Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

# Establishing boundaries with difficult people

While most of our social interactions go off without a hitch, finding yourself in a situation with someone who shows blatant disrespect for personal boundaries and common courtesy can be a truly off-putting or even frightening experience.



The ability to first recognize and then effectively deal with difficult people is a highly specialized skill. Developing this kind of understanding can really help you to better understand, and work more effectively with others.

**Tips and tools you can use**

Hostile, aggressive people can be very intimidating. They infringe on personal boundaries, with intent on bullying their way into control. Here are three common types of hostile or aggressive people, and strategies for dealing effectively with each:

| The type | Typical behaviours | Strategies for effective communication |
|---|---|---|
| **The Sherman Tank** | This type comes out charging and abusive. They can come across as abrupt, intimidating and overwhelming. "The Tank" often attacks individual behaviours and personal characteristics. | • Give them a little time to run down.<br>• Don't worry about being polite; get in any way you can.<br>• Get their attention, calling them by name, or deliberately sitting or standing.<br>• Maintain eye contact.<br>• Ask "the Tank" to sit |

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| | | down—this can help a "Tank" to focus and to give up some control.<br>• State your own opinions forcefully.<br>• Don't argue with what the other person is saying or try to cut them down.<br>• Be ready to be friendly. |
| **The Sniper** | The sniper uses a more covert approach, attacking with pot shots, innuendo, and non-playful teasing under the guise of friendliness. "The Sniper" may use social constraints to create a protected place from which to strike. | • Smoke them out. Don't let social convention stop you.<br>• Provide them with an alternative to a direct contest.<br>• Don't focus on their point of view.<br>• Do move on, and try to resolve the issue.<br>• Prevent sniping by setting up regular problem-solving meetings.<br>• If you are witness to a sniping situation, stay out of |

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| | | it, but insist that it stop in front of you. |
| **The Exploder** | Characterized by tantrums and irate attacks, the exploder is barely under control, and often feels physically or psychologically threatened. "The Sniper" is likely to show anger followed by blame or suspicion. | • Give them time to run them down on their own.<br>• If they don't run down, cut into the tantrum with a neutral phrase, such as "Stop!"<br>• Show them that you take them seriously.<br>• If possible, take a breather. Take them aside for a private dialogue. Seek out the true reasons for the aggressive behaviour. |

Remember that the first step in dealing with difficult people is to develop control of the one person that you can control—yourself. Be sure to:

- Identify, understand, and counteract boundary violations.
- Recognize that people can encourage difficult behaviour in others.
- Control your own emotions and respond with a level head to avoid reciprocating problematic behaviour.
- Calmly communicate how someone’s inappropriate behaviour affects you.
- Move discussions from discord to mutual agreement.
- Where needed, enlist another person to help enforce your boundaries.

By recognizing the methods they use, you can better understand how to deal with them in a productive manner, and maintain your personal boundaries with integrity.