

Coping with Difficult People

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As the holiday season arrives, many people dread spending time with “difficult” people. We need to own our part—exhibiting Christ’s love—without allowing people to destroy us or rob us of joy. How is this even possible?

1. Recognize it’s unlikely you’ll ever be able to reason with or change those who are controlling, critical, or demanding—emotionally abusive “takers” who seem blind to anyone’s needs but their own. But you can own your own response!
2. Set loving limits—and stick to them. If you can go for a walk to get away from a barrage of complaints, criticism, or cruelty, then go for a walk—or listen to music, read a book, bake cookies, arrange flowers, visit a friend, etc.
3. Stay focused. Instead of reacting to a difficult person, respond with Christ’s love. *For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another* (Galatians 5:13, ESV). Sometimes responding in love includes creating emotional, physical, and mental distance between you and the person who refuses to treat you with respect. Distance might look like going outside to pull the other person’s weeds (or, in the North, it could look like shoveling snow). But if a relationship is abusive, distance could look like not spending time together at all.
4. Don’t let yourself be pulled into an argument. If you try to defend yourself, you’ll only look guilty to a negative person. When you choose to control your own thoughts and emotions, you’ll live “above” the challenges. If your difficult person posts something cruel or untrue about you on social media, don’t comment on it. *Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life* (Proverbs 4:23, NASU).
5. Listen and pray. Throughout the New Testament, notice how often Jesus remained quiet when people condemned Him or attempted to trap Him. Allow the Holy Spirit to help you notice and care about the other person’s needs and concerns.
6. Be kind, clear, and direct. When you face a barrage of demands from a difficult person, you could simply state, “Help me understand what you need from me.” If your gracious attempts to communicate are met with contempt, take responsibility for your words and actions but not for the other person’s misperceptions, lies, or overgeneralizations. Realize it’s not always possible to be at peace: *If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men* (Romans 12:18, NASB).
7. Manage your stress response, recognizing it’s not what the other person is doing that “makes” you upset, angry, sad, etc. What actually happens any time you feel emotionally, physically, mentally, or spiritually threatened is this: your autonomic nervous system rapidly takes you into a stress reaction based on past learning. Just as rapidly, you can move yourself into a calm state, telling yourself the truth [recalling who you are in Christ], breathing deeply, and repeatedly choosing to relax.



For more information on dealing with the trauma of difficult people, see *Core Healing from Trauma* by Marti Wibbels (available on Amazon).