

## **DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE**

Early in my training I encountered a doctor who triggered a tremendous amount of stress in me. I found him extremely arrogant, smug, and full of himself. He also seemed to have a very condescending and patronizing manner that I found very offensive. It was bad enough that I had to periodically encounter him in some of my training rotations, but the capper came when I was assigned to his service for two months. I couldn't imagine how I'd get through the ordeal.

As we started to work together, I found him less abrasive and irritating than I'd expected. Then something amazing happened. He asked me to work with him on a long case and I found myself feeling flattered by the request. During our several hours together I found myself lightening up and kibitzing a bit. He responded and by the end of the afternoon we had made a real breakthrough. That was a turning point, but it got even better. As I got to know him I enjoyed him more and more. Most importantly, I realized that he wasn't arrogant or smug at all. In fact, he was extremely shy and soft-spoken and what I had taken to be arrogance was a combination of shyness and the way he compensated for his social unease. His behaviour and mannerisms didn't change, but my view of them changed totally. In the final ironic twist, he actually became one of my favourite people and we became real friends. It was a lesson in how easy it is for us to misinterpret other people and to react not to who they are, but to our interpretations and judgements of them.

This experience taught me something very important about dealing with difficult people: that the more you learn about them, the better you understand them. Even if you don't end up liking a person, getting to know him or her can lessen the feelings of tension. Appraisal of where they're coming from and what makes them tick is an excellent way of dealing with difficult people, but not the only one.

### **Let's look at some others.**

#### **Avoidance:**

An obvious way of dealing with stressful people is to just stay away from them. And where this is feasible, it usually works. However, there are four problems with this approach. One is that it's not always possible to avoid people, particularly if you work or live with them. Second, if you avoid people who are still in your orbit you may find yourself looking over your shoulder to make sure they're not nearby. This can be stressful in itself. The third problem is that you don't learn how to deal with the person if you simply skirt around the problem. It won't help you to develop better coping strategies. And fourth, you could actually end up magnifying your stress when you do see them. I learned this lesson years ago when I ran into someone I'd been studiously and stubbornly ignoring. He was sullen, abrasive and generally disliked and I wanted nothing to do with him. One day I found myself walking towards this person with not another soul around. It would have been too obvious if I'd turned around and gone the other way. So I kept walking, determined not to make eye contact with him. I was going to show him what a jerk I thought he was! Well, guess whose stress level went up with every step? As I passed him, I noted with dismay (and, frankly, some amusement) what a lousy strategy I'd concocted. I felt more stress when I couldn't avoid him. After that, I realized avoidance was a "losing game" - and I gave it up.

#### **Appeasement:**

This is where you concede to the other person and give them what they want in order to avoid conflict. This is the "line of least resistance" often employed by "pleasers." One of my patients used this approach with an aggressive friend of hers, saying that "being a pleaser is easier."

However, she started to realize that appeasement wasn't really easier at all. It perpetuated her upset and gave her friend the impression that her behaviour was acceptable. In effect, she gave tacit permission to the other person to continue to be controlling, domineering, and bossy. Appeasement may be necessary at times (to avoid a scene, for example), but isn't a great strategy on an ongoing basis. It keeps you feeling powerless and victimized.

*All material copyrighted, David B. Posen M.D.*