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How to Handle the Most Toxic People in Your Life

They spew negativity to demean and deflate you. And they think you're the problem. It's happening more and more. Herewith, a guide for surviving toxic times.

By Katherine Schreiber, published on May 2, 2017 - last reviewed on July 5, 2017



Christine Porath was an accomplished athlete just out of a Division I college when she landed her dream job—helping a global athletic brand launch a sports academy. But the dream quickly faded. Her boss was, by her description, a self-absorbed dictator whose rudeness was matched by his [bullying](#) and other

noxious actions. Soon enough, the dysfunction trickled down through the staff.

"Many took out their frustrations on others, barking orders at colleagues, making snide remarks to customers, and failing to pitch in the way good teammates do," she recalls. Some took to intentionally sabotaging the company, stealing supplies and equipment, padding time reports with hours they hadn't worked, and charging personal items to their expense accounts.

Within months, Porath felt depleted by the nastiness of the [environment](#). "We quickly became husks of our former selves," she says. She eventually left to work for a competitor, but the experience left an indelible mark. After getting a Ph.D. in business administration and another in organizational [management](#), she has devoted the last two decades to studying bad behavior in the [workplace](#). As an associate professor at Georgetown University's business school, she continues to catalogue the acts that can poison the atmosphere in or out of an office, the high costs of toxic behavior to people and organizations, and what it takes to create cultures where everyone can thrive.

Toxic behavior is common in the workplace, says Porath. In part, it grows from selfishness and callousness that can derive in extreme form from certain

character disorders that don't magically recede after hours and are particularly destructive in close interpersonal relationships.

But from mockery to the manipulation known as gaslighting, **toxic behavior is also the product of certain kinds of environments, notably those where [productivity](#) is the only benchmark of success or where mistrust or uncertainty permeates the atmosphere or, especially in close relationships, where insecurity or [anxiety](#) runs high.**

The tenor of the times plays a role as well. Periods of cultural turbulence, volatility, and uncertainty tend to unleash hostile behaviors that play on the fears of others.

Whether it turns up in the conference room or the living room, toxic behavior is identifiable by its jolt. It's destabilizing and has a negative emotional impact out of proportion to any immediately identifiable cause. In a one-two punch it delivers confusion, then the feeling of being deeply discounted and deflated. It steals your energy. Its signature is repeatedly—and repeatedly is important, because anybody can have a bad day—making its targets feel ill at ease without their being able to pinpoint why.

Toxic behavior doesn't just inflict a personal hurt. It assaults systemic well being. It generates [stress](#) and frustration at the crippling devaluation. It is deeply disturbing because, as it destabilizes us, it prompts us to believe, even for a moment, that it reflects how all others see us.

Just being around toxic behavior, to say nothing of being its target, makes people sick, says Porath. Chronic stress is linked to cardiovascular disease, [insomnia](#), depressed immunity, and overeating. Toxic people not only harm others emotionally, they're a threat to [health](#). And when toxic behavior takes hold in an environment, it turns everyone cynical.

The trouble is, it tends to be catching. Like all negative phenomena, it makes an outsize impact on the brain even if only witnessed. No sooner does one worker see a boss berating an underling than that employee finds herself replicating the behavior. **In families, bad behavior can get passed from generation to generation as reliably as hair color.** In personal relationships it is more insidiously woven through bonds of [attachment](#).

Over the past two decades, toxic behavior has been on the rise, fed by cultural upheaval and accompanied by a more general uptick in incivility and rudeness. In a recent issue of *McKinsey Quarterly*, Porath disclosed that nearly half of workers she polled in 1998 reported they were treated rudely at least once a month. By 2016, the number had climbed to 62 percent.

Since 2010, the global communications firm Weber Shandwick has been tracking civility in America and has found it is declining. **In January 2017, a record high number of Americans—69 percent—said they believe the United States has a major civility problem (vs. 65 percent in 2010). A majority cited politicians and the Internet/social media as prime culprits.**

By a 4-to-1 margin, Americans found the 2016 Presidential election especially toxic. [Donald Trump](#) was viewed as uncivil by 72 percent of Americans—including a majority of those who voted for him (53 percent). The level of nastiness in [politics](#) has risen so high, respondents said, that it is now deterring good people from entering public life.

Whether toxic behavior issues from sheer thoughtlessness or pure malice, it has always been part of the human repertoire. However much we find ourselves living in toxic times, it falls to each of us to know how to recognize nastiness and how to deflect it. Handling toxic people may not be easy, but it is vital to your welfare and to the greater good.

A Taxonomy of Toxicity

The boss who gives by taking: "I'd like you to run that big meeting for me. It will give you a chance to show off everything I've taught you."

Or the one who starts scrolling through his [Twitter](#) feed the moment you begin talking.

The friend who exculpates himself with a dig disguised as an apology: "Sorry for being so late to meet you, but I know you don't do anything anyway in the afternoon."

The [sibling](#) who always bursts your balloon: "Mom told me you won a big Atlanta account. You're going to have to get your kids cellphones just so they can remember who you are."

The spouse who parades your faults in front of others only to chide you for being too sensitive when you say it's demeaning.

Or the parent whose dismissiveness makes a child feel invisible and therefore worthless.

One thing for sure about toxic people: Whatever insult, injury, or confusion they've just inflicted is either your fault or a molehill you're making a mountain out of. They never take responsibility for their actions. They may even see themselves as trying to help you out.

These encounters so surreptitiously disable self-worth, however, that you start looking for ways to avoid such brushes with badness and their perpetrators—if only you could; too often, they are fixtures in the realms you inhabit. Still, the stealth quotient of the affront may be the clearest measure of its poison power.



The word *toxic* comes from the Latin word *toxikon*, which means "arrow poison," points out Theo Veldsman, head of Industrial Psychology and People Management at the University of Johannesburg. "In a literal sense, the term means to kill (or poison) in a targeted way."

As sins of commission go, toxic behavior doesn't get much more blatant than bullying. While its inherent [humiliation](#) enduringly stings, especially if incidents occur in the presence of others, so does the brute statement of power difference it reinforces. Intimidation in any form hurts in the moment but carries fear into the future. Frank insults can devastate one's sense of self just as memorably.

Subtler acts also qualify as toxic, especially when regularly deployed. Rumor-mongering is especially pernicious:

You never know what falsehoods are being spread about you and to whom, or who's operating on that false knowledge.

Another relatively subtle [act](#), shifting blame to others, wounds targets as it puts them in a morally untenable spot.

And then there are the sins of omission: excluding teammates from networks or a family member from a gathering. Ignoring a person altogether—in a meeting or social event—can be a toxic way of putting someone down while depriving him or her of important information.

Whether through overt cruelty, [passive aggression](#), or just for the hell of it, toxic people prioritize their self-interest above everyone else's. They refuse—or are unable—to consider another person's perspective or emotional state. Not caring to acknowledge how their behavior affects others, they disregard personal

boundaries, avoid admitting it when they've done wrong, and are unwilling to change.

In researching the impact of toxic individuals in the workplace, Veldsman focuses on toxic leaders. He finds that in many ways they are excellent psychologists. They have sharp eyes not only for their own interests but also for others' insecurities. They know just how to steal the oxygen to undermine colleagues. It's part of the package of survival skills they've honed during their ascent.

Veldsman believes that the number of toxic leaders is growing, courtesy of unfettered individualism; they get a further boost when organizations define competence as technical skills and exclude human values.

Much toxic behavior is situational. Yes, say the experts, there are those who have [personality](#) traits—[paranoia](#), aggression, [narcissism](#), [psychopathy](#), everyday sadism—that incline them to assault others with various forms of negativity. They create havoc wherever they are and with whomever they engage.

And there are some people at the opposite extreme, who know only kindness and compassion. But **the vast majority of people are in the middle, subject to influence by their surroundings. For them, toxic behavior is not automatic; it is something they engage in if the situation encourages it.**



At Work

In 2017, work has a way of bringing out the toxicity in people, says Porath. **Over the past two decades, the nature of work has undergone a transformation. Where once people functioned individually, today standing [teams](#) and project-based collaborations are the norm. As a result, toxic colleagues have more opportunity to create havoc.** And the damage is often measurable—on morale, say, or productivity—which is why research on toxic behavior tends to focus on the work domain. But toxic behavior is much the same wherever it occurs; what happens in the work realm, and why, is applicable to other areas of life.

Porath finds that **toxic behavior arises primarily from the high load of stress many people carry.**

Of the thousands of people she has polled in a variety of companies, "more than 60 percent claim the reason they are uncivil is that they are feeling overwhelmed or stressed," she reports. **She attributes much stress to the generalized rise in global [competition](#) forcing companies to operate tightly, a decline in free time, and what she considers an over-reliance on technology, which enables work to bleed into downtime.**

Technology feeds toxic behavior, too, by creating ample opportunities for misunderstanding and meanness in written communication, she notes: "Put-downs are easier when not delivered face to face."

Further, catching up on email correspondence during a one-on-one conversation or a group meeting, or any form of multitasking, can leave employees (to say nothing of spouses and children) feeling unheard, undervalued, and wanting to strike back. The much-heralded diversity of the workforce has many advantages, but one disadvantage is that **bridging differences—racial, cultural, generational—takes effort, making the entire work atmosphere challenging to negotiate.**

Yet toxic people often thrive in organizations if they have great expertise in a specific area, says Dylan Minor, an assistant professor of Managerial Economics and Decision Sciences at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. In fact, **those with significant skills tend to be overconfident and feel immune to [punishment](#) for bad behavior**; in his studies, overconfidence, along with valuing oneself above others, predicts toxicity.

The thing about toxic behavior in the workplace is that the effects aren't confined to the target; everyone suffers. Minor distinguishes between difficult employees and toxic ones. Both cause harm—but **the behavior of the toxic person spreads to others**. It diffuses rapidly through emotional contagion. "People can catch it without even realizing it," says Porath. That seems to be a basic characteristic of uncivil behavior.

Whether it's initiated by categorically toxic individuals or those whose unpleasant acts are more situationally driven, **toxic behavior can quickly become a fixed way of operating**, says Veldsman. In environments where people observe or regularly serve as the targets of hostility, rudeness, bullying, or other forms of noxiousness, they learn to survive by engaging in the same behavior. They **either infer that that is how to get ahead, or they get the message that such a way of relating to others is the company (or family) norm.**

In a poll Porath conducted, reported in the Harvard Business Review, 80 percent of nearly 800 workers said they lost work time worrying about an instance of workplace hostility, while 63 percent lost time trying to avoid the offender. "The emotional impact

on others in an organization was so outsized that productivity—not to mention employee satisfaction and well-being—was consistently disrupted."

Toxic behavior takes a [cognitive](#) toll, too: "People don't remember as well," reports Porath. "They're not as attentive to information. It decreases [creativity](#) and innovation." As a result, job satisfaction declines, morale evaporates, and engagement in work diminishes.

Spillover begets turnover. Because their behavior is so awful to be around, toxic workers often induce other employees—sometimes a firm's best ones—to leave. No matter how talented toxic employees may be, they wind up bruising the bottom line—the costs of recruiting and training new folks.

Best never to hire a toxic employee: According to a Harvard Business School working paper that Minor recently wrote, for one toxic employee on a team, a company pays \$12,500 in turnover costs—more than a company gains in profit from hiring a supertalent.



Love in a Time of Toxicity

At work, the goal is often to get away from toxic people. But in our private lives, we're more apt to invite them in. That's most likely to happen in the search for love.

Toxic people often have appealing traits, like [confidence](#). The most manipulative among them never reveal their true nature right away; they are likely, instead, to embark on a [charm](#) offensive, conducting a campaign of attention and flattery along with public displays of affection—say, a gaudy bouquet of flowers sent to you at the office, meant to impress your colleagues as much as you—to win the admiration and trust of a prospective partner. They move quickly.

By the time they start exhibiting questionable behavior, like making unreasonable demands, says neuropsychologist Rhonda Freeman, we've grown emotionally attached to them. Once they've snuck into our psyches under the radar, we see them through a distorting lens. We react to their transgressions—lashing out at us in myriad ways, blaming us for their problems, ignoring our needs and requests—by trying to accommodate or justify their bad behavior: "He's under a lot of stress," or "She's really a good person."

We may even take the blame on ourselves: "I'm being too needy," or "She's right; I'm lucky to be in a relationship with her. Who else would put up with me?" Freeman says such a dynamic may particularly entrap those who experienced emotional or physical [abuse](#) by a family member while growing up.

The closer we get to a toxic individual—the more they know about us, the more emotionally attached we grow to them, the more we let them into our lives—the more damage they can do to us. They simply have more information with which to manipulate or violate. Too, says Freeman, once we've bonded to a person, we go to great lengths to avoid the painful feelings of loss associated with detaching.

Intimate partners must always negotiate the fine line between nurturing and controlling. Some of the most damaging behavior in relationships occurs when a partner deliberately, habitually misuses trust to step over the line into controlling the other. **Manipulation is always an abuse of power**, but the collision of one partner's sinister intent with the other's assumption of positive regard can be particularly destabilizing.

One of the most notorious forms of romantic manipulation is love bombing, a dark variant of killing with kindness. First named in the 1970s and deployed to win converts by the Unification Church of Reverend **Sun Myung Moon**, it was defined by the late psychologist Margaret Singer, widely known for her work exposing the tactics of predatory cults. **Bombers—some because of their own insecurities, others due to their exploitative nature—seek to keep their partner to themselves, isolated from friends and family and totally dependent, making themselves the only focus of attention. When the target eventually objects, or the controlling partner tires of the game, devaluation begins. For the bomber, the target is always to blame.**

It may take many cycles of pursuit and devaluation for the target to catch on and move toward ending the relationship. Some people may be especially drawn to love bombers. Those who lack confidence, are uncertain who they are or where they're going in life, or aren't sure they're justified in speaking up may be especially vulnerable to **masquerades of love**. And just as bullies specialize in singling out those who never stand up for themselves, bombers can be especially adept at sniffing out self-doubters.

The most insidious form of manipulation may be gaslighting. It's by no means exclusive to [romantic relationships](#), but the intimate knowledge lovers share makes it potentially the most subversive of toxic behaviors. In destabilizing targets, it undermines their very grip on reality.

Gaslighting, says psychologist Robin Stern, associate director of the Yale Center for [Emotional Intelligence](#) and author of *The [Gaslight Effect](#)*, "is the systematic attempt by one person to erode another's reality—by telling them that what they are experiencing isn't so—and the gradual giving up on the part of the other person." Gaslighting always involves one person who needs to be in control to maintain a sense of self and another "who needs the relationship to maintain a sense of self and is willing to acquiesce."

The term *gaslighting* derives from a 1938 play, *Gaslight*, by Patrick Hamilton, later adapted as a film starring Ingrid Bergman. In it a husband convinces his wife that the footsteps she hears at night (his) and the dimming of the gas lights in the house (his doing while secretly searching for hidden treasure in the attic) are in her imagination.

Those whose partners twist reality for their own [goals](#)—insisting "You're too sensitive" or "You don't have access to the kind of information I have"—come to doubt their own beliefs and perceptions and to see themselves as a bad spouse for even daring to question the partner's [wisdom](#).

Like toxic bosses, gaslighters typically display great confidence in themselves, says Stern. That gives them all the more power in disputing a spouse's judgment. By its very nature, gaslighting invalidates gut instincts that might signal something is awry. To compound the damage, gaslighters—or the effects of their behavior—tend to isolate a partner from people who could help detect the cruelty or fact-check all the warped claims.

Why They Do It

It is unclear whether toxic people are truly aware of what they are doing. They may exhibit flashes of insight into the fact that their behavior is maladaptive, says Freeman. Most often, however, they see other people as the problem.

Some may have frank personality disorders not recognizable as such to most lay people. At a minimum, they have one or more personality traits—intimations of paranoia, narcissism, psychopathy among them—that in more florid form meet the criteria for diagnosis of pathology.

Freeman, who created a web-based educational hub, Neuroinstincts, to help people heal from toxic relationships, contends that perpetrators of toxic behavior lack the skill of

[emotion regulation](#). They are unable to titrate the intensity of their expressiveness to fit a wide range of situations.

Under normal circumstances, emotion regulation keeps people from blowing up when a coworker says something they disagree with, and it allows them to take in criticism from a partner without lashing out or breaking down. It's acquired during early development by exposure to strategies for regulating arousal, especially negative states of arousal. As Freeman puts it, "**emotion regulation allows us to accept accountability for our behavior, feel compassion, and be mature.**"

Deficits in [empathy](#) also play a role. Blunted sensitivity to others' pain especially enables the more overtly hurtful behaviors like bullying and the aggressively manipulative ones like gaslighting.

Studies show that those who meet the criteria for [borderline personality disorder](#)—their emotional instability frequently manifests in [rage](#)-filled outbursts as well as [self-harm](#)—exhibit defects in the [neural](#) circuitry that enables empathy. The same defects make it difficult for them to consider the consequences of their actions.

As with most behaviors, neural circuitry accounts for only part of the problem. Nurture



almost always has a hand in there somewhere. **Much research suggests that [parenting](#) strategies contribute to the hair-trigger reactivity that makes some people lash out. How parents help infants and toddlers manage strong negative feelings directly influences lifetime skills of emotion regulation.**

It remains to be seen whether the already significant uptick in toxic behavior continues into the future. For now, there's more than enough to go around.

Your Psychological HazMat Suit

The surest way to shield yourself from toxic behavior is to severely limit or cut off entirely contact with people who regularly spew it. But that is hardly ever possible or practical. Better to arm yourself with a few basic skills. They all fall squarely in the zone of self-management.

Control your exposure.

The single most important thing you can do is minimize contact. If you work near a toxic person, ask for a rearrangement of desks. Never sit next to a toxic person: It's catching, says Dylan Minor of the Kellogg School of Management.

If you work on a team with a toxic person, ask for reassignment to another project. If that's not possible, ask your boss to consider having the toxic teammate work more often from home, or to at least require fewer group meetings.

If your boss is the toxic person, limit the time you spend with him or her and identify others in your organization who can offer an ear. If nothing at all can be done, start looking for another job. If that's not an option, request to be paired with a different supervisor.

If you have hiring power, learn how to question candidates for signs of emotional competence and lay out norms for behavior at the beginning, says Georgetown's Christine Porath.

If the toxic person is your spouse, or an ex-spouse with whom you share children, you likely need the help of a mental health professional for navigating the relationship, says psychologist Rhonda Freeman.

Manage your reactivity.

Here's where you have the most leverage. Most essentially, says Yale's Robin Stern, **set firm boundaries. Assertively say no to demands that feel unreasonable—without justifying yourself. Have on hand a few good mantras for the moment a toxic individual blames or bullies you: "I'm not going to continue this conversation if you're calling me names," or "I'm happy to discuss this with you when you're calm."** Maintain clarity about toxic encounters by taking notes about how you felt before, during, and after any such interaction, as well as what was said and done by all, Stern advises. Doing so can help you make a case for managerial intervention.

Strengthen ties with friends and others you trust. Especially if the toxic person is a spouse, relationships with people who treat you with respect can buffer you from stress and help balance your perspective. Having your point of view validated can also boost your [self-esteem](#) and counteract isolation.

Find activities that take you away from the toxic person or environment. Join a book club, take a cooking class. You'll also gain a better a sense of who you are in relation to the world.

Don't explain.

Avoid even trying to explain yourself; by definition a toxic person is one who refuses to hear your perspective. Attempts will only frustrate you. Say “I’m sorry but I’m busy then,” or “I can’t do that right now.”

Offer no explanation, no matter how much ranting and raving the other does.

Immunize yourself.

Spot those with toxic potential and avoid them before there are any outbursts. Recognize the personality traits that feed toxicity. The drama queens. Those who are suspicious or notably aggressive. And those who consistently display little regard for the feelings of others.