

WATER OFF A DUCK'S BACK: HELP CLIENTS TO DEAL WITH AWKWARD PEOPLE – AND SMILE

*Frustrating situations and awkward, exasperating or manipulative people can trigger relapse. So **Jon Lavelle** offers helpful hints and tips to sail safely through some of life's storms.*

If you or a client feel bad just by thinking about a particular person, you are allowing them to annoy you in your time. What's worse is that the other person is not consciously trying to make you feel bad right now; they are not even in the room. You are doing it for them, repeatedly. How crazy is that? So, we are agreed that you are not going to allow people to mentally mess with you – the key question is how do we do this?

This page shares some 'quick fixes' which can be used alone or alongside therapy for long-term issues, and which can help both new clients and those in longer-term recovery.

CINEMA SURROUND SYSTEM.

Here's the first tip to try instead of the way you usually think about the person, which is probably intimidating, aggressive, annoying, sarcastic, bullying and the like.

Make a picture of them in your mind which is the opposite of how you usually view them. You might imagine them as a pathetic person in a weak or feeble situation, possibly whimpering.

Before you get too far into this, change the way you are seeing this in your mind's eye.

It is likely that, until now, you have been imagining a previously negative situation in full technicolour with accompanying cinema surround sound. Imagining negative images in this way will not help you because it is like projecting the image onto a massive cinema screen which consumes your attention and leaves no room for anything more helpful.

So, instead of taking your mind off to the metaphorical multiplex, imagine you are viewing the person or situation on a small, fuzzy, black & white TV on the other side of the room. The scene is still visible to you but in the distance. Try it now and see how small, distant, fuzzy, distorted and colourless you can make the image – and how tinny, crackly and pathetic you can make the sound.



Did you do it? Did you see it and hear it?

Don't read on until you have done this.

As you imagine the scene now, are you starting to feel different about this person already? If not, do it again and try harder, as the process should take only a few seconds when done right.

Practice this for a while, switching between the full-colour, full-on surround sound, in-your-face images, then the small, black & white, crackly, tinny, distant images. You should find that your negative emotions diminish when you think about the situation in the second way, and they return when you think about it in wide-screen, full on, full-colour format.

Assuming this mental exercise has a real impact on you, your goal now is to eliminate the previous full-on images and to replace them with the pathetic, distant, blurred images. You are turning this person's previously perceived 'importance' into 'impotence'. Any time you catch yourself imagining the situation in the earlier way, immediately switch to the blurred, distant, black & white image with poor audio.

Now the fun bit. Picture yourself as all-powerful, confident, courageous, strong and assertive. If you want to go to extremes, imagine yourself as a giant or other strong, dominating beast about to bear down on them from above.

If you open your mind for a moment and give this a go, you should start to notice some changes in the way you think and feel about people and situations – and all in a few minutes.

If you must deal with this person again, from

this point forward, they will have progressively less negative impact on you.

IDENTIFY VERBAL PROVOCATION.

This is not for dealing with reasonable people, but people you cannot avoid who do not have you or your client's best interests at heart or are trying to manipulate you, other people or a situation to their own ends.

Some people try to manipulate you with both what they say and the way in which they say it. Some are very clever and cunning about this; other, less sophisticated people try to twist things in a way which suits them. The first uses the precision of a surgeon's scalpel, the second a ham-fisted club hammer. Then there are the 'innocents' who do not realise the degree to which they distort reality.

Faced with such verbal provocation from others, you can equip yourself with linguistic tools to deal effectively with these situations. Then you can calmly undermine the unsubstantiated arguments and assertions of such people. But first you must recognise them.

There are eight common crimes:

- using subjective slurs and meaningless labels
- using the past to justify the present
- using exaggerated or value-laden descriptions
- expecting you to agree
- direct, open criticism
- making connections where none exist
- using 'universal' statements, and
- giving non-attributed opinion.

Turn to page 39 to learn how to respond to these.

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