

Loving Hard-to-Love People



Tools for serving difficult people.

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Ministering to “The Black Sheep”

The tightrope walk of love and correction.

by *Bonnie McMaken*

Do you know the old colloquialism, “There’s one in every family”? Traditionally this is referring to the “black sheep” of the clan; that kooky uncle who never quite grew up; the sister with too many cats. However, this phrase can be applied—and usually more often than we’d like—to a variety of contexts: “There’s one in every office.” “There’s one on every team.” “There’s one in every church.” It’s that personality everyone knows...and everyone avoids.

Maybe for you, that difficult person is someone who has become calloused and a little rough around the edges. Or maybe it’s a cynical person in your workplace. Or a person who talks too much in the Bible Study you’re leading. Or maybe—quite simply—it’s just someone who is really obnoxious to you.

Whatever the manifestation of their difficult personalities, loving these persons is often a challenging task. They test our patience, faith, and boundaries. We come face-to-face with our own limitations as ministers of the gospel. It is liberating, then, to realize we don’t have to love them as a display of our own capability. We love instead with Christ’s love flowing through us. Do you ever wonder why the church seems to be a hotbed for these people? I think they come





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because they are looking for something only Jesus can give.

Even as we seek to minister with the love of Christ, of course, it is important we set boundaries with hard to love people. They can be draining on our time and energy and sometimes, they can even be manipulative. We hold both these truths in tension as we seek to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18).

This packet is helpful for that specific purpose. It will give you wisdom for loving difficult people in your congregation, small group, ministry team, or workplace. The articles found in this resource have been written by leaders who have seen the many sides of ministry and have found that tricky balance between ministering unconditionally and setting clear boundaries when necessary. I hope this will help you understand this issue more deeply as you continue to lead and love as Christ did.

Peace of Christ,

Bonnie McMaken

Contributing Editor, Gifted For Leadership

Christianity Today International

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BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Coping with People Who Beef, Bite, and Bellyache



How to handle difficult relationships in your small group.

by Dr. Les Parrott

As kids, it never occurred to us to “work” on any of our relationships. They just happened. And if for any reason they didn’t, we jumped ship. No fuss, no muss.

But somewhere along the line, each of us entered the fray of mature relationships—and things got dicey. We learned that some people were more difficult, if not impossible, to get along with. We learned that trusted friends could betray us. Authority figures we admired could snub us. A colleague’s constant criticism could hurt us. And even family members with important information could leave us out of the loop. But we also learned that, unless we wanted to be hermits, we couldn’t abandon every relationship that hits a snag. That’s the rub with difficult people—we sink or swim together, especially in a small group.

A pioneering band of researchers has studied the age-old mystery of what makes people happy, in a general sense. Their answer is not what you might expect. What comes up consistently at the top of the charts is not success, good looks, or any of those enviable assets. The clear winner is relationships. Close ones—the kind of relationships that small groups engender.

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But such research raises an interesting question: If relationships make us so happy, why do so many of them make life so difficult? And more importantly, what can we do to keep our cool, stand our ground, and reach positive solutions when we find ourselves in a group with high-maintenance relationships?

Defining the Issue

About 40 years ago, William Schutz was requested by the U. S. Navy to construct an instrument that would help them assemble compatible submarine crews—groups of men who could live together, elbow to elbow, for extended periods of time with minimum conflict. Schutz determined that compatible behavior was determined primarily by “natural fit.” In other words, people who get along well with each other do so without much effort. Their relationship doesn’t require much work; you could say it is low-maintenance.

Hopefully, you have a few low-maintenance members in your small group—people with whom you naturally fit. Sure, you may hit temporary turbulence together from time to time, but it’s periodic and the relationship stays on course. If you are like most people, however, you also have some small-group relationships that aren’t so easy. These are the impossible people who beef, bite, and bellyache. They give you the cold shoulder, require special attention, play the victim, dominate the group, or trample other people’s feelings.

So, you may wonder, are we simply left to wallow in the misery they create? Hardly.

After combing libraries, listening to small-group leaders, and surveying dozens of small-group members, I have concluded that it is possible to make most high-maintenance relationships much better—in many cases, better than you could even imagine. Scripture not only says, “If it be possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18), it also promises that when we work at turning from our self-centered ways to building up our relationships, we “flourish like a palm tree ... like a cedar of Lebanon” (Psalm 92:12). The effort you exert to improve a difficult relationship is almost always rewarded with new vitality for you and your group.

Maybe you are free from passive-aggressive group members, or members that are highly critical or controlling. Or maybe you’ve never encountered any other descriptions that fall under “difficult people” in a small group. If so, read no further. Consider yourself

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lucky, and extremely rare. But if you are like most group members dealing with difficult people, I offer the following key suggestions.

Don't Let a Difficult Person Determine Your Mood

When Thomas Jefferson included “the pursuit of happiness” among our inalienable rights, he pinpointed an idea that is important for all of us wanting to live with inward joy: people will interfere with our inalienable right to be happy if we allow them to.

I participated in a small group some time ago, and my friend who was leading it gave some materials to a very sullen group member. As he did so, he politely thanked the man with a sour disposition for being there. The man, however, did not even acknowledge it. Afterwards, I asked my friend about it. “A sullen fellow, isn't he?” I commented as we walked away. “Oh, he's that way every time we meet,” shrugged my friend. “Then why do you continue being so polite to him?” I asked. My friend replied, “Why should I let him determine how I'm going to act?”

What an insight! But what really impressed me was that my friend was practicing it. To know that others don't control our moods is one thing, but to actually live this out is quite another. So practice this lesson every chance you get with a high-maintenance person in your group. If you do, it will soon become a habit.

Set Your Boundaries

As a kid, I was the ball-boy for a soccer team at the college where my father worked. I ran back and forth along the sideline ready to retrieve a ball that went out of bounds. Of course, when it did, the action on the field stopped. The same is true when you learn to set boundaries with difficult people. Since your small group has no referees to blow the whistle or coaches to call a time-out, you become responsible for saying “foul” or “that was out of bounds.” You alone manage the game.

So set some boundaries with the high-maintenance people in your group. Set limits on what is acceptable behavior for you. Decide what you want, be specific, and let the person know the rules. When he or she steps out of bounds, blow the whistle and call a time out before you resume play as a group together (or if more appropriate, after the group dismisses for the evening).





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Guard Against Infection

Warning: the negativism virus is highly contagious. Just like the flu, negativism can unwittingly be transmitted throughout a small group. Think of it this way: When someone honks insistently on the highway, does your ire rise to match theirs? No word has been spoken, but if you are like most people, you catch the driver's negativity.

The point is that when we are around a negative person, we become negative, too. We cut down other people's ideas and make cynical statements. Once infected, it becomes a way of relating. It becomes our membership-dues to acceptance.

So the goal for you as a small-group leader is to be objective and observe the person's negative feelings without getting infected by them. Paul gives us the best protection against negativism when he says, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

Recognize the Chemistry Between You

Everybody is somebody's impossible person some of the time. But rarely is somebody everyone's impossible person all of the time. Oh, there are those few annoying exceptions that make it their mission to complicate everyone's existence—you can usually detect them when the mere mention of their presence elicits a resounding "Oh no!" from a group of people. But, thankfully, they are rare.

That's why a good rule of thumb is to remember that the difficulty you experience with most impossible people is in your relationship, not in the person. After all, someone you like very much might get along just fine with someone else in the group that you can barely bare. Impossibility, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

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Thought Provokers

- *How do you allow behaviors and attitudes of others to influence your behavior and attitude? What steps can you take to avoid that in the future?*
- *Are there any individuals in your life who don't sense boundaries you have set for your relationship? How can you lovingly and firmly help them understand those boundaries?*

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How To

Identifying Critical People

Spotting people with critical attitudes can lessen the damage they cause.

by *Marshall Shelley*

Getting along with people is an essential part of any ministry. But when relationships are vandalized by critical people, also referred to here as “dragons,” the result can be hurt feelings and discord in the body. Here is a list of some of the most common dragons found in most congregations to help you identify them early.

1. **The Bird Dog.** The Bird Dog loves to be the church leader’s eyes, ears, and nose, sniffing out items for attention. “If I were you, I’d give Mrs. Greenlee a call. She has some marital problems you need to confront.” Of particular bother is the Superspiritual Bird Dog. This purebred strain is more likely to point out things that always leave the leader feeling defensive and not quite spiritual. “The Lord has laid on my heart that we need to be praying more for renewal.” Who could argue otherwise? These people like to give the impression that they have more spiritual perception than anyone else.
2. **The Wet Blanket.** These people have a negative disposition that’s contagious. They spread gloom, erase excitement, and bog down the ministry. Their motto: “Nothing ventured, nothing lost.”

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3. **The Entrepreneur.** Just the opposite of the Wet Blanket, the Entrepreneur is enthusiastic. He's the first to greet visitors at the church and invite them to his home. Unfortunately, in addition to being enthusiastic about the church, he's equally eager to sell them vitamins, bee pollen, or car wax.
4. **Captain Bluster.** This is the person who comes from the union steward school of diplomacy and speaks with an exclamation point instead of a period. He (or she) is right, and everyone else is wrong, and he doesn't mind saying in the middle of a church business meeting, "I don't like what you said."
5. **The Fickle Financier.** This person uses money to register approval or disapproval of church decisions. Sometimes he protests silently by merely withholding offerings.
6. **The Busybody.** This describes one who enjoys telling others how to do their jobs.
7. **The Sniper.** This is a person who avoids face-to-face conflict but picks off church leaders with potshots in private conversation, such as the cryptic "Be sure and pray for our pastor. He has some problems, you know."
8. **The Bookkeeper.** This is one who keeps written records of everything a church leader does that "isn't in the spirit of Christ."
9. **The Merchant of Muck.** These people breed dissatisfaction by attracting others who are more than willing to listen to, and elaborate on, things that are wrong in the church.

The distinguishing characteristic of a dragon is not what is said but how it's said. Even though these people are well intentioned, sincerely doing what's best in their own eyes, they aren't quite with you. Often they have a spirit that enjoys being an adversary rather than an ally. They have a consistent pattern of focusing on a narrow special interest rather than the big picture, which leads to tangents rather than a balanced church life.

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Thought Provokers

- *Where do you see these specific personalities in your ministry? How can you recognize when people are well-intentioned and have a constructive criticism or when they “have a spirit that enjoys being an adversary rather than an ally”? How would you respond differently to each?*
- *1 Peter 4:8-9 says, “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” What does this passage tell us about our primary objective in ministry? How does this change your perspective on truly loving—and not simply dealing with—difficult people in your ministry?*

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PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

When a Group Member Is Emotionally Troubled

Professional advice for ministering to wounded people in a group setting.

by Pat J. Sikora

It's a fact that we're seeing more seriously troubled people in the church—people who are depressed, suicidal, addicted, or mentally ill. As society continues to break down and as abuse in all forms continues to increase, fewer people make it through childhood unscathed. When you add chemical imbalances due to diet and environment, and throw in post-traumatic stress disorder from war or abuse—we have a problem.

The good news is that these people are increasingly seeking out the church for help, recognizing that the gospel offers their best hope for healing. The bad news is that an emotionally troubled person—we'll call him Travis Troubled—is now in your group, and he isn't functioning well. Here are some quick tips to help you identify the problem and support Travis, no matter what.

Identify the problem

People with emotional or mental problems may behave in a way that is frustratingly consistent, or they may switch back and forth like a chameleon, depending on circumstances. Sometimes intervention or a boundary in one area will lead to the problem morphing into something different. So your first task is to try to identify what's going on.

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- **Pray for wisdom.** Is the problem mental, emotional, or spiritual? Or all of the above? You may not know, but God does. He'll give you wisdom if you ask, so your first call for help should be in prayer.
- **Seek professional assistance.** Chances are, you'll feel that the problem is over your head. Seek assistance from your pastor or from mental health professionals in your church. You can also do some reading in the library or on the internet, but be careful that you don't start diagnosing Travis without the proper background. Also, be sure to use excellent sources. Sometimes a little information can be extremely dangerous!

Intervene When Appropriate

You're probably not called to "fix" Travis, but there are several things you can do to make your group a safe place for him and the other members.

- **Form a safe community.** A healthy community where people love and accept one another just as they are increases the joy of each person, and without an adequate joy capacity, we can't heal. Joy results from experiencing a genuine emotional response that says, "I'm glad to be with you!" Wounded people don't have enough "normal" people in their lives who are simply delighted to be with them, which means they don't have the capacity to handle pain or challenges. If you do nothing else, filling Travis's "joy bucket" will go a long way toward creating a sense of normalcy and fertile ground for healing.
- **Set boundaries.** If Travis seems to want all of your time, energy, and attention, you'll need to decide how much you can give and then set some boundaries. A boundary is any limit that defines where one person stops and the other begins. Boundaries can apply to physical space, time, feelings, attitudes, finances, or any other resource; they help others know what you will accept and what you won't. Consider the rest of your life's demands as you set boundaries with Travis (and anyone else in the group). For example, when may he call you and how long will you talk?
- **Set limits.** It's important to identify acceptable and unacceptable behavior within the group. Acceptable behavior may be annoying, but doesn't hurt anyone. Unacceptable

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behavior—which can include almost any form of acting or speaking out—risks hurting either Travis or someone else. You’ll need to define clearly what you will and won’t accept in the group, and immediately stop any disruptive behavior. If Travis has a habit of doing something unacceptable, talk to him about it, set a limit, and develop a cue between the two of you so that you don’t have to embarrass him in the group. If he’s willing to cooperate, many behaviors can be changed by a look, a touch, or a word.

- **Speak to his spirit.** When you’re setting limits with Travis, be sure to speak to his spirit rather than his soul. The spirit is created in the image of God and responds to truth; the soul wants immediate gratification. While the soul is the defender of the status quo, the spirit is usually willing to grow and change—even if a person is mentally ill. So often we speak to the souls of people. We want to teach them, inform them, or fix them. But change can occur more easily in the spirit, which can be engaged through eye contact and speaking truth deliberately. So rather than arguing with him, look Travis in the eye and gently but firmly say something like, “Travis, I believe you can make it all the way through the study today,” or “Travis, no one is trying to confuse you. If you’re feeling confused, let’s talk about it after the group time.” The spirit can be trained to exercise influence over the soul’s mind, will, and emotions. And as it does, you’ll see Travis’s behavior change.
- **Educate your group.** Chances are, the other group members would rather not deal with Travis. They’d prefer a group of people “like me”—you know, healthy people who have it all together. As the group leader, serve them by reminding them that we are the Body of Christ, and that when one member suffers, we all suffer. Remind them that each of us needs to grow and heal in some area. Encourage them with the joy set before them in seeing Travis become a little more functional. Teach them to rejoice in small bits of growth.
- **Lead him to Jesus.** Salvation is essential. You’ll have much better results working with an alive spirit than with one dead in sin. Don’t force this decision, of course, but certainly keep offering it. Many wounded people feel they have to wait until

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they're healed before they can come to Jesus. Show them that the opposite is true. And even after Travis is a Christian, keep pointing him back to Jesus. He needs to learn to fix his eyes on Jesus as his everything (Hebrews 12:1–3) and to continue to focus on truth.

When All Else Fails

One of my overriding principles of leadership is that the group is more important than the individual. This principle always surprises leaders; it seems antithetical to the concept of community. But it's essential. If people join a group to grow, they need a reasonably healthy environment in which to mature. Even one person who brings serious problems *and* (and this is the operative word) who can't or won't respond to leadership or correction will discourage other group members. Soon you'll experience complaining, absences, or both.

The heartbreaking reality is that many people today simply can't function in a traditional small-group setting, and you may need to ask those people to leave the group. This is always a last resort, and while it's seldom necessary—I've only had to do this a handful of times in over 30 years—it's important to know you have that option. You may need help in evaluating when you've reached this point, or if you are honest with yourself, you'll know it.

When you talk to Travis, try to offer him an alternative. Say something like: "Travis, it appears that this group may not be the best option for you right now. I have the name and phone number of someone who may be helpful in preparing you to participate in this kind of group and getting the most out of the experience. You're always welcome to come back when you feel that you are ready to tackle it again."

If possible, offer to continue meeting privately with Travis, since abandonment is a huge issue with wounded people. Also, urge him to seek professional help—even help him find it, if necessary. Follow up even after he leaves. Don't just leave him to flounder unless that's his choice. And be sure to pray.

Ministering to an emotionally or mentally troubled person is work, but it can be one of the most rewarding endeavors in your Christian ministry and life. Remember—if God brings you a Travis, know that He thinks you're ready for the challenge.

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*Pat J. Sikora is the founder of Mighty Oaks Ministries and author of **Why Didn't You Warn Me?**—a resource that equips group leaders to successfully deal with challenging members. This article first appeared on **SmallGroups.com**. Copyright © 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.*

Thought Provokers

- *Have you ever had to minister to someone like Travis? What was the most difficult thing about that experience?*
- *Respond to this statement: “One of my overriding principles of leadership is that the group is more important than the individual.” How is this principle helpful? Can it ever hinder ministry? How?*

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GETTING DEEPER

When Someone Promotes a False Theology



Prevention strategies and tips for addressing heresy in your small group.

by Reid Smith

Any group Bible study will reveal that not everyone thinks the same thing about a given passage of Scripture. But how does a small-group leader handle a situation where somebody in the group begins promoting a false theology? Here are some pointers to keep in mind:

- Don't be afraid. Prayerfully commit your group and each study to the Lord.
- Put the good of the whole group on the front-burner and concern about stepping on the toes of the individual in error on the back-burner. That person did not hesitate to bring up his or her point to the group; therefore, you should not hesitate to lovingly address it in the group.
- Sort the essentials from the non-essentials and spend your time and energy on what really matters.
- Remember, there is a difference between somebody saying something that happens to be erroneous (most of the time this is the case) and somebody who is actually promoting false theology. If somebody is promoting false theology, address it head-on with truth and grace (Titus 1:9).





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Addressing False Theology

These steps will help you approach such a situation in your group:

1. Ask the person to clarify what he or she is really saying. You might even restate what you have heard: “Are you saying that _____? Am I hearing you correctly? Could you explain more?” Adopt an inquisitive posture, be humble, and ask for explanation with scriptural support.
2. If they try to substantiate their position, invite other group members into the conversation by asking them, “What do all of you think about what _____ has said? Does it harmonize with what you’ve read about this topic?” The conversation doesn’t have to be confrontational—simply journey together.
3. Gently but firmly express the truth, and if possible support what you share with a biblical reference. It’s vital that you don’t let the individual’s misunderstanding derail the whole meeting. If he or she wants to pursue the matter further, state that you will be happy to do so after the group.
4. If the person seems persistent in promoting something other than the truth, ask him or her not to do it again. If the person does not respect your request, contact your coach or pastor for support.

Preventing False Theology

Here are additional tips to help keep your group centered on God’s Word and create an environment where biblical community can grow:

1. Clarify from the beginning that your small group holds the Bible as the Word of God. As such, it will be the authoritative source and standard of truth for your Bible study and discussions.
2. Continually bring your discussion back to the person of Jesus Christ by asking, “How does this help us to understand Jesus more, grow closer to him, and live more like him?”
3. Be intentional about drawing each group member into the process of reading and interpreting what the Bible has to say on issues of life. It can only help the group if each person grows in the ability to accurately interpret God’s Word.

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Because we are all fallible, we need to continually and intentionally commit to God's Word as the source of our knowledge. We also need our fellow journeyers to lovingly confront us when we begin to drift. Remember, neither of those necessary steps will happen unless you as the group leader take the initiative.

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Thought Provokers

- *Where is the line between hurting someone's feelings and allowing him or her to lead the group astray?*
- *What steps can you take in your ministry to ensure the Word of God is upheld as the authoritative source? How will you do this while including and mentoring those who are confused about the truth?*





CURRENT EVENTS

Is She Driving You Crazy?



Six ways to survive a high-maintenance friendship.

by Rhonda Rhea

My friend Liz and I can talk about our hair for hours. She'll tell me if I need to wear a jacket with that certain dress. And we have something only the closest friends have: a Mustache Pact. That means if either of us ever goes into a coma, the other will come and wax the comatose friend. That's a real bud.

Then there are those friendships that require more. Have you ever checked the Caller ID with a moan? Cringed at a lunch invitation? Rolled your eyes when the doorbell rang? If you have a friendship struggle, you're in good company—so to speak. Ethel Mertz had Lucy Ricardo. Barney Rubble had Fred Flintstone. High-maintenance friends pop up in everyone's life at one time or another.

Whether it's because of annoying habits or attitudes, a difficult husband, intolerable children, or overwhelming neediness, sometimes friendship can be tough. A perfect friend? That's annoying, too!

I'd love to become "Super Friend," persevering locomotive-style in those relationships not only when friendship is easy and mustache-free, but also when it's work. Here's what I've learned.

Learn Your Limitations

I know about those "work" friendships. While friendship happens easily with Liz, my relationship with Jan has been a different story.





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Jan and I started chatting on the phone several years ago when our sons became good friends. Jan is caring and funny, and I enjoy our time together. But she started popping in several times a week. When she came to visit, she clearly expected me to drop everything and play hostess. Even the days she didn't drop by, she called—sometimes several times. “Just one more thing ... “ she'd say. Then an hour later, my errands would still be undone and dinner would be late—again.

In addition to the time demands, I started to feel emotionally drained. Jan counted on me for advice in some overwhelming struggles in her marriage, with her children, and even in her finances. She confided that I was really the only person to whom she could talk, so anytime I cut our calls and visits short, I felt I was abandoning her and guilt would creep in.

I've had difficulty learning that sometimes being a good friend is knowing when to lovingly say “no.” Loving a friend at all times (Proverbs 17:17) doesn't mean attending to her at all times.

Jan needed more than just my friendship. I knew I needed to encourage her to rely on God to meet her needs. We started praying together, and I began to pray for her more on my own as well. And when I realized I wasn't doing her any favors by not being completely honest with her, I learned to let her know tactfully when I didn't have time to sit and chat. I'm still learning how to be a good friend to her.

Beg for Back-up

I also learned to point Jan to a network of my own mentors. At one point, I invited her to lunch with another friend I respect. I knew Lilly could offer Jan wise counsel and maybe a new perspective or two. I also knew I couldn't force a relationship. I simply made the opportunity and left the sharing part up to Jan. I was excited when she chose to open up. Lilly gave Jan wise insights, and we were fortunate to have another prayer partner.

Not only did it help Jan, but it took some pressure off me. I'd been feeling all alone in trying to help. It was scary to think Jan was looking to me, and me alone, to “fix” her problems. The Bible teaches that there is wisdom in having many counselors (Proverbs 15:22). Networking paid off for us both.

Overlook the Obnoxious

My friend Kim was feeling a different burden in her friendship with Linda. Linda grew up with little guidance in the social graces. They





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worked together in a small office where the everyday grind “forced” a friendship. But Kim dreaded their lunches out. It was more than just the loud talking, the open-mouth chewing, and the fact that Linda sat on at least one of her feet through the entire lunch. Linda talked nonstop. She rarely asked Kim about her own life. Kim couldn’t get a word in to tell her anyway. The nonstop chatter and the bad manners were getting on Kim’s last nerve.

She decided she was going to have to build some patience or just plain stop eating lunch. Okay, going without lunch might provide a great weight-loss opportunity. But Kim knew she might be missing an even greater opportunity to let this friendship trial polish her own character a little—even if it meant she had to endure the way Linda rubbed her the wrong way.

Kim made an important decision. She decided to accept Linda “as is” and shrug away some of those annoyances. She found that Linda had some wonderful friendship qualities—a great sense of humor and a generous, kind heart.

It’s been surprising the kind of friendship these women have built—despite their differences. Kim’s learned to be more bold in “getting a word in” with Linda. That’s been helping Linda become a better listener. Still, instead of restaurants, Kim suggests more carry-out Chinese. The friendship really does require extra work. But Kim will tell you she’s glad she’s investing in the relationship, and glad she’s been able to rise above some of the smaller annoyances to get to know the real Linda underneath.

Confront a Crime

There was a time, however, when Kim thought she might have to walk away from the friendship. Linda strayed into an adulterous affair. Kim struggled with how to confront her lovingly. She knew she wouldn’t be a good friend if she looked the other way or pretended it just didn’t matter.

Kim didn’t want to be condemning, but she knew she had to let Linda know that what she was doing was wrong. While a good friend shrugs away minor annoyances, she doesn’t shrug away destructive behavior. Kim gently spelled out what the Bible says about keeping a marriage commitment, and let Linda know she hoped Linda would restore her marriage and their friendship.





Loving Hard-to-Love People

Is She Driving You Crazy?

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Kim celebrated the day Linda asked for help in getting her marriage and her life back on track. Kim was quick to help Linda be restored in every way. Linda's still working on her marriage, and Kim continues to work to be a good friend to her.

Overcome an Obstacle

“Shopping? Er. . . Will Benny be in preschool?” It seemed tacky for me to ask. My friendship struggle with Annie had nothing to do with sweet Annie. It had everything to do with her four-year-old terminator, Benny. On our last shopping excursion, lunch at the food court had been no picnic. I discovered that ketchup packets are not childproof. I also discovered that while little boys' tennies are ketchup-proof, my new dry-clean-only jacket wasn't.

When we made it to the department store, Benny decided to climb on the perfume counter and spray all the bottles. He squirted the saleslady right between the eyes. I haven't been back there since.

Before the day was finished, Benny tried to put a kitten in the fish tank at the pet store, attempted a money-collecting venture from the fountain, and then, after our “reward” trip to the ice cream shop, discarded his soggy cone into my shopping bag (again with the dry-clean-only clothing).

I treasured my friendship with Annie, but I wasn't sure I could handle the package deal. Yet I knew that because of her challenges with Benny and with a difficult marriage, too, Annie needed a friend all the more.

When Annie sent out a tearful SOS, I decided our friendship was worth working for and rolled up my sleeves. I offered her books on marriage and child-rearing that had helped me. I hit the Internet and found more helps, and I put her in touch with other women who'd experienced the same struggles.

My most monumental decision was that if nothing changed, I would work around the obstacles and be a friend to her. Since that decision, Annie's experienced a few victories in her marriage and with Benny. But all the struggles are not completely over.

I can't say I never hesitate before accepting a shopping invitation, but accepting the challenge and concentrating more on my friend than any obstacles have helped to build a strong friendship for us both. (And I've learned to wear less dry-clean-only.)





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Cherish the Challenge

If you're working to become "Super Friend," remember to "Look! Up in the sky!" There's wisdom in trusting God to help you know when to encourage, when to back off, and when to come alongside your friend.

"Super Friend" can love, encourage, endure—everything just short of leaping tall buildings in a single bound. She perseveres not only when the friendship is a breeze, but even when the Super Cape is ketchup-stained.

So press on in your high-maintenance friendship (and make sure you buy machine-washable)!

**Except for Liz, all names have been changed.*

Rhonda Rhea, a speaker and freelance writer, lives in Missouri. This article first appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. Copyright © 2000 by the author or Christianity Today International/TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.

Thought Provokers

- *How have you avoided spending time with "high-maintenance friends" in the past? Describe a time when you persevered in a high-maintenance friendship.*
- *Do you view these friendships as ministry? Why or why not? Although you often give more than you receive in this context, what are some ways you've been blessed by this person/these persons? How has your faith grown or been challenged?*





BRINGING IT HOME

Setting Ministry Boundaries



Truly loving others requires us to know our limitations and rely on God.

by JoHannah Reardon

The biggest change Christ made in my life is a desire to serve others rather than myself. Before I became a Christian, it was all about me. Afterward, I was drawn to the weak and hurting and constantly looked for opportunities to minister. I took to heart Jesus' instruction that if I wanted to save my life, I had to lose it. This led me to full-time Christian work and helping to plant a church.

What I didn't know then, but am learning now, is that I simply cannot help some people. I'm sure that I understood this intellectually. I was aware of the joke: "How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, if the light bulb wants to be changed," but I thought I would have a lot more success than most psychiatrists since I had help from the Lord of the Universe. And that's true. I do have help a secularist could never tap into.

I thought those who were wounded would be able to understand God's love if I just loved them enough. In some cases, this happened. Some that I loved did understand God's love and were able to move beyond the hurts of their past. However, others couldn't comprehend the love I offered and only found reasons to blame me for their lack of comprehension. I became the recipient of all their anger.





Loving Hard-to-Love People

Setting Ministry Boundaries

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So how can we know when enough is enough? When do we keep giving, and when do we draw back? I don't know if I have all the answers, but I've come up with a way to determine what I should do. If the person is making progress, I ask God for the grace to hang in there with them. How do I measure that progress? I've found that the people who change have three things in common: a yearning to know God, a willingness to admit sin rather than blame others, and a desire to be other-centered rather than self-centered. If all three elements are there, then I'm in. I'll stay true to that person no matter how much work it takes.

The opposite of these three elements also becomes my dropping-off point. If the person is stuck, I'm done. Those who are stuck lack the things that are causing others to change. They may talk about God but don't yearn to know him, they won't admit their own sin but instead blame everyone else, and they are self-centered rather than other-centered. Sometimes such a person is simply taking up my time, which isn't too bad. In that case, I may stay in touch, although I scale way back on the amount of time I'm willing to give. But more often such people become abusive toward me. I'm the latest person for them to lash out against. In these cases, I drop them like a hot potato. That may sound heartless, but I've learned that such people suck the life out of me so that I have nothing to give anyone, not even my family. So what sounds callous is actually common sense. If I'm going to expend my life for others, I want to make a difference.

*JoHannah Reardon is editor of **ChristianBibleStudies.com**, a resource of Christianity Today International. This article first appeared on **GiftedforLeadership.com**. Copyright © 2008 by Christianity Today International.*

Thought Provoker

- *Do you think most of the hard-to-love people in your ministry want to grow? Where do you see that desire blossoming into fruition in their lives?*
- *Why is it often challenging for us to say “no” to difficult people, even if they are demanding or abusive? How did Jesus approach situations like these? How does that translate to your current ministry?*





Additional Resources

More places for more help.

Boundaries: When to Say Yes, When to Say No To Take Control of Your Life, by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 1992). Boundaries define who we are and who we are not. Boundaries impact all areas of our lives: Physical boundaries help us determine who may touch us, mental boundaries give us the freedom to have our own thoughts, emotional boundaries help us to deal with our own emotions and spiritual boundaries help us to distinguish God's will from our own.

Dealing with Difficult People, a downloadable resource from BuildingChurchLeaders.com. All church leaders encounter difficult people at certain times in their ministry. With these brief and practical handouts, your leaders will be better equipped to handle those in the congregation prone to complaining and stirring up strife. They'll learn about how conflict evolves and how to deal with it; ultimately, relationships within your congregation can be nurtured to build up effective followers of Jesus Christ.

Dealing with Difficult People, by Jill Briscoe (David C. Cook, 2003). *Dealing With Difficult People* is a compilation of the best articles on handling problem people in your life. You will appreciate the encouragement, practical tips and biblical guidance Jill Briscoe has gathered.





Stewardship: A New View of Money

Additional Resources

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Handling Conflict, a downloadable resource from BuildingChurchLeaders.com. Conflict can poison the life of a church. But it can also have a positive effect. Prepare your leaders for handling conflict—and thus protect your church—by discussing “Conflict Above Ground,” an interview with Bill Hybels. This interview will train your leaders to see conflict in a new light and help them deal with it in a more biblical way.

How to Get Along with Difficult People, by Florence Littauer (Harvest House, 2006). In this new edition of her classic book on human relationships author Florence Littauer draws from the experiences of the apostle Paul and her own demanding encounters to offer readers encouragement and practical advice to help smooth out thorny relationships.

Leading Your Church Through Conflict and Resolution, edited by Marshall Shelley (Bethany House, 1993). This first volume in the Library of Leadership Development helps pastors and lay leaders understand, prevent, and redeem conflict. Its authors who have survived and thrived in church conflict tell their stories and explain the principles that help them lead through the storms of congregational life.





Stewardship: A New View of Money

Additional Resources

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Do You Feel **Alone** as a Woman Leader?

IF you're a capable, called, and gifted Christian woman in leadership, join the conversation at **GiftedForLeadership.com**. This blog, along with downloadable resources, will help you safely converse with other women about the issues you face. You'll walk away feeling encouraged, supported, challenged, and definitely not alone!



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