



**Don't Try to Reason with Unreasonable People:
Simple strategies for dealing with mean or crazy people**

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Are there people in your life that you try so hard to get along with, but you somehow always leave the interaction feeling disheartened, sad, angry, or demeaned? Are there people you dread running into or spending time with because there's just something about them that strips you of your power, either provoking you into acting "crazy" (when you normally are quite a sane, nice-to-be-around person) or somehow always managing to make you give up something that's important to your well-being?

One of my coaching clients shared with me the experience of a person she is close to. He makes little digs all the time during conversation, despite claiming to be a supportive and loving friend. Whenever she leaves an encounter, my client feels a hollow ache of "sadness and hopelessness" that lasts into the next day. After spending time with this person she'll often explode in the car on the way home, and her boyfriend looks at her like she's nuts. She's not—but the unhealthy nature of the conversation (as poisoned by her "friend") is.

The art of understanding and handling the unreasonable person is probably the biggest lesson I've learned in the last few years, provoked by some interpersonal and professional crises I experienced that I had originally thought were my fault. I was very fortunate to find an amazing relationship coach who has a background in psychology and unique expertise in personality disorders. She helped me to see that I was usually dealing with disordered individuals, and that I was making classic mistakes in trying to make the relationships work.

As I'm a medical doctor with some training in psychiatry, understanding that I was dealing with individuals with a bona fide personality disorder was a huge "a-ha" moment. The thing is, there might be a clear list of characteristics describing someone with borderline, antisocial or narcissistic PD in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). But when you're dealing with one of these people, it often won't become (diagnosably) apparent until you spend a lot of time with them. And even then, if you're really emotionally ensnared you might not be able to spot it on your own.

Interacting with them might just make you feel really bad about yourself, or they may say and do things that don't sit quite right with you. Often, they have such an otherwise charming way about them that they find a way to make you laugh afterwards, or do something nice that makes you confused about "which one" is the real person. Most people will choose to focus on the good stuff and downplay the pathological, often at their peril.

A difficult person in your life might not have a full-blown personality disorder; they may just have related traits that express themselves from time to time. It still takes a toll on your self-esteem and well-being to be around them.

For the purposes of this article, here's a short list of the types of people I would lump into the "unreasonable":

- Those you can't have a reasonable conversation with; they somehow twist your words or totally confuse you and then tell you that you're the one who doesn't know how to communicate.
- People who make subtly or overtly demeaning comments or say cutting things to you disguised as a "joke".
- Those that don't respect boundaries and seem to enjoy stepping all over one after you've placed it.
- The types that aren't willing to consider your point of view or listen to your side of things (or just stare at you blankly, or laugh, or explode, when you try to explain "how you feel").
- Bullies, verbal or emotional abusers (these can also range from subtle to overt), manipulators, liars.
- People who leave you feeling bad, sad, shaky or feeling sick in the pit of your stomach.
- "Crazymakers," a.k.a. people who provoke you into acting crazy or unbalanced (and love making you feel like there's something wrong with you when you do), when your behaviour across the rest of your life is proof that you're not.
- The excessively charming who are too good to be true and have an ulterior motive. You know who I mean.



Now, here are the things I've learned about how to handle them and minimize the damage to yourself, your days, your sanity and your life:

- 1) Minimize time with them. Keep your interactions as short as possible. Minimizing your exposure to pathology goes a long, long way.
- 2) Keep it logical. I'm a very verbal, heart-focused person, so I would always try to connect with and reason with these types (and pretty much anyone else) from an emotional or empathic perspective. You know, those "when you do X it makes me feel Y" communication tactics we're taught in relationship books. This type of heart-centered communication only works with reasonable people who care. Unreasonable people usually don't care, and their response (or lack of it) often only upsets you more. Keep communication fact-based, using minimal details.
- 3) Don't drink around them. Though it's tempting to knock back a glass of wine or two when you're around people like this, it will only make you more emotionally vulnerable and more likely to do or say something useless that will either make you look bad, make you feel bad, or make you more of a target.
- 4) Focus on them in conversation. A way to avoid being the target of demeaning comments, manipulation or having your words twisted is to say as little as possible. Volunteer minimal information and get them talking about themselves (if you have to be around them or talk to them, that is)—they are a far safer conversation subject than you are.
- 5) Give up the dream that they will one day be the person you wish they'd be. I see this in coaching clients all the time and in myself, too. There are people in our lives who have moments where they seem to be the parent/partner/spouse/friend (insert whatever's appropriate) you've always felt they could be, yet they ultimately always end up hurting or disappointing us significantly. Amazingly, we fall for it and get our hopes up again the next time they treat us nicely or seem to have turned a new leaf. Giving up the hope and fully accepting this person for who they really are can be an unbelievable relief after what is sometimes a lifetime of wishing.
- 6) Stay away from topics that get you into trouble. Before going into an interaction with a difficult person, review in your mind the topics that invite attack and be proactive about avoiding them. For example, if your in-laws always make cracks about your choice of career, answer neutrally and change the subject immediately (see #4) if they ask you how work is going.
- 7) Don't try to get them to see your point of view. Don't try to explain yourself or try to get them to understand you and empathize with your perspective. They won't, and you'll just feel worse for trying.
- 8) Create a distraction. If you absolutely have to spend time with someone who typically upsets you, try to be around them in circumstances that offer some sort of distraction. Focus on playing with a pet if there's one in the vicinity, have the interaction be based around some kind of recreational activity or entertainment, or offer to help in a way that takes you out of the main ring of the Coliseum (e.g. offering to chop vegetables in the kitchen before a family dinner). If you can get them to do something that absorbs their attention (taking it off you), even better.

As I mentioned to a client today, if you master these skills and manage to conduct these interactions while being civil and even friendly, you might manage to save the relationship. Not that you would necessarily want to, but in some cases if the person is a family member, boss, or some other key fixture in your life who you can't cut out of your life, these tactics may prove to be lifesavers. They certainly have been for me!

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