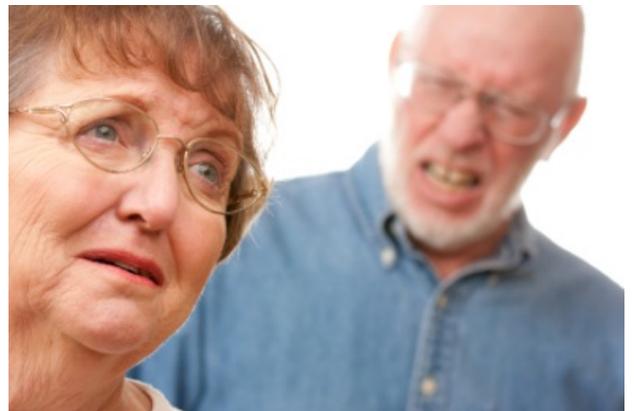




HOW TO HANDLE TOXIC AND CRITICAL PEOPLE

We all have encounters with difficult people who leave us rattled and shaken. A co-worker undermines us in front of our boss; our friend puts us down and says she was “just kidding”; our spouse rages at us and then turns everything around to make us think that it’s our fault.

Most of us would prefer to minimize our contact with people like this, but sometimes it’s just not possible. We may work with them, be married to them, or have some other connection that keeps us in regular contact with toxic individuals. For a long time Christians have been taught to forbear and forgive. While biblical in essence, most of us aren’t exactly sure how to live it out in real life.



We know that Jesus tells us that we’re to love our enemies and pray for those who mistreat us, but actually doing it is much more challenging. The apostle Paul counsels us in these instances not to be overcome with evil, but instead to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). Sometimes it feels like evil is stronger, and we struggle not to let it get the best of us.

I’d like to share with you some specific ways I have found helpful to put these Biblical truths into practice when dealing with a toxic or destructive person.

1. **Press Pause:** As soon as you feel that poisonous dart, take a deep breath and pray for God’s help. The words or behaviors of another person have just knocked you off balance and will infect you with its toxic effects if you don’t quickly apply an antidote.
2. **Don’t panic and overreact or be passive and underreact.** Stay calm and don’t fall for their bait. Try not to take what they have done or said personally (which is very tempting to do). Remember, the way someone treats you, whether it be good or bad, really has nothing to do with you. It is a statement about who they are.

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3. **Ask yourself this question:** What in this present moment do I need to learn (or change) in order to become the person I want to become? Here are a few things I have found I needed when I asked myself this question:

Courage

Humility

Generosity

To speak the truth in love

To set firmer boundaries

Patience

Not to worry so much what others think of me

Let go of my desire to make everyone happy

Not to let this person get the best of me or to make me act crazy

Believe me, it is very tempting in the moment to defend yourself, let yourself be blamed for the problem, be totally intimidated and overcome, or strike back with your own attack. None of those ways will help you move forward with a toxic person. However, God does promise to use these painful moments for our good. Therefore, learn what you can from the painful moment and let go of the rest.

4. **Teach yourself to respond out of the person you want to be rather than how you feel in the moment.** We do this all the time by being responsible and getting out of bed to go to work even when we want to sleep in or getting up in the middle of the night with a sick child even if we don't feel like it.

If you must respond in the moment, speak calmly, truthfully and firmly, especially when you have to set a limit or say "no". Refuse to engage in arguing, defending yourself, or circular conversations that go nowhere.

5. **Practice (and this takes a lot of work) looking at this difficult/destructive person in a different way than you have in the past.** Instead of meditating on his or her faults or sin, look for her goodness, his humanness, or his/her woundedness. When we can see a person in this new way, it's much easier to allow God to fill us with His love and compassion for this pitiful person who would be so blind as to treat us (or anyone) in such a sinful way.

Having this change in perspective doesn't excuse the toxic person or give him or her license to continue to do damage, but it does help us not to judge and empowers us to forgive him/her, even if we can't reconcile the relationship. We can honestly pray God's best for this person and leave him/her in His capable hands.

As believers, we will surely encounter evil, but by practicing these five steps, we can learn to overcome evil's toxic effects in us with good.