

Dealing with Toxic People

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Day One

How often do you say something like: “It’s driving me crazy”? Or “He’s driving me crazy”? It’s a way of expressing frustration and impatience with something or someone. And usually it is someone—that person who is getting on your very last nerve! I want to talk about dealing with toxic people—especially coworkers—who are “driving you crazy!”

Someone has said relationships are the sandpaper of our lives, and you would probably agree with that—right? When you are dealing with a relationship you wouldn’t necessarily choose—like a coworker—and when that person’s continual behavior is harmful and disruptive, you can feel like you’re losing it—or as we say, you’re going crazy.

This is one area where your light for Jesus should shine, because as a Christ-follower you and I have Holy Spirit power to give us the ability to deal with toxic people appropriately. I want to share some biblical principles to help you deal with your toxic coworkers.

First let’s define a toxic person. Toxic means poisonous, dangerous, harmful, and persistent. A toxic person is one who can poison an atmosphere, and their actions and words are harmful and repetitive. Toxic people don’t just have a once-in-awhile bad day but recurring unhealthy and hurtful behavior. Here are some signs a person is toxic:

- They talk more than they listen.
- They are always right—never admit to being wrong.
- They are drama queens or kings—drama seems to follow them everywhere.
- They often lack tact and general courtesy.
- They often lie to make themselves look good or to get what they want.
- They exhibit controlling behaviors.
- They love to talk about other people—to gossip.
- They are, in general, very negative people.

Here’s the first thing I want to remind you as we talk about dealing with toxic people. They are people God loves just as much as he loves you. I remember long ago when I worked for a boss who was anything but pleasant; I just found it hard to even be around him. But I remember clearly one day when the thought came to me, no doubt from the Holy Spirit, that God loved him just as much as he loves me. I had to sit down and think about it. How could God love someone so unlovable? But it’s true, because God is love. He loves the toxic person in your life just as much as he loves you.

Step one is to ask God to help you see a toxic person the way God sees them.

Day Two

Are toxic coworkers driving you crazy? These are people you are forced to be with daily, and their habits or attitudes are driving you—well, crazy!

What are some characteristics of toxic people? Basically, they are people who somehow poison the atmosphere around them with their attitudes and behavior. As Christians dealing with toxic people, our first challenge is to remember God loves the person just as much as he loves you. See them through God's eyes.

The second important thing to remember is the person is not in your life by accident. God is allowing it—not approving of their behavior, mind you—but allowing the person in your life for some good reason. It could be to help you grow in grace as you deal with them. It could be for the good influence you could have on them. It could be both. But trust me, God has a good reason(s) for the person being in your life.

We are told in Scripture: *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone* (Romans 12:18). That's our assignment for dealing with toxic people. Others may live by more commonly accepted relationship principles, such as, look out for number one! Don't take any guff! Stand up for your rights! They may not be motivated to live at peace with everyone, but we are called to this Christ-like objective. It is a lofty one; it is often out of step with the world's wisdom; it is often not appreciated or valued by others. But as disciples of Jesus Christ, it is our guiding principle.

Let me assure you when you can respond to toxic people with more patience, more kindness and less anger than others, you are demonstrating the love of Jesus, and it won't be missed. Your coworkers may not believe in God, they may never go to church, they may even think you are some kind of religious fanatic, but they cannot escape the difference in the way you respond to toxic people, when you allow God's Spirit to empower you to respond like Jesus would.

Keep these two things in mind, namely God loves them as much as he loves you, and no one is in your life by accident. God has a purpose for allowing that person in your life.

Day Three

I can remember times when I worked with or for someone who was toxic. I think of one man who was never pleasant, always complaining and demanding, had no encouraging words ever, and truly poisoned the atmosphere in the room when he entered. Do you have a coworker like this?

I'm specifically looking at how Jesus would want you and me to respond and interact with the toxic people in our lives. I think the first challenge is to get your own attitude and reactions to toxic people under control. Learn to do some things that will keep you from—as we say—going crazy. Here is the first and most important thing you can do to protect yourself when you're dealing with a truly toxic person.

1. Don't let your thoughts and your mind dwell on them all the time.

When dealing with such a disruptive and irritating person—on a regular basis, no less—it's very natural to let their behavior occupy your mind and your thoughts way too much. You dread going to work because you'll have to deal with them. You fume all the way home because you had to deal with them. They can occupy way too much of your thought life. You need to firmly and swiftly boot the person out of your head. Refuse to let them take over your mind. Philippians 4 tells us to think about things that are lovely, pure, noble—and that pretty much excludes a toxic person. Stop giving them time in your mind.

And how do you do that? You do it by replacing thoughts of them with good thoughts, thankfulness, reciting your blessings, and focusing on God's goodness. That's what it means to bring every thought into captivity and make it obedient to Christ, as we read in 2 Corinthians 10:5. This spiritual discipline will make a huge difference in your life. If you have not already discovered this truth and learned how to take wrong thoughts captive, I recommend a book I've written on it, entitled *Think About What You Think About*.

As you head out to work each day, pray the Holy Spirit will remind you to boot those wrong thoughts out of your mind, to help you refuse to allow toxic people to occupy your thoughts in a negative and upsetting way. That is a very important first step.

Day Four

For many years, I've been sharing the privilege and importance you have as a Christian in the marketplace to *let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven*, as Jesus told us in Matthew 5:16. In all those years, one issue surfaces most frequently—dealing with people. As Charlie Brown said, “I love mankind; it's people I can't stand!” I'm examining dealing with people who are particularly toxic, spreading their poison where you work.

You must intentionally purpose not to let toxic people occupy any more of your thought life than absolutely necessary. Here's another practical suggestion:

2. Distance yourself from them as much as possible.

You've heard a lot about setting boundaries, I'm sure. The Bible teaches us to set boundaries. For example, these two passages from Proverbs:

Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evildoers. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go on your way (Proverbs 4:14-15).

The highway of the upright avoids evil; those who guard their ways preserve their lives (Proverbs 16:17).

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7).

You must be wise about distancing yourself from people who would fill your mind with evil and try to bring you down emotionally. You may not be able to distance yourself from a toxic person physically, if they are a coworker, but you can learn to distance yourself mentally and emotionally. Pray each day that God will protect your mind and teach you how to literally tune them out when you can. If you can wear headphones where you work use them as a buffer between you and a toxic person. Even if you don't listen to anything, just wearing headphones creates some distance.

You have two options: You can gripe and complain about them, letting them bring you down to their level, or you can determine by God's grace, to take whatever steps are necessary to respond appropriately and in Christ-like ways to toxic, difficult people. God loves them as much as he loves you, and no one is in your life by accident.

Day Five

Are toxic coworkers driving you crazy? First, just remember workplaces will be workplaces—people will be people. In most workplaces, you have a lot of different personalities thrown into one cauldron during working hours. Drama, power struggles, office politics, and other unpleasant things are going to happen, at least to some extent. It's not that you just settle for these types of situations, but you shouldn't be shocked to discover that in a sin-infected world, we must deal with toxic people.

In Philip Yancey's book, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, he advises it is easier to act your way into feelings than to feel your way into actions. In other words, do what you know is right to do and let the feelings follow, if they will. If you wait on your feelings to kick in before you do what you know you

should do—especially when it comes to dealing with difficult people—you’ll be in wait mode many days, if you’re like me!

John wrote:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him (1 John 4:16b).

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:18).

This kind of love is an action, not a feeling. It is a decision not a desire. Sometimes the feelings are present; sometimes they are not. Either way, if we live in God, we must live in love.

One of the greatest indications that we truly “live in God” and are new creations in Christ Jesus is our willingness to extend this God-love to people who would have no claim on our love otherwise. After all, these toxic coworkers can’t expect you to love them, can they? It’s not in your job description and no one can demand it from you.

Therefore, when you choose to love in actions and truth, you show a loveless world a sample of what Jesus is like. You become the love of God reaching out to them, unconditional love, which cannot be explained or ignored. It is powerful in its implications and effects on the relationships of our lives.

One small verse in 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us *love never fails*. When nothing else works, try love. When there seems to be no way to improve a relationship, try love. Love never fails.