



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Dealing with Difficult Personalities

“It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.” ~ Henry David Thoreau

In the practice of law, there are many circumstances that increase the possibility that we will encounter difficult personalities: the stakes are high, the adversarial process is a historically prized component, days are long and stressful, competition is a norm, and perfectionism is a goal. A judge or lawyer, whose career is fundamentally about communication, must navigate waters full of difficult personality traits on a daily basis in the form of colleagues, bosses, clients, opposing counsel, the public, etc. We have all encountered people who exhibit personality traits that are difficult to deal with. In fact, if we want to be honest with ourselves, we all exhibit traits from time-to-time that put a kink in interpersonal relationships, communication, and work-place productivity. No one is perfect, and we all suffer from behaving or communicating in “less than mature” ways when we are stressed, confused, or hurt. Sometimes these difficult traits escalate to a pattern of behavior and pattern of thinking for long periods of time that can actually be diagnosed as personality disorders. When we work or live with individuals who perpetually exhibit these traits, it can take a toll on our emotional, mental, and even physical well-being. Some of these traits include: aggression, cruelty, being a know-it-all, neurotic indecisiveness, compulsive talking, perpetual gossiping, passive aggressiveness, needing to be the center of attention, maliciously sabotaging others, co-dependency, shaming, the list goes on. We need to understand the origins of these behaviors so we can respond in ways that are helpful, rather than hurtful, when communicating with others who might exhibit these traits.

When we experience intense feelings, whether they are positive or negative, a chain of events occurs within us that affects our behavior and communication with those around us. We all grew up in environments where certain emotions were allowed to be expressed, and certain emotions were not. In some households, crying was not allowed but complaining from a victim mentality was. In some households, a child was encouraged to speak proudly about his or her accomplishments, while in others sharing accomplishments was a punishable offense. How did the adults in your household punish or reward your behaviors and emotional expression? In what ways did those adults express themselves when they felt intense emotions? Depending on our upbringing, we learned and practiced certain methods of communication and expression.

As adults our ability to communicate with others often depends on our level of awareness of how we respond to intense feelings within ourselves. In general, we build a

pattern, or template, of how we react or respond to our environment and the people in it. This pattern is our personality. For example, some people react to feeling angry by yelling or hitting others, throwing objects, or belittling those around them. Some people react to feeling angry by suppressing the emotions and turning them inward, leading to depression or self-sabotaging behaviors. Yet some people will respond to feeling angry by taking a deep breath, taking a walk to process the sensations of anger, and communicating appropriately (maturely, clearly) with others. How we respond to a feeling, sensation, or emotion is ultimately a choice that only we can make. But individuals who predictably repeat the same reaction to feeling certain sensations in the body (for example, blood rushing their heads or butterflies in their belly) start behaving like robots. In a way, they are no longer able to choose how to respond in a situation or during an emotion because one part of their brain “hijacks,” or takes over and controls, another. This phenomenon usually takes place between the limbic system (which supports functions such as emotions, long-term memory, and behavior) and the prefrontal cortex (which supports executive functioning and decision making discretion; it is our filter).

In some cases, the limbic system floods and hijacks the prefrontal cortex, resulting in strong emotions essentially paralyzing the ability to choose how to respond to the environment. This results in behavior and thoughts that are “over reactive” because the nervous system is signaling danger. These include acting aggressively (fight response), fleeing or avoiding (flight or faint response), or racing, neurotic or paranoid thoughts (freeze response). Alternatively, a person’s prefrontal cortex could hijack the limbic system. In that case, an individual is unable to feel emotions because his or her logical, analytical brain stops the emotional process. In essence, the person is unable to feel and express emotions. In that case, the nervous system is also signaling danger, but the prefrontal cortex prevents the limbic system from engaging at all.

If someone has been practicing a certain reaction for years, maybe their entire life, it essentially becomes an addiction. Thankfully, like addictions to exogenous psychoactive substances such as alcohol, heroin, or marijuana, an addiction to a certain behavioral reaction to emotions (ie., personality traits) can absolutely be overcome. This takes mindfulness, awareness, discipline, and sometimes, outside assistance from friends, family, therapists, or other mental health professionals. Sadly, the very nature of such behaviors and ways of thinking often prevent the individuals who could benefit from mental health assistance from getting it. So, what are we to do in the meantime when we have to deal and cope with these individuals and their behavioral addictions that negatively impact us on a daily basis?

The first step is to recognize that this individual is essentially paralyzed emotionally and behaviorally in a perpetual child-like state. Examine their reaction to a situation as if they

were a child or adolescent. We assume that because someone is of a certain age and has a certain level of education and worldly or professional experience, they should behave in a certain way with a particular level of maturity. However, that is simply not the case. Adults, especially those who have traumatic or compromised pasts, such as being emotionally neglected as children, are simply children in bigger bodies. Without learning by experience or example how to be aware of their behaviors, they react to strong emotions like they did when they were children. Dramatic, melodramatic, and passive aggressive expressions of emotion are childlike traits. If an adult is exhibiting these traits, or experiencing negative, neurotic thoughts on a regular basis, they are stuck in the past.

In certain contexts, these traits are rewarded by our society. Narcissists, for example, are so self-absorbed that they lack empathy for others around them and can become angry if they are not the center of attention or do not receive enough adulation or praise. These traits by definition make them narcissists, but also allow them to control companies, a court room, a law firm, a legislature, a country, the military, or even the stock market. Some will assert that these traits make them better at their career, such as lawyers, surgeons, musicians, actors, etc. If we reward difficult personality traits, or willfully ignore them and therefore enable them, there is hardly an incentive for these individuals to change. Hence our work, which is *the second step*, is to change *our* own reactions to *their* behavioral addictions.

Often, naming “the elephant in the room” is a helpful way to deal with awkward situations where a person is exhibiting difficult personality traits. However, we obviously can’t say to a judge “Your honor, I believe your limbic system is hijacking your prefrontal cortex, and therefore, I would like you to reconsider that ruling” or to a senior partner at your firm “You are overacting to this the way a three-year old throwing a temper tantrum would.” And, if you are in the middle of a trial, it could potentially backfire for you to reach out to opposing counsel and express your concern for their wellbeing if they are clearly exhibiting mental health problems. The difficulty in the legal profession is that we can logistically or perceptually become trapped by the threat of retaliation if we speak honestly with those in power who are exhibiting difficult personality traits. Therefore, it takes an immense amount of courage to respond to the situation maturely, regardless of how the other person is behaving. This is the essence of not taking something personally.

The third step is to literally take a breath and metaphorically (if you can’t physically) take a step back from the interaction. If you can physically remove yourself from the situation, then excuse yourself to go to the restroom or to get more tea, water, or coffee. Chances are, when you return, the individual will be in a slightly different mood or would have been distracted by something else and you will be “out of the line of fire” enough to continue communicating with that individual. The worst thing you can do is “poke the bear.”

Sinking to their level, and getting your nervous system activated (with fight/flight/freeze/faint responses) will only make things worse. Stay calm, and speak your mind as clearly as you can without blaming, criticizing, judging, belittling, or attacking the other person. Just because they are acting like a child, doesn't mean you have to join them in their sand box mentality.

For more examples of how you can handle specific styles of difficult personalities, click on the links below:

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/communication-success/201309/ten-keys-handling-unreasonable-difficult-people>

<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2008/04/15/6-difficult-types-of-people-and-how-to-deal-with-them/>

<http://theconsultingteam.com/seven-difficult-personality-types-and-how-to-deal-with-them/>

http://www.utsouthwestern.edu/edumedia/edufiles/about_us/admin_offices/human_resources/eap/difficult-personalities.pdf

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