

A passive aggressive person is good at being a victim; unable or unwilling to look at their own part in a situation, they will go silent, sulk and be sullen in order to get attention or sympathy. If they can, they will find a way to blame others, avoid responsibility for their own feelings and emotions, which, in fact, they brought about by their own actions.

Passive aggressive actions and behaviour

When it comes to tasks at home or work, a person using disguised hostility may or may not appear cooperative but, either way, they’ll do things to disrupt or sabotage a task, activity or project, often by creating confusion around the issue.