



Managing Difficult Behaviors in Others

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. List three types of difficult behavior that may be seen in the workplace.
2. Identify two reasons why people may display difficult behavior.
3. Discuss techniques to manage difficult behavior in co-workers.

Karen is fuming. Her co-worker, Lynn, had begged her to switch shifts. Karen agreed, and they had the switch approved. Karen worked the shift for Lynn, but when Lynn's turn came to work Karen's shift, she told the agency she could not work that day. The agency then called Karen in, requesting that she cover the shift.



Karen is experiencing a common problem in today's workplace... dealing with a coworker's difficult behavior. Situations such as this can take much of the pleasure out of our jobs. While we can't eliminate difficult situations from the workplace, we can learn to manage them so that they don't have as much effect on us.

This newsletter will focus on how to deal with difficult behaviors at work, including types of behaviors and common reasons why people exhibit them. Strategies for managing these behaviors will also be covered.

What are Difficult Behaviors?

Difficult behaviors in others often interfere with your ability to do your job well. They also tend to produce negative feelings in you, such as anger, embarrassment or anxiety.

Common difficult behaviors include:

- *Aggressive behavior*: this person gets what he or she wants by

intimidating or bullying others. An angry expression and tone of voice, along with a "don't mess with me" attitude, are hallmarks of this behavior.

- *Sneaky, undermining behavior*: this person may appear to be your friend, but is working behind the scenes to make you look bad... for example, gossiping about you to others or not giving you information you need.
- *Whiny or helpless behavior*: these people can never seem to do anything alone, always needing someone's help. Or, they may talk constantly about personal problems. Their latest crisis often overshadows everything else, including work!
- *Critical or complaining behavior*: this negative person seems to spout a constant stream of criticisms or complaints... about the agency, clients, policies, staff, etc. He or she finds fault with just about everything.



People Behaving Badly

When confronted with a coworker's difficult behavior, your first reaction may be, "I can't believe someone would act like that!" In fact, have you ever been left speechless and open-mouthed at another's behavior toward you? And frustratingly, you may not have even been able to think of a response to the person until much later!

There are many different reasons why people behave badly. This behavior may be “normal” to them, since that’s what they saw in their families as they grew up. It may meet a need they have, or serve as a defense against getting hurt. And, quite simply, this behavior has gotten them what they wanted in the past... either attention or other desired results. So, the behavior continues because it works.

You may be tempted to try to figure out why a person behaves the way they do. Don’t waste your time or energy! Instead, your goal is to respond to the behavior so that your feelings and work productivity are not negatively affected.



Coping With Difficult Behaviors

Before you focus on coping with the difficult behaviors of others, make sure you’re not part of the problem. All of us can be difficult at times, especially in stressful situations. Examine your feelings and behaviors to make sure you don’t see yourself described above, in the “common difficult behaviors” section. Also, if you seem to find “difficult” people *everywhere*, or people often react in a negative way to you, then your behaviors may be contributing to this reaction in others. If in doubt, ask someone you trust for honest feedback on how you interact with others.

Your first impulse when confronted with difficult behavior may be to complain to a friend or coworker about it. Don’t! This gossiping just adds to the problem, and makes you look as bad as the difficult person. Instead, think about the interaction... what triggered it? What was said? How did that make you feel? How did you respond? Is this ongoing behavior, or a first-time offense? Once you have sorted out your feelings, you can develop a plan to deal with the behavior.



The first step in dealing with the difficult behavior of others is to realize that you cannot change anyone but yourself. In changing your reaction to the behavior, however, you *may* cause a change in the person’s difficult behavior, since it no longer has the desired effect. For example, when the person who constantly “whines” no longer has an audience to listen to all of her troubles, the behavior often stops.

In managing difficult behaviors, you may choose to use an indirect or direct approach. The indirect approach involves changing your response to the difficult behavior. This serves to reduce your stress, as well as discourage the difficult behaviors:

Aggressive behavior: Keep a neutral facial

expression, not showing fear or anxiety. Remember, this person’s goal is to intimidate you, so don’t let that happen. Lower your voice and slow your rate of speech. If there is some aspect of the person’s point that you agree with, then do so... “You’re right, Dana, I should have bathed Mrs. Clark before your shift with her started.” During “calm” moments, try building a relationship with this person by asking for their advice or opinion.

Undermining behavior: Try to show, through your behavior, that you are not engaged in a “feud” with this person. Ask for this person’s help or opinion on some matter. Show honest support of the person’s ideas when you agree with them, and compliment him or her when it is deserved... “Carol, when I took care of Mr. Trent today, he told me you did a good job yesterday. That’s great, he’s hard to please.”

Whiny/helpless behavior: As long as you keep listening, or helping, this person will continue to use you. For the person who talks constantly about his own problems, turning the conversation to yourself often stops this pattern... “You know, I had a similar thing happen to me once, etc etc etc.” Cutting the conversation short can also be effective... “Oops, my time is up, gotta go!” If the person constantly asks for help, explain that you’re tied up... “Sorry, I’m swamped now.” Or, offer to help *after* she’s helped you... “Sure, I’ll help, but first I need a hand with...” This person will either help or disappear!

Critical/complaining behavior: Once again, this person requires an audience in order to be difficult, so don’t provide that. Excuse yourself when the complaining starts, or provide a positive note to the topic... “I like the new schedule, it’s more predictable.”



The direct approach to dealing with difficult behavior involves talking to the person about the behavior and how it affects you. This is best done when you and the person are alone. Use “I” statements to prevent a defensive reaction... “I switch shifts to help you pretty often, but then when you can never switch to help me, I feel used and resentful.” Or, “When you call me names, even in “fun”, I feel embarrassed and angry.” State the behavior and how it affects you. Then talk with the person to arrive at a solution... “How can we work this out?”

In most cases, you should be able to handle difficult co-worker behaviors on your own. However, if the behavior involves sexual or other harassment, or your safety is threatened, it’s time to let your supervisor or other manager know.



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**Peak Development for ...
Home Health Aides®
Competency Assessment Tool**

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NAME: _____ DATE: _____ UNIT: _____

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- ____ 1. Aggressive behavior is often seen as:
A. complaining about everything
B. acting nice to your face
C. using an angry tone of voice
D. constantly asking for help
- ____ 2. Jenny acts friendly toward her co-worker, Patty, but then tells other staff members untrue things about Patty. Which of the following best describes this type of behavior?
A. complaining
B. helpless
C. aggressive
D. undermining
- ____ 3. People often exhibit difficult behavior because it:
A. gets them what they want
B. seems "normal" to them
C. serves as a defense against getting hurt
D. all of the above
- ____ 4. Your first step in managing difficult behaviors should be to determine why the person is acting that way.
A. True
B. False
- ____ 5. To determine if your behaviors are contributing to other's poor reactions to you, it is most helpful to:
A. assume that your behaviors are fine, since the other person has the problem behaviors
B. ask someone you trust
C. record all interactions for one week
D. avoid those people completely to see if their reactions change

- _____ 6. When someone at work behaves badly toward you, you should tell your other coworkers about it so they can watch for this behavior.
- A. True
 - B. False
- _____ 7. The indirect method of managing difficult behaviors involves:
- A. changing your response to the behaviors
 - B. arranging to talk with the person one-on-one
 - C. informing the person of their behavior and its effect on you
 - D. none of the above
- _____ 8. The only person you have the power to change is yourself.
- A. True
 - B. False
- _____ 9. Barbara dreads working with June, who talks constantly about her personal problems and gets very little work done. Barbara can most effectively manage June's behavior by:
- A. keeping a neutral facial expression
 - B. listening to her carefully and showing support
 - C. cutting the conversation short each time
 - D. agreeing with what June says
- _____ 10. Bob complains constantly about anything and everything. Sarah, who often has to work with him, can best deal with this behavior by:
- A. saying, "When I listen to your complaints, it makes me feel tired and drained."
 - B. telling Bob that if he doesn't stop complaining, she'll give him something to complain about.
 - C. refusing to work with Bob
 - D. complaining just as much as Bob does

