

# How to deal with a co-worker you can't stand

**YOU'RE NOT ALONE: MOST OF US WORK WITH SOMEONE WE CAN'T STAND. HERE'S HOW TO COPE.**

BY GWEN MORAN

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Overall, you genuinely enjoy work. You like your job and the projects are interesting. But whenever you think about that one co-worker, you get a knot in your stomach and suddenly feel the urge to scream.

You're not alone.

In conducting research for their book *Toxic Co-workers: How to Deal with Dysfunctional People on the Job*, psychologists Alan A. Cavaiola, PhD, and Neil J. Lavender, PhD, surveyed more than 1,100 employees. They found that roughly 80% reported moderate to severe stress as a result of working with a difficult co-worker, boss, or subordinate.

The psychologists asked workers to describe those difficult individuals using an adjective checklist. They discovered the difficult co-workers had similar characteristics to various personality disorders described in the DSM-5—the diagnostic manual used by psychiatrists and psychologists, Cavaiola says.

Working with exceedingly difficult people isn't uncommon. But it can be a major distraction at work, sapping the joy out of an otherwise good work experience.

If you're in a situation where you're working with someone you dislike, then try these methods of coping.

## **1. REFLECT ON YOUR OWN HISTORY**

Sometimes, people set us off because they remind us of someone we dislike elsewhere in our lives. It could be an expression or mannerism that reminds you of your impossible ex or an estranged family member—something of which you're not even aware, Cavaiola says. Once you realize it's the reminder and not the person you can't stand, it may be easier to cope.

"I have some clients who are very insightful," Cavaiola says. "One guy in particular was always going toe-to-toe with this boss that he hates. One day, he said, 'Now, I realize that this guy is like my stepfather. He's critical, he makes it out like nothing's going on—he doesn't really address issues.'"

## **2. MAKE YOUR NEEDS KNOWN**

If certain communication styles or actions are a problem for you, state your case calmly to make your needs known, Cavaiola says. Avoid accusatory language and

instead try the "When . . . I feel . . ." formula. For example, tell that person: "When you cut me off in meetings, I feel like you don't value my contributions."

Then, wait for a response. You may find out that the other person didn't realize you weren't finished speaking, or your colleague was so excited about your idea that he or she enthusiastically jumped into the conversation.

### **3. CHECK YOUR EXPECTATIONS**

Cavaiola, who teaches psychology at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey, says it's also not uncommon for people to have unrealistic expectations about co-workers. We may expect them to act just as we would or say the things that we might say in certain situations. That's just not realistic.

People have ingrained personality traits that are going to largely determine how they react, he says. Expecting others to do as you would do is setting yourself up for disappointment and frustration.

### **4. RECOGNIZE YOUR TRIGGERS**

Similarly, some personality characteristics may always set you off, says Los Angeles, California-based conflict consultant Kathleen Bartle. Maybe it's the colleague who regularly misses deadlines, or the guy who tells off-color jokes.

Take a look at what sets you off and who's pushing your buttons. That way, you can prepare for when it happens again. When your teeth are on edge and your hands start to shake, you can check in with yourself and defuse your response. Therefore, you won't end up erupting angrily in the moment, which is almost never a good idea in the workplace.

"If you can pause and get a grip on your adrenaline pump and go to the intellectual part of your brain, you'll be better able to have a conversation and to skip over the judgment," Bartle says.

### **5. DITCH ASSUMPTIONS**

Bartle says assumptions and judgment can be dangerous because they ascribe our own meaning or motivation onto someone else's communication or actions—which may be entirely incorrect. Instead, she suggests asking questions.

"You want to find out, 'Hey, yesterday when we were in that meeting together, and you went off on this tangent over here about these six things,'" she says. "Are these six things important to you, or were you imagining that that might be an addition, or is it something I left out? What did those six things mean to you?" Then you find out what's important, instead of making assumptions about what's going on." That kind of communication can help bridge misunderstandings.

## **6. REALIZE YOU'RE NOT GOING TO LIKE EVERYONE**

Sometimes, we get caught in the trap of trying to make people like us—even when that's never going to happen, Bartle says. Often, disagreements or conflict is a result of differences in values.

Once you understand that the reason you don't get along is a difference in values, and that values create judgment, the realization can take the emotion out of the situation. That may even result in getting along better, she says.