

Got Toxic People?

They're negative, manipulative and moody. They can be demanding, deceitful or just plain mean and if you aren't careful, toxic people can suck you into their vortex and drain the life out of you.

It doesn't matter if they are members of your family, you work with them or know them through some other association you must save yourself from being contaminated because their toxins are highly contagious!

Here are some practical, simple strategies to save your time, energy and quite possibly your sanity around toxic people.

- Don't try to figure them out – Unless you are a licensed therapist and getting paid for the job, it is best not to waste your time and energy because those seeds of negativity are usually buried pretty deep. I learned very early in my career as a law enforcement officer that you can't reason with an unreasonable person. I classify toxic people as unreasonable. I've had lots of encounters with people who were high or drunk and there was no point in trying to reason with them or trying to understand where they are coming from in that moment. Their reality is tainted by their drug of choice. Much the same, the toxic person's viewpoint is unreasonable, often unrealistic, with a negative twist to everything. To try to figure them out is an exercise in futility. That's time you will never get back in your life.
- Don't try to make them happy – again, unless you are their therapist, consider making them happy as a task that is above your pay grade. It's not your job to make other people happy. I worked for a very kind Department Director who had a monthly staff meeting during the lunch hour and had a pizza lunch catered for all the staff. It was not just a bunch of greasy pizzas either. We had salad, garlic rolls, wings and several varieties of very good pizza. Rather than see this as an act of unrequired kindness, one toxic employee would actually complain to others about the FREE lunch every month. "Can't we have something other than pizza?" or "Why doesn't he use the money from the pizza to give me a raise?" There was no 'pizza budget', this gentleman bought lunch for a staff of 30 or so with his own money once-a-month for years. In this instance, there was such a thing as a 'free lunch' but no lunch in the world was going to make her happy. Be kind and civil to them, but don't waste your time and energy. Again, it's time you will never get back.

- Claim your space – kindly tell them that you are a “negative free” zone. Let them know in no-uncertain terms you are trying hard to keep yourself in a positive, productive state and you are not going to engage in any negative conversations. When they start to go into something that is negative about someone or something, remind them you don’t care to discuss the topic at hand in a negative way. It may not start out as a negative conversation, but when you pick up on the shift to talking *about* other people or how *wrong* the new policy at work is or how *sick* of this or that, you will have to reclaim your space. It may take several times of doing this – sometimes, several times a day- but eventually they will learn that you mean what you say and you aren’t going into negative territory.

I can appreciate that some people have a very hard time around claiming their space and setting boundaries. This can be an uncomfortable thing to do for some folks. Maybe it’s telling the office gossip that you aren’t going to entertain the latest “news” about your colleagues (because I’m pretty sure the gossip will include your name at some point or another and will involve un-truths anyway). If your colleagues hear you aren’t willing to participate, they may follow suit and the “news” will dry up. It might be uncomfortable to tell your friend who always expects you to pick up the check at your lunch dates that you really don’t have room in your budget to keep paying all the time, but if you don’t say something, they will never know. For me, I ask myself what I’m really willing to live with. I can either live with something or I can’t. If you can, then live with it and it shouldn’t bother you in those quiet moments of self-reflection. However, if something starts to eat away at you and you resent the person or situation, you should take a look at setting or resetting boundaries around that issue. Trust me when I tell you the earth **will not** spin off its axis if you start looking out for your own best interest and claiming your space to be what you want/need.

- Challenge them – to find the solution to the problem or person they are trying to talk to you about. Here is the area where most toxic people get quiet. You can say “Ok, I see you have clearly identified what you see as the problem, so what is the solution?” They might spout off with more negativity about how “...there is no solution because management doesn’t care about anyone below them...” At that point, you would just shut them down by maintaining your “negative free” zone and telling them you can see they need more time to come up with the solution and you’ll be happy to hear about it when they do. However, very often when you ask them to solve the problem you will just hear crickets chirp and they will find somewhere else to be.

It may seem selfish or uncaring, but self-preservation is a must when you have toxic people around you. You have the right to protect yourself from their poison. After all, misery loves company and you deserve better company than someone who gets satisfaction from bringing everyone down. Stand firm in your commitment to your own happiness and joy – in fact, do your best to make your happiness and joy contagious. If you stay out of toxic, negative space and lead by example, maybe those you influence will decide to join you on the bright side of things.

Life on the bright side is so much more fulfilling. I'm wishing you sunny weather and brighter days!