

## dealing with negative people

### Discover ways to stay calm when critical people cross your path.

Encounters with negative people can be emotionally draining and stressful. This is especially true when you are generally a positive and productive person but have to interact with fitness colleagues, family members or friends who bring you down. Understanding why some people always appear negative and why their behavior causes disruption in your life can help you develop better strategies for interacting with them.

#### Understanding Human Behavior

Negative people can find something wrong in any situation. They are expert complainers, cynics, tyrants, worriers and/or victims. Unfortunately, negative people may not be concerned with the effect their behavior has on others; they simply want to get rid of their own uncomfortable feelings in the fastest way possible. A quick look at basic human behavior will help you understand why some people seem so negative.

Everything we do and say in our lives is shaped by our particular life experience. We learn from a very early age that certain behaviors produce certain results. For example, if we are hungry and we cry, someone will give us food. If we throw a tantrum, someone will pay attention to us and ask what is wrong. If we throw a big enough tantrum, people will leave us alone. These learned behaviors stay with us throughout our lives.

As adults we are expected to repress

our feelings of discomfort (or stress) and behave in a more civilized manner. However, expressing ourselves in a more socially acceptable way takes advanced communication skills, and sometimes we haven't developed them. Consequently, when we experience stress, we may not act or react in an appropriate manner.

#### Typical Ways People React When Stressed

When faced with a situation that causes them stress, many people react in unproductive or negative ways. Here are some of the most common responses:

1. People turn into “know-it-all dictators” who boss others around and think no one else can do things as well as they can. (“Forget it—let me do it—you’ll only screw it up!”).
2. They take on a helpless role (“I never do anything right”) or simply withdraw from the situation (“Okay, whatever.”).
3. They behave in a rebellious or defiant way (“No way! You can’t tell me what to do!”).
4. They respond with insensitivity, sarcasm or inappropriate humor (“Hallelujah—you finally got off your butt to help out.”).

Sometimes people react to a stressful event in a combination of these ways. It all depends on what behaviors make people feel more comfortable at the time. Negative responses help them protect their egos and their sense of control with regard to the situation.

Here is an example. Tina’s fitness director finds out last minute that a big budget deadline has been pushed forward by 2 weeks. He approaches Tina while she

is calling a client and yells at her to quit chatting with her stupid friends all day and get to work. Stunned and hurt, Tina snaps back at her boss with a sarcastic remark and thinks to herself that she will get to “his budget information” when she is good and ready.

In this situation, both Tina and her boss reacted to the stressful situation with their automatic, ego-protective responses. The boss raised his voice and personally insulted Tina. Tina countered by expressing contempt and withdrawing from the situation. Now Tina thinks her boss is a selfish jerk and he thinks she is insubordinate. The reality is that neither Tina nor her boss is either. Both of them just experienced and expressed feelings of stress in an unproductive and inappropriate way.

It isn’t always obvious that people are only reacting to stress, particularly when they tend to express themselves by whining, complaining or criticizing in the absence of any identifiable stressor. For example, Cheryl’s friend Abbie is constantly complaining that nothing ever goes right for her. Cheryl listens to Abbie and tries to comfort and reassure her that she actually has a lot of good things in her life. Abbie continues to complain. Frustrated and tired, Cheryl begins to mock what Abbie is saying, and they get into an argument and stop speaking.

Abbie’s complaining is actually a communication strategy she employs to protect her from what she fears most: that important things in her life will not continue to “go right.” She uses a negative form of communicating (i.e., complaining) to cope with the stress of potential future disappointment. When Cheryl feels her supportive approach isn’t effec-

## turn that frown upside down

Negative people are hard to handle. Talking, working and even sitting by them can be very stressful, even when you try not to get involved with them. Therefore, it is important to develop ways to destress after an encounter with a negative person. Try to find ways to release stress and diffuse your negative energy rather than perpetuate it. Here are some strategies to try:

- Take a brisk walk or work out at the gym.
- Write down your feelings in a journal.
- Take some deep breaths and let go of the stress.
- Keep a funny cartoon or photo in your desk or bag and pull it out to give yourself a laugh. Research has proven that the simple act of smiling and laughing (even if you fake it at first!) reduces stress, lowers cortisol levels and stimulates the immune system (Berk et al. 1988; Berk et al. 2001; Marci, Moran & Orr 2004).

However you choose to destress, make sure you do it in a positive way. Negative emotions and behaviors only produce or amplify stress.

tive, she becomes agitated and stressed and resorts to using negative communication tactics to end the conversation.

### Strategies for Coping With Negative People

So what can you do when faced with someone who really gets under your skin? Take a close look at how you react. For example, watch what you do when someone rubs you the wrong way. Chances are you react (out loud or to yourself) in one of the ways described above. Developing an awareness of how *you* react to negative people and situations helps you better deal with what you can control—yourself.

When you become aware of how you typically react to stressful situations, two things happen. First, your awareness provides you with an opportunity to choose a different way to behave. Second, it enables you to maintain objectivity in the presence of stress. It helps you remember that other people's negativity is not personal to you or to your situation. It is simply the way they express themselves when they feel insecure or uncomfortable.

Creating and maintaining awareness of your own behavior and choosing to act in a different manner (i.e., not using your automatic ego-protective responses) can prevent an encounter with a negative person from escalating. It might not stop the person you are talking to from being negative, but it will provide you with control over your response to the situation. Your choice not to communicate in an unproductive way removes the likelihood that you will be replaying the conversation in your head for days or thinking of all the zingers you wish you'd said!

### Misery Loves Company

Some people seem to thrive on making themselves or others miserable. Nothing you do or say can change that fact. After employing various productive communication strategies with a person like this and finding that nothing seems to work, ending your relationship might be the best thing you can do.

This approach may not seem like an option, particularly if the person is your boss, a co-worker or a client. However, there is usually a solution. You might request a department transfer or a change in schedule to minimize your contact. If you find the person unbearable to be around even for a short time, you may want to think about joining another company or changing jobs.

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