

How to handle difficult people

If someone's making you nuts but you can't—or don't want to—cut her out of your life, we've got clever (and easy) ways to cope. by Ellen Welty

The Needy Friend

She's constantly chewing your ear off about some "crisis," from a fight with her husband to the way her gardener ripped her off. And you're sick of it.

What You Need to Do:

- **Shorten those long, whiny phone calls.** After a few minutes, say, "Wow, that sounds so tough." Then tell her you have to run to take care of X from your to-do list. She's less apt to feel blown off if she hears a specific excuse, says Sandra A. Crowe, author of *Since Strangling Isn't an Option...*, a book about dealing with difficult people.
- **Get social.** Include other pals in your plans with her so the conversation won't revolve around her sob stories.
- **Nudge her forward.** When you do lend your ear, ask her how she could solve her "crisis." If she says, "It's hopeless," gently insist that there must be a solution. She'll either take her griping elsewhere, or start fixing her life on her own. Win-win!

The Unreliable Sitter

She used to be on time and clean up after your kids, and they love her. But these days, she all too often cancels at the last minute or is late, and usually forgets to load the dishwasher.

What You Need to Do:

- **Try a little tenderness.** Don't just motor out the door when she arrives—ask how she's doing. Concern for her welfare shows her she's important to the family, says Douglas Stone, coauthor of *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*.
- **Remind her how good she has it.** When you're chatting about your children,

casually mention some bratty kids in town, or a woman you know who's awful to her nanny. Manipulative? Yes, but it just might work.

- **Use four little words.** When having her heed your request really matters—say, you need her at 8:00 sharp the next morning—tell her, "It's important to me." Being explicit about how vital it is that she come through ups the odds that she will, says Crowe.
- **Have "the talk."** If the above strategies don't reform her, clear the air. Start with, "My kids love you." Then say, "It's been really hard for me lately that you've done X, Y, and Z. I'd like to find a way to make this work, if you want to." Adding "if you want to" commits her to making it work, and committed people try harder.

The Conniving Coworker

Once, she "sympathetically" asked about your heavy workload, and you learned your bitching got back to your boss. And when you wear a new dress, she "playfully" and loudly asks, "Are we job hunting?"

What You Need to Do:

- **Always tell her, "Things are fine"**—even if you're swamped. Reserve your openness for nonwork topics. Hey, maybe you'll learn you like the same movies.
- **Shrug off her snide comments.** Simply smile. Your confidence will show her there's no point in trying to rattle you or make you look bad, says Crowe.

You can win over the gossip hound next door.

The Obnoxious Neighbor

Her dog poops on your lawn, she always forgets to bring your garbage cans in from the curb when you're on vacation (no matter how nicely you ask), and you suspect she gossips about you.

What You Need to Do:

- **Pay her small, heartfelt compliments.** She'll warm to someone who sees the best in her, says negotiations expert Stone. So go ahead and praise her neat hedges.
- **Have her and another neighbor or two over for coffee.** With her attitude, she probably doesn't get a lot of invitations. But she may secretly love them. Also, she'll be less apt to dish about you with neighbors if you've all shared a good time.
- **Start patting her pooch on the head.** She'll melt more if you admire those she loves. Eventually, you can say, "Fido's so great. He keeps us all safer. The only thing is, he poops on my lawn. Is there a way to keep him from doing that?"
- **Make it clear that being your neighbor doesn't come with duties.** Before a vacation, ask if she'll take in your cans, but assure her she doesn't have to. When she does, bring her a small gift, like chocolates.

- **Put her in your debt.** Bring her coffee when she's bleary-eyed; help her collate that rush report. She'll start thinking of you as her savior, not her victim, says Crowe. Even if she doesn't, your kind, generous behavior will only highlight her snarkiness—and cement your reputation as the thoughtful, unflappable professional you are. □



Writer Ellen Welty has two kids—Sawyer, 11, and Kato, 7.