



Mark Goulston, MD

## WHAT TO SAY TO A JERK

### The one word that will stop him in his tracks...and other tricks to get toxic people out of your life

Communication is challenging enough with the “normal” people in your life—the ones who want to cooperate and make life better for everyone. When you are forced to deal with jerks—people who don’t care about social give-and-take—communication can seem next to impossible, leaving you drained and upset.

Jerks tend to trigger powerful negative emotional reactions that take a long time to recover from and that interfere with clear thinking.

As a psychiatrist, I refer to jerks as “toxic people.”

If being around a toxic person is having a destructive effect on your physical or emotional health, you may need to get that person out of your life completely. But in many cases, you can “neutralize” the negative effect that a toxic person has on you. *Here, simple ways to do it...*

**Recognize when a person is toxic.** Everyone can be uncooperative and selfish some of the time—and the techniques in this article can work during those times. But a toxic person is different from a person who is just having a bad day.

Toxic people have a distinctive view of life. They perceive the world as having cheated them out of something or as owing them something. Nothing good that happens to them changes that perception for long.

### 8 SIGNS OF A JERK

#### A toxic person...

1. Interrupts.
2. Doesn’t take turns.
3. Takes advantage of people who are down.
4. Gloats in victory.
5. Is sullen in defeat.
6. Is not fair.
7. Lacks integrity.
8. Is the kind of person you’ll avoid if you possibly can.

In contrast to healthy people, who feel entitled to what they deserve...and neurotics, who do not feel entitled to what they deserve... toxic people feel entitled to what they *don’t* deserve. They do not play by the usual rules of getting along with others. They feel justified in taking, with no compulsion to give.

This belief system reveals itself in different ways for different types of toxic people. A toxic bully may aggressively push others around to get his/her way, whereas a toxically needy person may feel entitled to have his hand held constantly or insist that other people fight his battles. Bullies scream and demand.

Toxically needy people whine and complain.

**Adjust your expectations.** We expect people to behave reasonably, and the shock that we feel when toxic people do not do so can be quite painful.

Toxic people sometimes may appear to be caring and cooperative. This behavior will last only until they get what they want. Don’t be fooled into thinking that they have changed.

In addition, the strategies that usually work with nontoxic people—such as empathizing or appealing to fairness—do not work with toxic people.

Once you have identified a person as toxic, your smartest move is to protect yourself from being blindsided. Expect the person to act solely in his own interests even when he appears to be kind and caring.

**Hold part of yourself back.** Toxic people get what they want by pushing others off balance. They do so by acting in ways that trigger rage, fear, guilt and other strong emotions in others. Remind yourself not to get emotionally engaged. This is their issue, not yours.

**Helpful:** Pause before responding. No matter what the toxic person says or does, make a practice of waiting several seconds or more before you reply. Stay calm.

The longer you wait before responding, the more the toxic person

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may escalate his behavior. For example, he may get even angrier or whine even more. But the behavior is less likely to upset you, because you are keeping your emotional distance.

#### WHAT TO SAY TO A JERK

Three good responses to nearly every type of toxic person...

**“Huh?”** This one word can stop a jerk in his tracks. Use a mild, neutral tone of voice. Do this when the toxic person says something utterly ridiculous but acts as if he is being perfectly reasonable. This response conveys that what the toxic person is saying doesn’t make sense. It works because it signals that you are not engaging with the content of what he said.

**“Do you really believe what you just said?”** Use a calm, straightforward tone, not a confrontational one. This question works because toxic people often resort to hyperbole to throw others off balance. They are prone to using the words “always” and “never” to drive home their points. However, don’t expect the toxic person to admit that he is wrong. He is more likely to walk away in a huff—which is fine because then you won’t have to waste more energy dealing with him.

**“I can see how this is good for you. Tell me how it’s good for me.”** This response is a useful way to deal with a toxic person’s demands. If he stalls or changes the subject, you can say, “Since it’s not clear how this is good for me, I’m going to have to say no.”

Here are other responses to specific types of toxic people...

#### BYE TO BULLIES

A bully gets what he wants by scaring other people. Even when he is behaving himself, his presence

triggers fear because you never know when he will explode.

What to do...

**Disengage:** Most bullies use words and tone of voice as their weapons. Say silently to yourself, *This person is not going to physically harm me.* Picture his words as rubber bullets that, instead of hitting you between the eyes, zoom over your shoulder. **Caution:** If there is any possibility that the person may be physically violent, leave at once.

**Respond:** Take a deep breath, and say out loud, “Ah, geez, this is going to be a long conversation” or “You gotta be kidding” (said mockingly to show that the bully hasn’t scared or offended you).

Whatever the bully’s reaction—whether he demands an explanation or continues to attack—you can calmly say, “You’re upset, I’m starting to shut down, and before we get to anything constructive, the sun is going to set, and then we’re going to have to start all over again tomorrow because I don’t see us reaching any conclusion.”

If he keeps pushing and says, “I am not upset—you’re just not listening,” you say, “Nah, forget it, it’s gone, gone...the opportunity even to get into a conversation is gone, finito, flew the coop.” The bully eventually will give up.

You can repeat this approach the next time. If the bully says, “Don’t try that with me again,” you just say, “Sorry, I find this exhausting, and I need to preserve my energy. If you can figure out a way to talk with me instead of at me, I’m willing. Until then, count me out.” Then walk away—which will be easy once you let go of the expectation that you will ever reach a win-win solution with this person.

#### NEUTRALIZE NEEDY PEOPLE

Unlike people who have a healthy need for others, toxically needy people expect constant help and attention and often use guilt to get it. No matter how much you do for them, it is never enough. They act like victims, suck you dry and leave you feeling depressed and incompetent because nothing ever gets better for them.

What to do...

**Disengage:** Imagine that the needy person has a hook that he is trying to snag you with, but the hook has missed you.

**Respond:** A needy person might say in a nails-on-a-chalkboard voice, “It’s not fair.” Pause and calmly but firmly say, “It is completely fair to everyone that it affects.”

#### GIVE IT TO TAKERS

The taker constantly asks you for favors but never seems to have the time or energy to pitch in when you need help. Whereas needy people make you feel as if they are sucking you dry, takers make you feel as if they are grabbing at you.

What to do...

**Disengage:** Picture the taker as a child grabbing at you to get your attention. Imagine yourself calmly tapping him on the wrist and saying, “Now, now, wait your turn.”

**Respond:** Make a mental list of ways the taker could help you. The next time he asks for a favor say, “Sure! And you can help me out by...” If he balks, say, “I assume you don’t mind doing a favor for me in return, right?”

Insist on a quid pro quo each time, and the taker will soon move on to an easier target. ■■■■