

HOW TO MANAGE DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIPS:

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A more popular title might have been “How to Manage Difficult People.” However, an individual that one person might find difficult is the same individual that another person might view as easy and enjoyable. In other words, a person who is difficult for me to manage might not be difficult for you—and vice versa. Further, managing relationships is not so much about managing others as it is about managing ourselves. Although difficulties are encountered more frequently with certain types of people—particularly those with addiction, alcoholism, and some personality disorders—it is more often the case that the difficulty is in the interaction rather than the person. It takes two to have a difficult relationship, although it takes only one to make a change in the relationship. When we are facing difficult relationships, the best place to look for change is with ourselves. Yet it is often the last place we look.¹

How We Make Relationships Worse.

Try a thought experiment: Imagine for a moment what it would take to make a relationship worse. Here is a short list, arranged alphabetically, of seven of the most common ways people make their relationships with others worse.

- Always having to be right
- Being bossy or controlling
- Complaining all the time
- Discounting the other person
- Expecting too much from others
- Forgetting to express gratitude
- Giving unsolicited advice to others

How We Can Make Relationships Better.

In contrast, here is a list of seven of the most common ways and opposite actions that we can take to make our relationships with others better:

- Always admit when we are wrong.
- Be willing to let go of controlling others.
- Compliment others genuinely and warmly.
- Demonstrate empathy and encouragement.
- Expect less and give more to others each day.
- Find ways to express appreciation, gratitude, and thankfulness.
- Give full attention and avoid giving advice unless asked for it.

Understand emotional reasoning.

Our emotions can cause us to make choices we'd otherwise not make. *Emotional reasoning* refers to the state of being so strongly influenced by our emotions that we assume our feelings indicate objective truth. When we engage in emotional reasoning—consciously or otherwise—whatever we are feeling seems true. It is as if we have no need for external evidence—or the only evidence we see is what supports our reasoning (i.e. “confirmation bias”).² Here are some examples of emotionally-based responses:

- When we are angry, we are likely to become defensive or go on the offensive and attack.
- When we are scared, we are likely to feel the urge to avoid the source of the anxiety.
- When we are sad, we are likely to become passive, withdraw, or isolate ourselves.

Consider opposite action.

Using this skill involves choosing to do exactly the opposite of what our emotions are telling us to do. More specifically, it requires taking a pause and—when it is appropriate—making a conscious choice to do the opposite of what our emotions are impulsively driving us to do. Taking action is a conscious choice. It involves responding rather than reacting. Like any skill, we may not feel comfortable until we have practiced the skill enough to become natural and proficient.³

Opposite action of anger: With anger, the automatic behavioral impulse is to attack or defend, either verbally or physically. An opposite action might be to be kind, gently avoid, or talk softly. Gentle avoidance is something like the old-fashioned counting to 10. We do it long enough to manage and regulate our own emotions. We focus on ourselves rather than the other person.

Opposite action of fear: In choosing the opposite action of fear, we do what we are afraid to do—over and over again. Acting in opposition to our natural impulse to avoid means approaching the things we fear. Rather than escaping, we can choose to take part in things that give us a sense of autonomy, agency, and mastery over our anxieties and fears.

Understand what often drives emotions.

The effective use of opposite action requires an understanding of what drives emotional impulses in the first place. In understanding complex emotional responses, it is useful to oversimplify: (1) It may be helpful to start with the assumption that fear often underlies anger. (2) It is useful to remember that there are two basic thoughts that often underlie anger:

- Something is happening that we think should not be happening.
- Something is not happening that we think should be happening.

In both instances, it is the expectation rather than the reality that contributes to the anger. It is the “should” that creates the problem. If we change our expectation, we create room for solutions. In the case of anxiety, there are two basic thoughts that often underlie fear:

- Thinking we will not get what we want.
- Thinking we will lose what we have.

Again, it is the expectation rather than the reality that contributes to the fear. Just as our thinking creates the anxiety, a different type of thinking can create a solution. For example, even if we do not believe it, we can say to ourselves something like, “I have enough, I have always had enough, and I will have enough of what I need each day.”

Fake it ‘til you make it.

Because our thoughts influence our emotions, we can change how we feel by changing how we think. However, we often forget that we can also change how we think by changing how we act. Most people can often act their way into better thinking faster than they can think their way into better behavior. Like developing a new skill, learning new behaviors requires us to do something that may feel awkward. Like practicing a sport or playing a musical instrument, learning new interpersonal skills requires practice. Some actions do not become automatic habits until we practice them hundreds of times.

Avoid the psychology of victimology.

Stop blaming the other person. If we are actually being abused, then we can leave and seek safety. Otherwise, we don’t invest in the mentality of victimology, which involves maintaining the role of a victim. Instead, we focus on what we can do to make things better for ourselves.⁴

Stop stockpiling resentments.

When feeling angry about a specific situation, we can pay attention to whether we keep score or maintain a stockpile of resentments from the past. Like the proverbial “throwing in the kitchen sink” during an argument, dragging up the past is bound to increase the other person’s defenses to a new level. When involved in a disagreement, we can stay focused on the present matter at hand and avoid bringing up the past.

Change unrealistic expectations.

When we take an inventory of our resentments, we discover that many of them are based on unspoken expectations that were not met by others. Unrealistic expectations can become *premeditated resentments*. Focusing our attention on resentments is like drinking rat poison and hoping it will kill the rat. In contrast, *forgiveness* is the process by which we let go of resentment (Doverspike, 2008). Forgiveness and resentment cannot exist in the same space. If we change our expectations, we can reduce our resentments. In taking a daily inventory, a good measure of whether our expectations were realistic is how we feel later.⁵

Listen and learn.

Good communication is 90% listening. Because we can’t listen and talk at the same time, we can limit our talking in order to listen. The word *listen* has the same letters as the word *silent*. When we practice silence (e.g., through contemplation and meditation), we become better at learning when and how to be silent. Good listening does not involve thinking about what we are going to say next. If we are thinking about what we are going to say next, then we are not really listening. It is often helpful to keep this question in mind: “Am I really listening—or just waiting to talk?”

Listen rather than give advice.

Advice is criticism disguised—but not well disguised. When listening to someone voicing a concern, we ask ourselves: “Does this person want advice or simply want to be heard?” For most people, receiving unsolicited advice is like receiving implied criticism. In contrast, active listening communicates that we care. How do we know when others want advice? They ask for it. If we cannot resist wanting to give advice, then at least we can preempt our comment by asking, “Would you like me to offer a suggestion—or just listen?”

Distinguish between suggesting and nagging.

If someone wants a suggestion, it usually helps to use our own experience by speaking in first person (e.g., “What **I** often find useful is to _____”). Some of us have to remind ourselves of how suggesting something can easily escalate to an attempt at controlling someone:

- Saying it once is a suggestion.
- Saying it again is a reminder.
- Saying it three times is nagging.
- Saying it four times is controlling.

Express less criticism and more gratitude.

Criticism can be an ineffective way of making a request. If there is something we want, we can make a thoughtful request. Rather than focusing on what we want but do not receive, we can focus on what we have and what we have to give. Expressing genuine gratitude is one way to increase our awareness of what we already have.

Ask “how” rather than “why” questions.

Questions that begin with the word “why” are often perceived by others as indictments or blaming statements. Instead of asking “why” questions, we strive to ask “how” questions.

Use “I” rather than “you” language.

Statements that begin with the word “you” are often perceived by others as accusations, criticisms, or indictments. Rather than making “you” statements, which place blame on the other person, we make “I” statements, which place responsibility on us. Speaking of pronouns, it is intentional that this article has been written in first person rather than second person: “We” is a more inclusive pronoun than “you.”

Don’t touch when angry.

Physical touch can be powerful, but it can also be misinterpreted when mixed with anger. We avoid using touch during a heated argument—lest it be misunderstood. Instead, we use anger as a cue to consider opposite action—such as stepping back, lowering our tone, and slowing down a bit. The *process* of speech (*how* we say it) often communicates more than the *content* of speech (*what* we say). When there is a discrepancy, people usually focus on process rather than content. In other words, our tone of voice often says more than words. Of course, actions also speak louder than words.

Leave some things unsaid.

More damage can be done by saying something that does not need to be said than by not saying something that needs to be said. When in doubt, we can simply listen and learn. Most relational problems are solved by more listening rather than by more talking. No one ever hurt another person by being a better listener.

Respond with active-constructive comments.

When listening to a person share something, there are basically four ways in which we can respond: *passive-constructive* (e.g., understated support, such as a neutral comment or thoughtful silence), *active-constructive* (e.g., authentic, enthusiastic

support, such as showing positive interest, asking open-ended questions to hear more, and expressing positive emotion), *passive-destructive* (e.g., ignoring the sharing, showing lack of interest, expressing no indication of caring), and *active-destructive* (e.g., criticizing or pointing out the negative aspects of a positive sharing). Of these response styles, it is the active-destructive response that destroys relationships and the active-constructive response that builds relationships.

Let go of having to be right.

We can be 100% right, but in winning the battle we may be losing the relationship. Making a point to be right usually means making the other person be wrong. Letting someone be right does not mean that we are wrong. It may mean that we are choosing to be happy rather than choosing to be right. In reality, it means we are choosing to be in a relationship rather than attempting to be controlling and dominant. Try saying it once and notice what happens: “You may be right.”

Shut up when we are right.

When we’re wrong, we strive to admit it. When we’re right, we shut up and stop talking.

Think before speaking.

There is rarely a spoken word that cannot be made better by thinking before speaking. Before we speak, a good test is to THINK: Is what I am about to say Thoughtful? Honest? Intelligent? Necessary? Kind?

Count before speaking.

For those who are better with numbers than words, here is a useful exercise: When we don’t know what to say, we count to 100. When we do know what to say, we count to 1,000.

Listen to what others say about us.

When criticized, there is a natural tendency to defend ourselves by reacting with a rebuttal, counter-criticism, or explanation. Instead of defending ourselves, we can accept the things about ourselves that are negative. In other words, we strive to accept any kernel of truth in what the other person is saying about us. If we accept ourselves, we cannot be manipulated by others through anxiety or guilt. Further, the process of changing into more of what we want to become begins by accepting ourselves as we are. Three good words to use are “Tell me more.”

Consider agreeing with criticism.

When someone points out one of our flaws, we can prevent a defensive rebuttal by avoiding JADE (justifying, arguing, defending, or explaining). Instead, when we are criticized, we can respond with “You may be right” “Tell me more.” Agreeing with criticism often leads to new insights into ourselves and new patterns of communication with others.

Learn the love language of significant others.

Psychological research has confirmed the wisdom of the old adage: “Different strokes for different folks.” When we express love to others, we make sure that it meets their needs—not just ours. We learn to not only use the language that we like the most, but we use the one that our loved ones can receive the best. In other words, we strive to express love the way our partner experiences being loved. Five popular languages of love include affirming words, giving gifts, spending quality time, physical touch, and acts of service (Chapman, 1995):

Affirming words: We use words to affirm, appreciate, and encourage the other person. We actively listen when the other person is speaking. We give unexpected cards, handwritten notes, or text messages. We avoid not recognizing or not appreciating the efforts of the other person.

Giving gifts: We provide thoughtful gestures and give unexpected gifts to the other person. We express gratitude when receiving gifts from the other person. We avoid forgetting special occasions and we avoid the unenthusiastic receiving of a gift.

Quality time: We create special moments, have small talks, take small walks, and do little things with the other person. We avoid being distracted by other people, places, or things when spending time together. We avoid long periods without any one-on-one time.

Physical touch: We express love by using non-verbal language such as a gentle touch. We take actions such as hugs, cuddles, and kisses. We always avoid verbal or physical abuse or neglect.

Acts of Service: We let the other person know we want to help. We go out of our way to assist with chores. We avoid a lack of follow-through on tasks, whether they are large or small. We serve with genuine gratitude and with a smile.

Practice the Platinum Rule.

The Golden Rule says, “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.” This universal moral principle is contained in at least 12 major world religions. At the same time, it is often helpful to balance it with the Platinum Rule, which says, “Do unto others as *they* would have you do unto *them*.” What we want for ourselves may not be what others want for themselves. The Golden Rule of universality must be balanced with the Platinum Rule of diversity (Doverspike, 2012, p. 95). Self-awareness must be balanced with other-awareness. Intentions must be balanced with impact.

Pay attention to entrances and exits.

When leaving for work in the morning and when returning home in the evening, we pay attention to how we enter and leave. It is helpful to think of a 3-minute egg timer. A thoughtful comment or a warm embrace takes only a few seconds, yet the effects can last hours—even years.

Avoid harsh start-ups in conversations.

At the end of a workday, when there are harsh comments, criticisms, or complaints expressed within the first 15 minutes of an interaction with a marital partner, then the interaction usually goes downhill from there (Gottman & Silver, 1999). One way to avoid harsh start-ups is to begin each interaction on a positive note—a gentle start-up.

Avoid generalizations when complaining.

In low doses, complaints are not necessarily unhealthy but it is usually better to ask for what we want rather than to complain about what we're not getting. When it becomes necessary to complain, we avoid the use of generalizations such as *always* or *never*. Instead, we particularize our requests by simply stating what we want in a caring and thoughtful manner. How it is said (process) is often more important than what is said (content).

Complaints are often cowardly requests.

People who complain and whine are less likely to state their requests clearly and openly in advance. It is as if they act like they have no preference at all when asked, but then they secretly reserve the right to complain later. In other words, they find it more difficult to assert what they want and they find it easier to complain about someone else's choice—whether it is a meal, menu, or movie. In this sense, a complaint is like a passive-aggressive way of making a request. It can also be a symptom of the psychology of victimology.

Understand complaints and criticisms.

We make requests when possible, voice complaints only when necessary, and avoid criticism and contempt altogether.

Requests assert our autonomy without respecting the rights of others to decline our requests. When we make requests in a direct and honest manner, we stand up for ourselves in such a way that we do not violate the rights of others.

Complaints involve specific statements of anger, distress, or displeasure. Although rarely pleasant, expressing a complaint has the potential to make a relationship stronger than suppressing the complaint. Another way to improve relationships is to complain less and encourage more. We shift our focus of attention when we complain less about what we think others are doing wrong, and we encourage more of what we see that they are doing right.

Criticism involves attacking someone's personality or character, rather than expressing a specific behavior. Complaints are usually behavioral, whereas criticisms are usually personal—often with blame attached.

Contempt is a form of verbal abuse that is directed as an attack. Although criticism and contempt are both personal, what separates contempt from criticism is the intention to psychologically abuse or insult someone. It can involve name-calling or personal insults. Contempt can also be expressed in a tone of voice.

Learn to say we're sorry.

Our conscience can nag us regarding some comment we made or some action we took. Rather than assuming the incident will eventually be forgotten, here is a simple sentence to use: "I am sorry." Even better, try this one: "I was wrong." These types of disclosures can be the beginning of a new conversation—or perhaps a new relationship.

Learn to say the 10 important words.

A variation of the five most important sentences, 10 of the most important words include: “I was wrong. I am sorry. Please forgive me.” It’s not only easier read than done, and it’s not even 10 words (Doverspike, 2015).

Promptly admit when we are wrong.

The 10th Step of Alcoholics Anonymous is sometimes described as *relationship glue*: “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.” The operative word here is *promptly*, because the longer we wait, the more likely we are to begin rationalizing that we are right. Admitting when we are wrong can often go a long way in making things right in a relationship. There is a big difference between *making* a mistake and *being* a mistake. Because we are all sometimes wrong, this step says “when” rather than “if.”

Make amends when we have hurt someone.

Whether it is inadvertent or not, hurting someone requires restitution. Admitting when we are wrong sometimes requires a genuine *apology*. There are several components to restitution: expressing regret (“I am sorry”), accepting responsibility (“I was wrong”), genuinely repenting (“I will not to do it again”), requesting forgiveness (“Will you please forgive me?”), and making restitution (“What can I do to make things right?”).

Don’t take it personally.

When our feelings are hurt by someone’s thoughtless or rude comment, the comment may reflect more about our partner than it does about us. Although we need to consider our own part in the interaction, the other person’s comment may not be about us. Remember to use QTIP: Quit Taking It Personally.

Mind my own business.

In the days of newspapers, advice columnists received hundreds of letters each week from readers who sought advice about troubled relationships with romantic partners. Approximately 80% of the responses written by advice columnists fell in one of two categories: (1) MYOB: Mind your own business, and (2) Are you better with this person or better without?

Find ways to say “Yes” rather than “No.”

We’ve all met someone with whom we’ve shared an idea or plan, and then been met with the response, “Yes, *but* it will never work.” Or perhaps we’ve disclosed a personal experience or professional achievement with someone, who replied with something like, “Yes, but....” Even if we do not show it, we usually experience a sense of deflation or devaluation when hearing a “yes, but” rebuttal. The tendency to be nay-sayer is often greater in critical thinkers, who hear something and then immediately judge what is wrong with it rather than what is right. A “yes, but...” response style is critical and judgmental, with predictable consequence of being a conversation killer. It typically results in shutting down suggestions, stifle contributions from others, and effectively ending efforts at dialogue. A simple antidote to being a nay-sayer or a “yes, but” person involves a style of thinking that psychologists call “Yes, and...” thinking. This type of response involves accepting what another improviser has stated (“yes”) and then expanding on that line of thinking (“and”). When it comes to connecting with others, we have a choice: We can build bridges or we can destroy them.

Practice positive affective presence.

Have you ever known someone who, upon entering a room, seemed make others in the room feel better and more at ease? Very likely, such individuals are characterized by qualities known as *positive affective presence* (Eisenkraft & Elfenbein, 2010). In contrast, there are other individuals whose *negative affective presence* seems to make others want to avoid, withdraw, or leave the encounter. Practicing positive presence can begin with actions as simple as making eye contact, connecting rather than simply talking, and listening to learn about the other person. Just as importantly, *enabling positivity* refers to engaging in behaviors that encourages positive behavior in others (Doverspike, 2018, p. 4).

Always end on a positive note.

Professional dog trainers end their training sessions with a reward for practicing a skill with which the dog is able and confident. This dog training principle also works with humans. In any interaction, find an area of agreement or consensus so that the interaction ends on a positive note. This concept requires awareness of entrances and exits. This closing style increases the chance that the next interaction will open on a positive note.

Turn enabling into something positive.

The word “enable” has gotten a bad reputation because it is usually associated with actions that reinforce addiction or pathology. However, it is also possible to enable—or reinforce—actions and behaviors that are adaptive and healthy. We enable positive behaviors when we notice and give our attention and encouragement to others’ actions that are adaptive and healthy. *Enabling positivity* refers to engaging in actions that encourage another person’s positive behavior (Doverspike, 2018, p. 4).⁶

Leave others in a better place.

When we encounter a person, whether it is for a minute or an hour, we can leave them feeling either a little better or a little worse. *Enabling positivity* refers to engaging in behaviors that encourage another person’s positive behavior. People who enable positive behaviors lift and encourage others—leaving people, places, and things better than they found them (Doverspike, 2018, p. 4).

Start a new day right now.

When things seem to be going downhill during the day, we keep in mind that tomorrow is a new day. A new day can bring about a change in perspective or an attitude adjustment. It’s never too late to start a new day—so take a pause and start right now.

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Notes

1. In the words of Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), “Everybody thinks of changing the world, and nobody thinks of changing himself.” According to another source, Leo Tolstoy said, “Everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself” (Mead, 1965, p. 400). However, because the world has been changed by both men and women, a more modern translation would read, “We all think of changing the world, and none of us thinks of changing ourselves” (Doverspike, 2003, p. 2). Changing ourselves requires a paradigm shift. We can change our attitude and perspective, and we can also change our actions. Tolstoy’s words are a faint echo of an Anglo-Saxon Bishop (1100 C.E.), whose words of wisdom were written on his tomb in the crypts of Westminster Abbey:

“When I was young and free and my imagination had no limits, I dreamed of changing the world. As I grew older and wiser, I discovered the world would not change, so I shortened my sights somewhat and decided to change only my country. But it too seemed immovable. As I grew into my twilight years, in one last desperate attempt, I settled for changing only my family, those closest to me, but alas, they would have none of it. And now as I lie on my deathbed, I suddenly realize: If I had only changed myself first, then by example I would have changed my family. From their inspiration and encouragement, I would have then been able to better my country and, who knows, I may have even changed the world.”

2. *Absolutistic thinking* occurs when our attitudes or beliefs are equated with reality. The underlying belief is, “If I think it’s so, then it’s so.” This process is usually outside our awareness. Absolutistic thinkers typically equate their *certainty* with absolute truth, which they support by seeing only evidence that supports their belief while remaining blind to evidence that contradicts their beliefs.

3. Four Steps of Opposite Action

1. Identify the emotion. Am I angry? Anxious? Ashamed? Sad?
2. Identify the action urge that accompanies the emotion. Do I want to punch someone or throw an object? Do I isolate myself? Do I seek support and call someone?
3. Identify whether the action urge fits the facts of the situation (not the “facts” of the emotion).
4. If our emotions and their urges don’t fit the situation, then we channel our inner rebel and do the opposite of what the urge wants us to do. We continue to do opposite action until we notice a decrease in our emotions. In time, we are able to see and feel the difference.

4. Because we live in an American culture that permits everything and forgives nothing, effort and intentionality are required to take responsibility for our actions rather than blaming outcomes on others. Otherwise, we get caught up in the self-indulgent narcissism of blaming, shaming, and faming.

5. If we are prone to be intropunitive and turn anger inward (blaming ourselves), then our unrealistic expectations lead to *disappointments*. If we are prone to be extrapunitive and turn anger outward (blaming others), then our unrealistic expectations lead to *resentment*. If we find that we are appreciative, delighted, and surprised at the outcome of a situation, then our expectations may have been exceeded.

6. *Enabling positivity* refers to engaging in behaviors that encourage another person's positive behavior. People who enable positive behaviors lift and encourage others—leaving people, places, and things better than they found them (Doverspike, 2018, p. 4). This concept (i.e., leaving people, places, and things better than we find them) is not original to me. Long before I became an ethics professor, during my days doing field trials and hunt tests with my retriever, I learned from hunters the field ethic of “Always leave the land better than we found it.” However, my idea of “enabling positivity” may be closer to an original thought (i.e., at least I had never read it before although others have probably had it also). Although there is a tendency for therapists to use the word “enabling” in a pejorative manner (e.g., enabling addiction, enabling pathology), I like to think in more dimensional terms so that there is “negative enabling” (as most therapists use the term with reference to contributing to maladaptive or pathological behavior) and “positive enabling” (which is what I like to describe in terms of “enabling positivity” such as causing, promoting, or contributing to adaptive, positive behaviors).

Ten Ways to Manage Difficult Relationships

1. Use “I” rather than “you” language.
2. Ask “how” rather than “why” questions.
3. Avoid giving unsolicited advice.
4. Change our expectations.
5. Agree with criticism.
6. Think before speaking.
7. Count before speaking.
8. Promptly admit wrongs.
9. Watch entrances and exits.
10. Leave others in a better place.

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