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# Difficult People and Their Difficult Behaviour

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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.

They may decline to contribute their ideas, but when your ideas and actions aren't successful they may respond with: 'I knew it wouldn't work.'

In order to resist doing what you ask them to do, these people will stall, turn up late, drag their heels and procrastinate. They will find excuses for delays and reasons for not doing something, invent difficulties or complications or 'forget' about what they were asked to do. They can be deliberately inefficient, doing something badly or leaving it incomplete.

When a person is using disguised hostility in a passive aggressive way, they may or may not be consciously aware of how controlling, manipulative and devious they're being. Whatever, you are left feeling confused, upset, offended or frustrated. You may even feel guilty; you think you've done something wrong, but you're not sure what.

Disguised hostility is a form of conflict that doesn't allow either of you to engage sensibly; it avoids the real issues.

### ***Why do people behave like this?***

People usually express their hostility and resentment in underhand ways because, for whatever reason, they feel unable to say directly what they really think, feel or want.

It's a dynamic born of control – wanting to control the other person while at the same time, not wanting to be controlled by them – wanting to avoid confrontation, resulting in suppressed anger and an inability to be honest.

They may lack the confidence to say what they do or don't want. If they've been discouraged or suffered in the past for openly expressing their feelings – anger, frustration or disappointment – they will use less detectable ways to say what they think, feel, want and need.

Whereas a passive person will simply accept the needs, feelings and opinions of others, a passive aggressive person is not happy to submit to others. But rather than assert themselves in direct, honest ways, they resort to underhand tactics to get what they want and blame others if things don't work out. And sometimes, a person who is being passive aggressive may simply enjoy confusing you and messing with your head.

**Almost all our faults are more pardonable than the methods we think up to hide them.**

**La Rochefoucauld**

Two examples of how disguised hostility and passive aggression can present are gaslighting – using controlling and manipulative tactics that confuse and mislead another person – and victimization – blaming others for the difficulties and challenges they experience.

### **The Gaslighter**

Gaslighting is the psychological manipulation of a person that causes that person to feel confused; questioning their judgement, memory and perceptions of what has or hasn't happened. Gaslighting is an insidious behaviour that often develops gradually, making it difficult for you to know

what is and isn't happening, leaving you confused and unsure. Over a period of time, you may suffer a loss of self-esteem and confidence, feel uncertain about your emotional or mental stability and find yourself dependent on the person who is gaslighting you.

As well as a strategy used by abusers in romantic relationships, gaslighting can also come from family members, colleagues and managers in the workplace. It can also occur when a healthcare professional dismisses a patient's symptoms or illness.

### **Gaslighting techniques include**

- Deliberately misunderstanding; pretending not to understand in order to avoid giving an honest answer about something.
- Forgetting; pretending to forget events, or how they occurred.
- Downplaying and denying something they've done wrong, saying it's not that important or denying they've done anything wrong.
- Refusing to engage; not answering you or speaking to you.
- Blocking or diverting; changing the focus of a discussion and questioning you and your thinking; saying, for example 'Yes, but what about when *you* ... ?'
- Isolating you by avoiding seeing your friends and family, discouraging you from doing so and/or saying that your friends and family are wrong, no good or don't really care for you.
- Claiming that they care; they say they only have your best interests at heart, but you rarely see any evidence.

And in any case, their idea of what's best for you is not your idea of what's best for you.

As well as the passive aggressive techniques described above, gaslighting may also involve more direct behaviour:

- Belittling or disregarding your feelings. Discrediting you, saying other people won't believe you.
- Making accusations. Claims that you're making things up, always forgetting things or being irrational.
- Lying; saying things you are certain are not or cannot be true.

### **The victim**

This person imagines all slights against them – real or imagined – are intentional. They become upset at any hint of disapproval. They are sensitive to any indication that you don't like them or agree with them. You have to walk on eggshells around them in case you say or do the 'wrong' thing and they accuse you of disrespecting them.

Rejection or the expectation of it makes them hostile. Their reactive aggression is more likely to manifest in passive rather than overt aggression.

The victim looks for signs of being excluded; but the irony is that in time their victim mentality – their sensitivity and negativity – does, in fact, cause others to avoid them.

They may wallow in feelings of self-pity because they believe that everyone else gets all the breaks. Victims are,

by nature, martyrs too. They need to let you know how much they are suffering; they seek sympathy or attention by feigning or exaggerating any difficulty or deprivation they are experiencing.

## **Passive behaviour**

Passive behaviour happens when a person does not express their true thoughts, feelings, opinions or needs.

This can manifest itself in different ways. A passive person may be a people pleaser; rather than expressing what they really feel and want, they go along with what everyone else wants, seeking their approval, wanting to be liked and unable to turn down other people's demands.

Instead of voicing their own opinions, or making choices that will be controversial, unpopular or could hurt feelings, they wait for others to speak first and then agree with pretty much everything others say. They may be clingy and needy and lean on you more than they should.

People pleasers are often placatory: appeasing, pacifying and attempting to win others over. But their compliance can get irritating and difficult to deal with, especially when they overcommit themselves and let you down because they can't say no to someone or something else. In this way, they end up damaging relationships rather than strengthening them.

Passive behaviour, then, can manifest itself by doing whatever others want. But it can also be evidenced by non-participation – not taking part or not taking responsibility. Initially, you may find these people agreeable and easy to get along with, but it soon becomes clear that they are not contributing, engaging or taking responsibility. They are flaky; unreliable. They rarely commit themselves or initiate activities, preferring instead to leave it to other people to get things going and make things happen. They avoid decisions, leaving you feeling frustrated at their inability to engage.

### ***Passive verbal behaviour***

Typically, you may hear passive people say things like: ‘I don’t know’, ‘I don’t mind’, ‘It’s up to you’ or ‘Whatever you think is best.’ But these responses do not tell you what that person really feels, thinks, wants or doesn’t want. And, because they are accepting and rarely disagree, you begin to doubt whether they mean it or even care.

You may notice that they rarely stand up for what is right or wrong, back you up or support you. They prefer to avoid friction of any kind.

### ***Why do people behave like this?***

A person may have developed a pattern of unassertive, passive behaviour as a response to parents, teachers, siblings or friends who were dominant and controlling or didn’t allow the person, as they were growing up, to express their thoughts and feelings freely.

They may think that others will be hurt, angry or disappointed if they do not do what other people want. In fact, they may believe that they do not have the right to state their needs and opinions.

They may be afraid of displeasing others and of not being liked and want to protect their 'nice guy' or 'nice girl' image.

It may be that a person behaves in a passive way because they fear disapproval or derision from others for their decisions and opinions, so they hand over control and responsibility to others. But a person may also behave in a passive way because they can't be bothered, they're not interested, don't care and simply have no desire to contribute and participate.

## **Difficult people and difficult behaviour**

No doubt you have recognized someone you know in these descriptions of difficult people and their behaviour. We all know at least one person who leaves us feeling upset or let down, frustrated or angry, humiliated or confused, drained or despairing.

Understanding how and why someone else is being difficult can give you a better chance of dealing with them.

But just how much 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.

## Key points

- A difficult person is anyone who leaves you feeling upset or let down, frustrated or angry, humiliated or confused, drained or despairing.
- 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 is passive aggressive behaviour. It is covert; dishonest and manipulative.
- 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. It's a 'my way or no way' approach. It can be instrumental aggression, thought through and planned, or it can be impulsive aggression: a reaction to something that's happened.
- When a person is being passive aggressive, they usually express their hostility and resentment in underhand ways because, for some reason, they don't want to be direct about what they really think, feel or want.
- A person behaving in a passive way might think that others will be hurt, angry or disappointed if they do not do what other people want. They may hand over control and responsibility to others if they can't be bothered or simply want to step away from contributing and participating.