

# **Dealing With Difficult People in the Healthcare Setting**

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## **Program Description**

Difficult people can make your life miserable, unless you have mastered a set of strategies to disarm them and gain some control. This session will help you identify the type of difficult behavior you are dealing with and what motivates the individual to continue to use it. You will learn strategies to successfully deal with difficult people and reduce your own stress. You can apply these strategies during meetings, one-on-one conversations, performance management, and critical incidents.

## **Program Objectives**

As a result of this program, you will learn to:

- Identify difficult personalities
- Deal successfully with each type
- Manage your own stress in dealing with difficult behavior

## **Program Outline**

1. Identify Difficult People: Difficult or Different?
2. Signs that you are Getting Hooked into the Difficult Behavior Cycle.
3. Disengaging and Gaining Perspective.
4. Identifying the Type:
  - Aggressive: Tanks and Volcanoes
  - Passive-Aggressive: Snipers and Clams
  - Negativists: Wet Blankets and Chronic Complainers
  - Uber Experts
5. Strategies for Dealing with Each Type.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF DIFFICULT PEOPLE

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1. We're all a little difficult at times!
  
2. Appropriate response to your approach?
  
3. Difficult behaviors vs. difficult people.
  
4. Difficult people:
  - Do it more often. They are chronically difficult.
  - Don't respond to feedback by making consistent change.
  
5. Difficult people may "set you up:"
  - Get you to run away and give up.
  - Generate predictable responses from you so they can get what they want.
  - Render you ineffective.

You teach other people how to treat you.

## SKILL CHECK: NON-DEFENSIVE COMMUNICATION

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To be effective in dealing with difficult people, it is essential to stay OFF the defensive. Reflect upon your ability to do this by rating yourself on the following communication skills.

1 = Almost Always    2 = Sometimes    3 = Almost Never

1. \_\_\_\_\_ I am descriptive, rather than judgmental, when I discuss an issue with someone.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ I understand when it is appropriate to offer advice and when it is not.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ I convey a sense of flexibility and openness to new information.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ I convey a genuine interest in others' points of view, even if I am not sure I agree.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ I don't dominate conversations with others.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ When I disagree with others, I use "I" statements.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ When asking questions to better understand others' point of view, I ask "what" questions, rather than "why" questions.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ My feedback to others is specific, rather than vague.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ I don't talk down to those who have less status than me.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ When I give someone constructive criticism, our relationship improves.

## BASIC COPING STEPS

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1. Assess the situation.
2. Stop wishing they were different.
3. Get some distance.
4. Formulate a coping strategy. Act inconsistently with their expectations.
5. Implement your plan.
6. Monitor your progress and modify your plan.

It's easier to change yourself than a  
difficult person.

## SHERMAN TANKS AND VOLCANOES

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### **Characteristics:**

Abrupt  
Intimidating  
Domineering  
Arrogant  
Overwhelming  
Attacking  
May have temper tantrums

### **Coping Strategies:**

1. Manage your stance and eye contact.
2. Give them time to run down.
3. Assertively, but not aggressively, give your response. Manage interruptions.
4. Speak from your own point of view. Don't fuel the fire by mirroring the attack.
5. If a tantrum is brewing, use staccato language and get out of the public eye.
6. Be ready to be friendly.

## SNIPERS

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### Characteristics:

Skilled in passive-aggressive behavior  
Take pot shots  
Make innuendoes  
Engage in non-playful teasing  
Spread mean-spirited rumors; sabotage

### Coping Strategies:

1. Surface the attack. Smoke them out.
2. Ask questions. Avoid accusations.
3. Search for the real problem.
4. Reduce the threat of being direct.
5. Prevent behavior by setting up regular meetings/interactions.

## CHRONIC COMPLAINERS

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### Characteristics:

Whiny  
Fault-finding  
Accusatory  
Blaming  
Self-righteous  
See complaining as their “duty”

### Coping Strategies:

1. Listen extremely attentively and ask detailed questions.
2. Acknowledge, but don't necessarily agree.
3. Use limiting responses, but avoid defensiveness.
4. State facts without comment or apology.
5. Attempt to switch to problem solving. Employ the “problem-solution” rule.
6. The move of last resort, "How would you like the conversation to end?"

# CLAMS

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## **Characteristics:**

Unresponsive  
Close down  
Avoid answering direct questions  
Silent in group meetings

## **Coping Strategies:**

1. Ask open-ended questions.
2. Use the friendly, silent stare.
3. Don't fill in the space.
4. Comment on what's happening.
5. Recycle if necessary.
6. Set time limits.
7. Be attentive when the clam opens up.
8. Avoid the polite ending if the clam stays closed.

## SKILL CHECK: LISTENING

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	YES	NO
1. I am interested in many points of view.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I listen carefully for a speaker's main ideas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I take notes during meetings to record key points.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I don't allow myself to be distracted.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I keep my emotions under control when I listen to something that triggers them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I concentrate carefully and do not fake attention.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I wait for the speaker to finish before finally evaluating the message.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I respond appropriately with a smile, nod, or a word of acknowledgment, as a speaker is talking.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I understand and control my biases when I am listening.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I refrain from interrupting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. I maintain eye contact about 70% of the time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. I periodically restate or paraphrase what the speaker said to make sure I have the correct meaning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. I listen for the speaker's emotional meaning as well as subject matter content.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. I ask questions for clarification.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. I do not finish other people's sentences.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. I am careful to judge the message rather than the speaker.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## WET BLANKETS

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### Characteristics:

Respond to most ideas with a negative attitude  
Believe most ideas won't work  
Focus on what's wrong, rather than what's possible  
Become negative when others try to solve a problem

### Coping Strategies:

1. Be optimistic; don't get drawn in.
2. Don't argue or try to persuade the negativist that things aren't so bad.
3. Be the first to bring up potential problems. Don't rush to conclusions.
4. Set a horror floor, "What's the worst that could happen?"
5. Use their criticism constructively.

## UBER EXPERTS

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### Characteristics

Air of superiority  
Highly competent and thorough  
Make others feel resentful  
Rigid when they decide on a course of action  
Blame problems on “incompetents”

### Coping Strategies

1. Be prepared – thoroughly prepared.
2. Actively listen; paraphrase.
3. Question; avoid direct confrontation.
4. Don't be a counter expert.
5. Move of last resort: Let them be the expert.

Adapted from Coping With Difficult People, by Robert M. Bramson, 1981

## MINI-CASES

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1. You're presenting an important proposal at a staff meeting. About a third of the way through, your co-worker, Dr. Pierce, breaks in and says, "All right, I'm tired of listening to this crap! This is the craziest idea I've heard in a long time. Why should we waste any more time on a proposal that will never work in a million years?!"

Type: \_\_\_\_\_

Approach: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Your co-worker, Jim Lin, just got a big promotion and you make an announcement at the weekly staff meeting. One of the staff members, Sarah, has been making snide comments throughout the meeting that you are conducting. You overhear her saying, "I wonder how soon they'll find out what Jim is really like?"

Type: \_\_\_\_\_

Approach: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. **You:** "We've found some more errors in the cash reconciliation, Helen. Are you sure?"

**Helen:** "If only you'd realize that I'm always careful, you wouldn't keep bringing it up to me. There's no written procedure for handling money, and you know it. I've told you before, but you still haven't gotten the accountant to write one."

**You:** "I know we need a better procedure, but..."

**Helen:** "We don't even have a procedure. It's not my job to do anything but answer the phones and put everything where I'm told, and besides..."

Type: \_\_\_\_\_

Approach: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. **You:** "I'd like to try a new approach to processing these applications."

**Jim:** "I don't see any need to change what we're doing now. It's working just fine."

**You:** "Let's look at the process together and see how we might improve it."

**Jim:** "Why can't we just leave well enough alone? Don't managers have enough to do to keep busy without changing everything constantly?"

Type: \_\_\_\_\_

Approach: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. **You (to full group of your staff):** "Hi, everyone. I'd like to get your input on this proposed schedule. It will affect all of you. So, what do you think?"

**Staff:** Silence

**You:** "Any input?"

**Staff:** Silence

**You:** "Anybody have any concerns?"

**Staff:** Silence

Type: \_\_\_\_\_

Approach: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Resources

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