

# 7 Tips for Dealing with Difficult People During this Time of Civil Unrest and COVID



How are you doing during this coronavirus crisis and time of civil unrest? We hope you're managing okay, staying healthy, taking time for deep breaths and washing your hands a lot. This article is about the reality that even during a crisis we still have to deal with some difficult people. With this in mind, here are several tips that may help you cope with them, including co-parenting exchanges and dealing with an abusive person.

## **1. *Difficult people tend to act worse during a crisis, not better, so be prepared.***

We all have this hope that everyone will pull together and act reasonably during a crisis, but the opposite is true for people with a pattern of difficult behavior. They are stressed too, so they act more like themselves, not less. Whether you live with them, work with them over the phone or by Zoom, or are dealing with an ex-spouse or long-distance family member, it helps to anticipate their usual pattern of dealing with difficult problems which may include all-or-nothing solutions, unmanaged emotions and extreme behaviors. Yelling, blaming, impulsive actions, and dramatic withdrawals may be common. If you have bad news to deliver or a controversial issue to discuss, be prepared to stay calm through their storm.

## **2. *Calming upset people with lots of EAR statements.***

EAR statements show empathy, attention and/or respect for an upset person. This may be the last thing you feel like doing, but calming an upset person may make your own life a lot easier. When you start a conversation, you can ask how they are doing and give them some empathy. "Yeah, I hear your frustrations. What a stressful time for you and the rest of us." Or some attention: "Tell me what your concerns are about this problem. I want to understand your point of view." Or some respect: "I respect your efforts to make this work. We just have to work out a few more details."

**3. *Keep the conflict small: avoid the past and focus on current choices.***

Difficult people spend a lot of time complaining and arguing about the past. Be prepared for them to try to bring up past issues while you're discussing a current problem. Focus on what you can do now about it. Have 2-3 solutions (proposals) in mind before you start the conversation.

Difficult people often jump from topic to topic, bringing unrelated issues into the discussion of your request. Don't be surprised. Expect this and say "Let's finish talking about this issue first, before we talk about that. Thanks."

**4. *Avoid getting emotionally hooked; stay focused on what to DO.***

When difficult people are high conflict people, they are preoccupied with blaming others. Be prepared to be attacked or blamed or criticized for something. Remind yourself "It's not about me—it's about the decision or plan we need to make." You can even say out loud: "Let's stay focused on what to do now," and stick with it.

**5. *Take breaks and allow others to take breaks.***

When people are under stress or in a conflict, it's easy to just keep pushing through it to get it resolved and done with. But the reality with difficult people is that they often can't disengage and in fact relate to people by engaging in conflict with them. Be firm about your need to take a break, repeating that you're taking a break now and won't discuss it further until you've both had a chance to think about it. And if the other person wants to take a break, certainly let them do that. Feeling trapped makes people act worse, not better. Especially during this stay-at-home period, everyone needs a chance to take a break from each other.

**6. *Resolving co-parenting issues between two households.***

Courts are closed, so dealing with separation and divorce conflicts are best handled with mediators, such as those on the website of the Academy of Professional Family Mediators. One of the biggest issues for co-parents right now is the exchange of children between two households, amid fears of catching or spreading the coronavirus. The standard worldwide is to follow the court orders, unless to do so would be very dangerous. Of course, who decides what's very dangerous? Many families are grappling with this right now and there's no clear-cut answer. When there's a high conflict co-parent, this easily becomes a huge power struggle. Reasonable parents communicate and make compromises, including lots of virtual time with the other parent. However, high conflict co-parents tend to make it a chance to seize power and withhold the child. In this case, here's a few extra tips:

- a) Keep a daily record of where the child is, what the other parent said and what you said about exchanges. This may be needed when courts open again.
- b) Emphasize to the withholding parent how you think the courts would address the issue of withholding a child. Try not to make it about you versus the other parent, but rather about standards.
- c) Adopt an objective system for deviating from the court orders, such as this suggested by the National Self Represented Litigants Project in Canada: If a parent thinks they or someone in their household is coming down with COVID-19, they should immediately notify the other parent and self-quarantine for 14 days—with the child if the child is already with that parent or without the child if the child is already at the other parent's house. Maintain the status quo for 14 days, then return to the normal exchange schedule.

### **7. *Living with an abusive person.***

Usually a person is encouraged to stay away from an abusive person, but if you can't here's some tips:

- a) Find distracting calming activities (movies, TV, board games with the kids, etc.).
- b) Avoid criticism and blame (even if you're being criticized or blamed) and try using EAR statements that show empathy, attention or respect (any of these may help). Examples: "I know this is a hard time. I know you're frustrated. I'll help you with this." "I'll listen. Tell me what's going on. Tell me what's frustrating you right now, I want to understand." "I really respect your efforts to solve this. I respect your time. I'll respect your space."
- c) Find a task that will use his skills and make him feel good about himself, such as getting help with your WiFi or taking a picture or explaining how something works that's related to his occupation.

Overall, understand that the best way to manage a difficult person is to manage your own anxiety. By staying calm you may be able to calm the other person. But also do whatever is necessary to protect yourself if the situation becomes dangerous. And give yourself a sense of hope. The coronavirus curve is starting to flatten in many places. The end is in sight.

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