



The Art of Loving Unlovable People

12 steps to help you deal with difficult people

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Life is full of people who rub us the wrong way. Whether it's within our family, workplace, church, or community, we've all encountered at least one person who drives us absolutely crazy. Maybe they say sly insults, tell bad jokes, or invade our personal space. Whatever their annoying or hurtful habits are, our spirits are dampened and flustered by their presence in our lives.

As Christians, how do we cope with difficult people? Christ calls us to love selflessly and ceaselessly. So are we just supposed to force a smile and fake a laugh, while inside we're cringing or crying or wanting to flee? How can we possibly be genuine with all these negative emotions broiling just beneath the surface?

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We can't do it on our own. Our broken, sinful hearts aren't capable of scraping together nearly enough love to cover the foibles and flaws of our fellow humans. We occasionally have trouble loving even those who are dearest to us. So often, our feeble, fleeting attempts at love fall flat and our patience runs dry.

The only true source of compassion, strength, and love is God. If we embrace and rely completely on God's love and forgiveness for us, we can then draw from his infinite provision and begin to love others more fervently and sincerely.

I've found that there are 12 key steps we take to help us build greater compassion, empathy, and love for our neighbors—even the ones who have caused us pain, anger, or frustration. It is critical, though, to understand that these tools are best used in the hands of those who have deeply acknowledged their own sin and their need for Christ's grace and direction in their lives.

- 1. Pray for the Holy Spirit's intervention.** If you know you're about to enter into an interaction with a difficult person, appeal to the Holy Spirit for strength, compassion, and patience. Through him, you have the power to represent Christ—even in the most trying of circumstances. Our calling as Christians is difficult, but we don't have to do it alone. Remember that your kindness could portray the gospel to someone who desperately needs it.
- 2. Consult God's Word.** Scripture is a treasure trove of practical advice about how to interact with people. Sometimes we may feel as though the Bible is distant and unrelated to today's culture, but upon closer inspection, we can see that human nature hasn't really changed. The wisdom that the Word provides is still relevant to our lives.

3. **You don't know their whole story.** Knowing the hardships in someone's life can give you an entirely new perspective and understanding of their personality. Dealing out judgment comes so easily to us, especially when we are leveling it at someone who makes our lives miserable. But if we remember that they, too, have felt the sting of injustice, the burden of anxiety, and the ache of emptiness, perhaps we won't be so quick to feel anger and annoyance.
4. **It's always possible to establish common ground.** It's amazing how finding something in common with a person you take issue with can begin to bridge the chasm between you. It could be something as simple as a similar childhood experience, a shared hobby, or a book you both enjoyed. These tiny tendrils of connection may seem meaningless, but they could gradually improve your interactions.

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5. Silence is golden, so think before you speak. Sometimes our words stumble out of our mouths before we have a chance to censor them. It can be easy to lash out in anger or make condescending comments. But words, once they're said, are irreversible and hold incredible weight. Pray for self-control and the wisdom to speak only what is encouraging, considerate, and kind.
6. Don't take yourself too seriously. An important life skill is learning how to laugh at yourself. We can become so caught up in proving a point or keeping our pride intact that we start to forget that we are as human as everyone else. A humble attitude admits to faults and views others as equals instead of inferiors. Carrying out God's work is what should be taken seriously.
7. Be open to criticism—there could be some truth in it. None of us enjoy being criticized, especially when we feel it is undeserved. But even if the criticism is riddled with untruth or mean-spiritedness, it's possible that there could be a grain of truth in it. In order to grow, we must look inward with honest, objective eyes and prayerfully search our motives and actions for faults. Although the process may sting, we will emerge from it stronger and more self-aware.
8. Don't conspire against them with others. There's nothing more tempting than blowing off steam with a group of understanding friends after an encounter with an obnoxious coworker or acquaintance. We want their feedback and sympathy or maybe we just want to talk it out. This is natural and often helpful for our peace of mind. But we must be careful not to indulge in slander or malicious gossip. Venting should be about healing our wounds and being encouraged, not about dragging the offender's name through the mud in order to feel superior to them.
9. Pray for discernment about whether to confront an issue or let it go. It's difficult to know when we should call out an offense or drop it. We don't want to seem upset or ruffled all the time, but we also don't want to bottle up all our frustrations until they erupt. When should we lovingly confront the person about her wrongdoing? Unfortunately, there is usually never a perfectly clear answer to this question. The best thing to do is pray for guidance. If the offender's actions are destroying the relationship or making interaction difficult, it may be time to communicate your feelings in a gentle, considerate manner.

- 10.** Don't go looking for trouble. There can be something oddly satisfying about keeping an account of our enemies' sins. Maybe we sniff out offenses like a bloodhound, looking for more fuel to feed our dislike. By focusing on their dirt, we begin to feel better about our own. But this mentality leaves us bitter and allows no room for grace. Shed the attitude of hypersensitivity and instead adopt one of patience and forgiveness.
- 11.** Remember, they are God's precious creation. Just as you have been created in God's image, so has your intrusive neighbor or your over-bearing boss. God knit them lovingly in the womb, numbered the hairs on their heads, and has guided their footsteps. When we extend love to them despite our differences, we are exhibiting the depth of our love for God.
- 12.** Love because you are loved. Forgive because you have been forgiven. Ephesians 4:32 puts it best: "Be kind to each another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." When you feel the need to hold a grudge or keep your love from someone, remember the abundance of grace that is available to you through Jesus, despite your great sin. He is the reason we can each love deeply, joyfully, and freely.

Who are the people in your life who are the most difficult to interact with? Christ has taught us to not only outwardly treat them with kindness and respect, but to also view them through his eyes—with understanding and compassion. His example and transforming power in our lives will equip us to go out and love as he loved.