

Empathy for your Adversary

(Particularly useful for family holiday get-togethers)

Read the article below, focusing mainly on strategy #3 - Give up on trying to fix him or her, which includes the practice of empathy.

1

Identify a person who just rubs you the wrong way, or elicits negative emotions in you. Explore why this is in at least two paragraphs. Perhaps this person seems preoccupied with him/herself, has a different social attitude or spiritual practice, has difficulties listening to you, reminds you of a problematic past, you already have biases or assumptions toward this person, they elicit a fight or flight response in you, produces anxiety or anger in you.

2

Practice empathy with this person. Explain how you practiced empathy with this person in at least two paragraphs. See article below for advice and these ideas from Manassis (2017): try thinking about this person as a human being, someone's son or daughter, recognize that your understanding of others is imperfect, recognize your own cognitive biases, go to your happy place (i.e., what strategy of mindfulness or calming can help you deal with this person), try to connect with or relate to this person on some level.



Three Easy Strategies for Dealing with Difficult Relatives

How does your family know how to push your buttons? Because they installed them. Here's how to take stress out of the holidays.

BY CHRISTINE CARTER | DECEMBER 18, 2014



“I had a great teacher in India who said to me, ‘If you think you’re spiritual and evolved and enlightened, go home for Christmas.’”
—Elizabeth Gilbert

When I was little, I had a controversial grandmother. She was the woman my grandfather remarried after my father’s mom’s premature death. We pretty much only saw her twice a year: once for a family reunion, and once for a Christmas party. I adored her (except that she always smelled like cigarettes and had a lot of rules). But my parents and aunt and uncle were very tense around her.

Fights rarely broke out at the parties—I think my grandma was too dignified for that—but I do remember a lot of stress surrounding this difficult person in our lives. She knew how to push people’s buttons.

Do you have someone difficult to deal with this holiday season? Here are three strategies that work well for me.

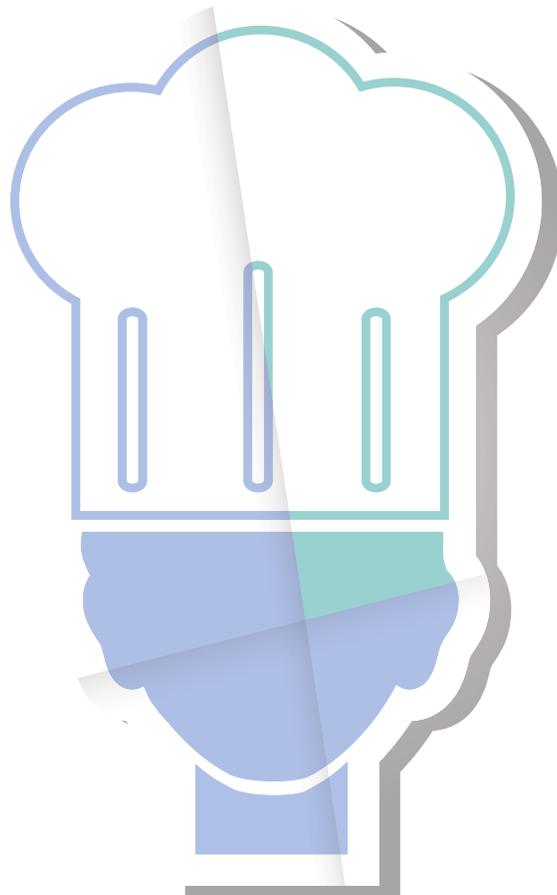
1

Make sure the difficult person has a job to do, and then let them do it their own way.

Things were always better when my grandma had a job in the kitchen. For a lot of people, conflict is born from an unfulfilled desire to feel useful and to be a part of something larger than themselves. Start by giving the difficult person a way to focus on something besides themselves.

Tip:

When you ask someone for his or her help, provide a rationale—any rationale—for the favor. One study showed that the word “because” tends to trigger automatic compliance. For instance, you might say brightly, “It would be great if you could peel the carrots, because we need the carrots peeled for dinner.” As bizarrely repetitive as that may sound, it should work better than, “Would you peel the carrots for me?”



2

Take care of your own needs first

This one is about taking precautions to keep yourself balanced and prevent your fight-or-flight response from kicking in. It's harder to regulate your emotions when you're tired, for example, so if you're at a party with the difficult person and you start to feel spent, consider leaving early, lest you get sucked into a confrontation. You might risk insulting your host, but that's generally better than ruining the party by making a scene.

Similarly, research shows that keeping your blood sugar stable will make you less aggressive if you get angry, so don't skip a meal if you are headed into a difficult situation. If you need to leave the room and do some deep breathing, do it—even if the difficult person needs you to talk about politics right now. If we can stay calm, we are more likely to engage the brain circuits that make us better problem-solvers in challenging situations. (Also, we have more fun.)

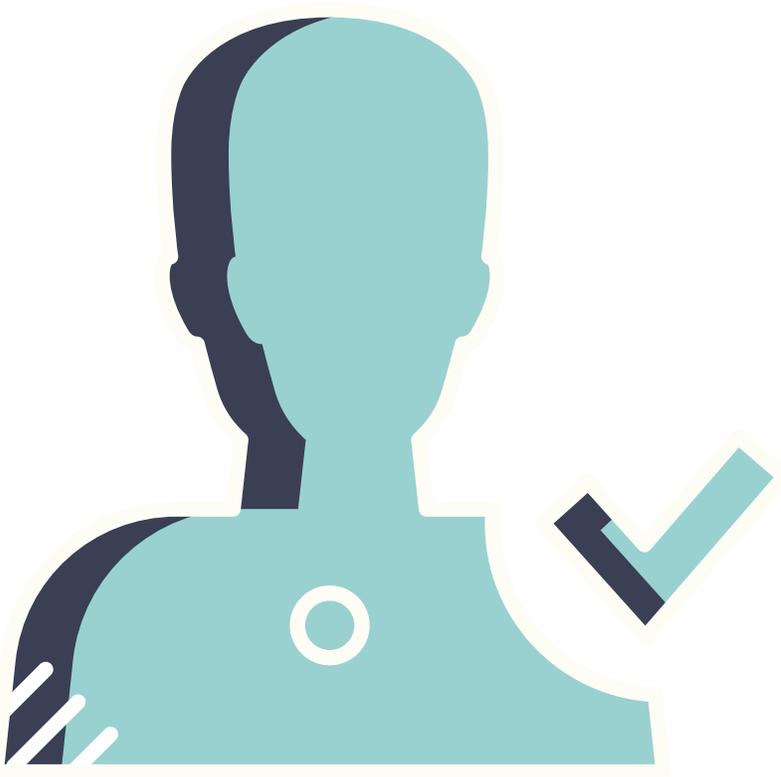
Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson's advice can help us take this even further:

Also see how taking care of yourself has good ripple effects for others. Deliberately do a small thing that feeds you—a little rest, some exercise, some time for yourself—and then notice how this affects your relationships. Notice how healthy boundaries in relationships helps prevent you from getting used up or angry and eventually needing to withdraw.

The exception: When our "need" is to be right. Often we feel a strong desire to show the difficult person the error in his or her ways. But this won't make the situation easier, and it won't make us feel better in the long run. Find a different (and more positive) way to feel powerful; for example, turn your attention to helping someone in need, perhaps even the difficult person him- or herself.

3

Give up on trying to fix him or her



This means accepting the difficult person for who he or she is, including the discomfort (or even pain) that they are creating.

Practicing this sort of acceptance is about dropping the fantasy of how we think things ought to be. You might have a fantasy of a sweet, close relationship with your daughter-in-law, for example, and so you feel angry and disappointed every time she does something that doesn't live up to this fantasy.

But be aware that she likely feels your disappointment, and feels judged. She knows you are trying to change or “fix” her, and that doesn't feel good—it hurts her, in fact, and hurting someone, however unintentionally, does not make her easier to deal with.

An alternate approach is one of empathy. Rather than judging what the person does or says, just try to listen and understand where he or she is coming from. This doesn't mean that you need to agree with the person, just that you're showing him or her a basic level of respect as a human being. Research suggests that engaging with a person this way—acknowledging his or her point of view without judging it—can make him or her feel more understood... and, as a result, less defensive or difficult.

Here's how to practice acceptance and empathy:

Take a deep breath. Look at the difficult person with kindness and compassion, and say to yourself, I see you, and I see that you are suffering. I accept that you are anxious and scared, even if I don't understand why. I accept that you are making all of us anxious, too. I accept that your trouble has become my trouble for the time being. When we acknowledge and accept difficulty as something that just is, we let go of the resistance that creates stress and tension. There is a lot of truth to the adage that, "What we resist, persists."

When this person is speaking, try not to interrupt with counter-arguments or even with attempts to try to get him or her to see things from a different, perhaps more positive point of view. Instead, try to paraphrase back to the person the points you think he or she is making, and acknowledge the emotions he or she seems to be expressing. For instance, if he seems ticked off about something, you might say, "It sounds like that really makes you angry." In this way, you let them know that their experience matters. We are all just looking for love and approval. This holiday season, the greatest gift we can give a difficult person—and ourselves—is to accept them fully, with love.

