

A Compassionate Approach with Difficult People

by Christine E. Dickson, PhD

"Compassion is giving the other person space to be miserable without interfering. It is only when we give space that the cycle of suffering can end."

In life, it is impossible to avoid difficult people. We all know people who are considered difficult and sometimes we are forced to interact with them on a daily basis. It might be a boss, coworker, in-law or family member. It might even be a spouse. Regardless, we must find effective ways to deal with difficult people.

As a psychologist, I spend countless hours coaching my clients how to effectively deal with difficult people. This article represents the framework I use to help my clients transform their discomfort, frustration, anger or guilt into the calm and clarity that *only comes* from harnessing the power of compassion.

The Basics of Compassion with Difficult People

Taking a compassionate approach with difficult people is empathizing with the suffering that drives irrational, disrespectful, and hurtful behavior. This type of compassion is called *cognitive compassion*. **It helps us depersonalize the behavior and recognize that when people express disrespect or anger toward us, they are manifesting feelings that are more about their own internal suffering than about us.** In this way, we defuse our anger, irritation, fear, worry, or frustration about what that person did or said. Clarity arises and we can see how hurt or damaged the difficult person is and we no longer take their words or actions personally. As a result, we react effectively and manage the situation skillfully.

The Negative Consequences of Non-Compassion

When we take a non-compassionate approach with a difficult person, we find ourselves drawn into the behavior, and may react by feeling guilty or responsible, offering advice and trying to "fix" the problem, judging, defending, arguing, yelling, crying, worrying, talking excessively about the interaction, behaving in a cold or distant manner, acting in an overly sympathetic manner, withdrawing, being passive aggressive, feeling helpless and overwhelmed, inappropriately involving others in the conflict, writing inflammatory emails, texting inappropriately, or overall making poor decisions about how to handle the person and situation. **We end up behaving in an ineffective manner by mimicking the behavior of the difficult person and appearing as if we caused the person's problem.** As a result, we may unintentionally discredit ourselves and our perspectives in an effort to manage or gain control of the difficult person.

The History of Non-Compassion

Throughout most of human history, it appears we have taken a defensive, non-compassionate approach to managing difficult people. Spanking, beating, and threatening "difficult" children has been common practice to maintain compliance in our society. Fighting, threatening, and controlling difficult adults appeared to be the best way to maintain societal order. **In addition, there appears to be an evolutionary basis for a non-compassionate approach with difficult people in that our "fight or flight" instinct is triggered when we are faced with a perceived threat and we physiologically react to the threat.** Our heart increases, blood pressure rises, blood flow to muscles is reduced; glucose levels and adrenaline rise to give the muscles a shot of energy for the fight or flight response.

If compassion is not the driving force behind our interactions with a difficult person, we may experience these involuntary physiological responses, which then trigger a broad range of emotional reactions as well as ineffective behaviors.

Out with the Old, In with the New

One question that I frequently ask my clients is, "*Are we helpless to our emotional and physiological instincts like animals or are we evolved conscious creatures that can skillfully take control of our reactions and manage our thoughts, emotions, and impulses when faced with a difficult person?*" Unlike animals, we have a choice and we have control over our reactions. Certainly if real danger presents itself, we will react effectively via our "flight or fight" instinct. **However, in modern society the threat is more emotional than physical, and we need to harness the power of compassion to navigate difficult territory rather than resort to violence, anger, and hatred.** If we choose the more prehistoric animalistic route, we will feel out of control and look foolish as we react unconsciously to the perceived threat of the difficult person.

Best selling author, Eckhart Tolle provides us with insight into how evolved conscious creatures should approach their reactions with difficult people or situations. He states in his book, [The Power of Now](#), "**It is never the person or situation that is the problem, it is your reactions to it.**" Basically, as evolved conscious creatures we are responsible for our reactions and cannot blame someone else for *making* us feel angry or guilty. In other words, "**I made myself feel angry or guilty, and I am responsible for this reaction NOT the difficult person.**" *Can you imagine how empowered you might feel, if you believed this?*

In order to harness the power of compassion, we must take responsibility for the reaction the difficult person seems to generate in us. **As we manage our reactions, we come to realize how much the difficult person is suffering.** A sense of calm and clarity emerges as we feel compassion for the other person's suffering, and we are able to problem solve more effectively. At my office many people share stories of what a difficult person did or said to them. I listen patiently and empathize with my clients' pain about what happened but then I ask them a tough question. "*Can you see how much that other person must be suffering in order to behave the way they are? Can you feel compassion for their suffering?*" Since I have a lot of open-minded clients, they generally entertain my question. However, most of the time they say,

“No, I cannot have compassion for that person!” **But with guidance they always think deeply about what I am asking and realize that compassion is the only way out of their own suffering and pain.**

4 Ways to Harness Compassion in the Moment

How do we begin to approach a difficult person compassionately and harness the calm and clarity that comes from compassion? For me compassion is the feeling, and empathy is the action I take to access compassion within myself. Most people say they are empathetic, but are you capable of stepping into another person's shoes and seeing from their point of view, when they are verbally attacking you? Can you empathize with the person's anger or irrational thinking, if it is directed toward you?" For most people the answer is "No."

Below are 4 strategies for harnessing compassion in the moment while interacting with a difficult person.

- 1 Slow Down.** In order to access compassion in the moment through empathy, you must "slow down." **I imagine myself slowing down to such an extent that I create space between me and the other person. "Here I am" and "here is the other person and their negative energy."** I then prevent their negative energy from "*flowing through me like a river*" or "*sticking to me like glue*." I say to myself, "I am not responsible for this negative energy even if they said I caused it." As a result, the negative energy bounces off of me and I am capable of stepping into the person's shoes and seeing from their point of view, even if I do not agree with it. In that moment, **I access compassion for their suffering and do not personalize or take responsibility for their pain.** I remain calm and a type of clarity emerges that allows me to be objective and non-judgmental. **With that knowing, I give the difficult person space to be miserable without interfering, without energizing it, or sharing in their pain.**
- 2 Give Lots of Space.** Many of my clients are surprised when I say, "**Compassion is giving the difficult person "space" to be miserable and to suffer.**" I believe this is one of the greatest gifts we can give a difficult person. Giving them space to be miserable has the potential to end their cycle of suffering. When we do this, we find the difficult person is forced inward for the first time and must take responsibility for their negative energy. **They can no longer blame you for causing it.** When you get angry at the difficult person, they have ammunition against you and can easily say you caused their problem. **On the other hand, if you rush in to fix their problem or comfort them, you also add fuel to their fire.** The difficult person will feel justified in their thoughts and reactions, and the cycle will continue.
- 3 Protect Yourself.** Knowing that my first priority is to protect myself and to help myself feel peace and calm in their presence, **I see the situation in an objective, non-judgmental manner and can empathize with the person.** If by chance, the difficult person responds to my peace and calm, with peace and calm that is wonderful. If not, their suffering and misery is not my problem. In each moment, I take action to protect myself by knowing that I am not responsible for the difficult person's negative energy.

- 4 Transform the Negative Energy.** Even if there was something you had done to offend the difficult person, the negative energy they carry is out of proportion with reality. **Whenever we feel an intense negative energy coming from another person, it is rarely about us even if they made it about us.** When I know I am not responsible for their emotions, I can feel compassion for their pain and suffering. As Zen Master, [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) might say, I can look upon them with “*eyes of compassion*” rather than “*eyes of anger*,” and transform the negative energy that has been transferred to me by the difficult person.

6 Ways to Stay Compassionate

Now that you have learned four strategies for harnessing compassion in the moment, *how do you stay compassionate in on-going interactions with a difficult person?* Maintaining on-going compassion can be more challenging than harnessing compassion in the moment. Mainly because difficult people do not stop being difficult after one positive interaction, and sadly may never change. However, you can maintain an on-going compassionate approach with a difficult person by following a few helpful strategies that I've adapted from the book, [Out of Control](#), by psychologist, Shefali Tsabary. As I stated earlier, **your primary motivation for staying compassionate with a difficult person is to stop *your own* suffering and pain.** Below are 6 ways to practice staying compassionate in on-going interactions with a difficult person. Preparing yourself in advance is key.

1. Don't get triggered. It is easy for difficult people to trigger us or hook us into their conflict or drama. It is critical that we realize that they can easily trigger us, and we must make a choice to protect ourselves from their negativity. We might say to ourselves, "*You cannot trigger me.*" "*I will not allow you to have power over me.*" Saying these two simple statements to yourself can help you press back on their negative energy. This will give you space to step into their shoes and access the power of compassion.

2. Don't take things personally. "*It is not about you! It is not about you! Really, it is not about you!!!!*" This is something I say over and over to my clients when they are struggling with how to deal with a difficult person. When you take their behavior personally, you are instantly filled with anger. As I stated earlier, the negative energy a difficult person carries is out of proportion with reality and is most likely due to something that happened to them long ago that has nothing to do with you. Whenever we feel an intense negative energy coming from another person, it is rarely about us, even if they made it about us. When clients come to my office, I show them how the difficult person's negative energy originated from the past. When my clients take this to heart and believe it, they can access compassion toward the other person's suffering.

3. Time yourself out. Sometimes we need a time out when dealing with a difficult person. Generally, I coach my clients to say, "*Could you please excuse me, I need to use the restroom,*" whenever they feel the slightest negative energy arise in them during their interaction with a difficult person. In the restroom, my clients are coached to do a "**hand washing meditation.**" A time out is critical to prevent the negative energy from taking them

over. In the workplace, I will have my clients say a variety of phrases to end their contact with a difficult person such as, "*Thank you for your feedback or concerns, I'd like to think it over. Can I get back with you a little later?*" Coming up with a couple of good phrases for different situations at home or at work, and then rehearsing those phrases beforehand is an excellent way to prepare yourself for interactions with a difficult person. By giving yourself a time out, you discover "this is not about me!" and you create the needed space to be empathic.

4. Breathe. Taking a deep breath and consciously breathing after an exchange with a difficult person can calm you. You might do a breathing meditation in the restroom during your time out or when you get back to your desk or step out of the room. Breath in and out with conscious awareness and try to calm your body and still your mind. Sometimes you only need to take three conscious breaths to calm yourself. When my clients share stories with me about a difficult person, I will begin breathing loudly. Partly to make my clients laugh but also to make them realize that they probably are not breathing while telling me the story. I tell them that I am doing "*aggressive deep breathing*" because their story is "*taking my breath away.*"

5. Talk through your feelings. After you have escaped the situation with a difficult person, it definitely helps to talk through your feelings with a trusted friend. However, make sure you are not venting and complaining because this type of communication will only agitate you. When you tell the story, try to focus on the objective facts of the situation versus your judgments about the situation. Focusing on the facts, always gives you a great deal of power to develop an effective response to a situation. As you focus on the facts, you will also be able to empathize with the difficult person and to develop compassion for their suffering. **If you focus on your judgments, you will be filled with anger and resentment, which will poison you and lead to ineffective action.**

6. Keep your sense of humor about the situation. Difficult people can say and do some of the most absurd things. Their behavior and responses are so outlandish that it might seem funny. At first, no one laughs after an encounter with a difficult person but after you think about it or tell the story to a friend, you might find yourself laughing. Finding humor in the situation, can lighten your mood and prevent you from taking the behavior personally. After I have adequately empathized with my clients, I will show them the humor in the situation. It is not uncommon for me and my clients to laugh about the story. We are not making fun of the difficult person, but finding humor in how absurd someone's behavior can be. As a result, the difficult person no longer has power over my clients, and they can access compassion for the difficult person's suffering.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

Compassion does not mean you lay down and die, and do nothing. **It means your emotional reactions no longer control your response, and you can make better decisions about how to handle the difficult person.** You then problem solve more effectively by recognizing that the difficult person is ill, suffering, irrational, and unconscious. When you come to my office, you will hear me say this quote from Thomas Paine, "*Talking to an irrational person is like giving medicine to a dead horse.*" You cannot get through to difficult people, and it is only when they are calm and more rational that you have a chance to communicate effectively with

them. However, if you add fuel to their fire by behaving angrily, attempting to "fix" their problem, comforting them, attacking, or withdrawing, you energize them, they become more difficult, and the cycle continues.

About the Author

Dr. Christine E. Dickson is a cognitive psychologist in private practice in Pleasanton who specializes in mindfulness-based cognitive behavioral therapy. She is best known for appearing as a regular guest on local TV where she provides self-help advice on topics such as mindfulness, work-family balance, marital happiness, compassion, trauma recovery, and more to nearly 200,000 viewers. Check out her local TV interview on Bay Area TV30 where she discusses this article, "*A Compassionate Approach with Difficult People*." Christine's work is also featured in Wikipedia, the world's largest online encyclopedia.