- Interpersonal relations




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ART OF LIVING

# How To Get Along with Anyone

*Master awkward conversations with these seven tricky personality types*

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While making polite small talk at a baby shower, my day was quickly ruined. "Ooh, are you expecting?!" asked a family friend, looking me up and down. I sheepishly shook my head, instantly regretting both my party dress and my plate of mini-sandwiches. Then, just when I thought it couldn't get worse, it did: "Well," she asked, "why not?"

My mind flooded with reasons and retorts – "just fat, thanks," deep-rooted doubts about my maternal capabilities, fear of climate change, or perhaps a well-deserved expletive – but, sadly, none materialised. Instead I murmured that I was busy with work and excused myself to mope for the rest of the afternoon.

I've since recovered emotionally, but I sometimes wonder: *What should I have said to a nosy question from a rude person?* And how about all those



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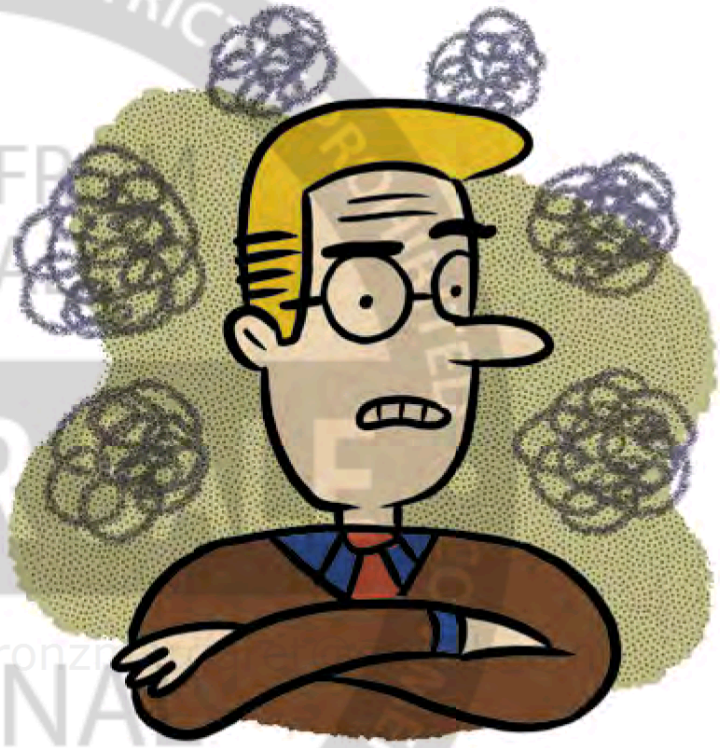
other challenging personalities we have to talk to whether we want to or not?

So I asked experts about how to deal with the trickiest, meanest and most maddening personalities.



## THE COMPLAINER

You know the type: this restaurant's too pricey, the music's too loud, their burger is overdone and they can hardly taste it anyhow because they're coming down with something. People who whine are great fodder for comedians. But in real life, the Complainer isn't so funny.

"This is a person who thinks life is unfair to them," says psychologist Jody Carrington. Nobody is that put out by a burger; they're down about other, bigger things and are taking it out on specific, controllable things like what's on their plate.

How should you deal with this good-mood thief? "If you want to interact better with these people, it starts with empathy," says Carrington. (This is true for all tricky personalities, but especially for a Complainer.) Start by removing the small stuff from the equation – maybe let them choose the restaurant – so you can both focus on the big picture. Get them to talk about what's really bothering them and challenge their negativity with questions about what's good in their lives.

## THE CONTRARIAN

You say it's a nice day; they say it's too hot. You've read a good book; it was the worst book they've read in a decade. You mention that they contradict everything you say; they say, "No, I don't!"

"A Contrarian is someone who just likes to argue," explains Monica Guzman, an expert in curiosity. "Sometimes this is fun, but other times it's aggressive and unpleasant. The Contrarian can't always tell the difference." So while you're arguing the issue at hand, they're arguing for the sake of argument – and so they win every time.

How to better brave this battle? A Contrarian only wants to spar, so pick your battles. For anything inconsequential, says Ian Leslie, an argument expert, "the most disarming way to handle a Contrarian is to say



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you agree with them." This doesn't mean you should lie. Try "I agree with you on that" about something small and specific, or "I can definitely see your point" if you truly don't agree on a single thing. Then change the topic.

When you want to stand your ground, you can move the Contrarian beyond their default defence position by becoming a more nuanced opponent. "You can sometimes get them off the opinion showdown by asking them for their story or experience with a matter," says Guzman. Asking "How did you come to believe that?" can move a conversation away from a competition of opinions and towards a personal perspective.

## THE CHATTERBOX

If you can't ever seem to finish a sentence, chances are you're face-to-face with a Chatterbox. Despite the cute name, they can be a frustrating bunch, explains communication expert Sandy Gerber. "The Chatterbox is a story stealer. They identify with what you're saying and then give a story about themselves."

It can feel like the Chatterbox is constantly trying to one-up you, but it's not necessarily true. They could be socially anxious, uncomfortable with silence or just extra passionate and excitable. But whatever the reason, they probably don't even notice they do this, nor the deeper reason why.

"Particularly in kids, Chatterboxes could also be called connection seekers," says Carrington. "That's all they're after, but they're not giving you the chance to connect back." And because they're chatting a mile a minute, you might not notice until you're irked on the drive home, having realised all your stories were hijacked.

Next time, try the phrase you'd least expect: "Tell me more." Says Carrington: "Choose a topic and let them exhaust it. Ask them questions, follow up and really listen."

Once the Chatterbox has run out of things to say, their need to be heard has been met, so now it's your turn. Jump in with something like "I love your stories and I have one for you, too." For once, the floor is yours.



## THE TECH ADDICT

Socially, few things are more annoying than someone repeatedly checking their phone in the middle of your conversation with them. Soon enough, you're projecting sulky thoughts their way like, *I'm boring you/You're more concerned with whoever's on that phone than me/You don't care about me,* explains Carrington. None of that's necessarily true, but this is: "If someone is engaged in a great conversation, they wouldn't care about their phone," she says. Ouch.

Whether you say something or not, remember the Tech-Addict's annoying habits aren't about you. "It's rude, for sure, but sometimes we mistake the behaviour for more than what it is," says Leslie. "It's possible they're just nervous or anxious," he says. It's also possible their partner is stranded with a flat tyre or their kid is sick. The point is, you don't know.

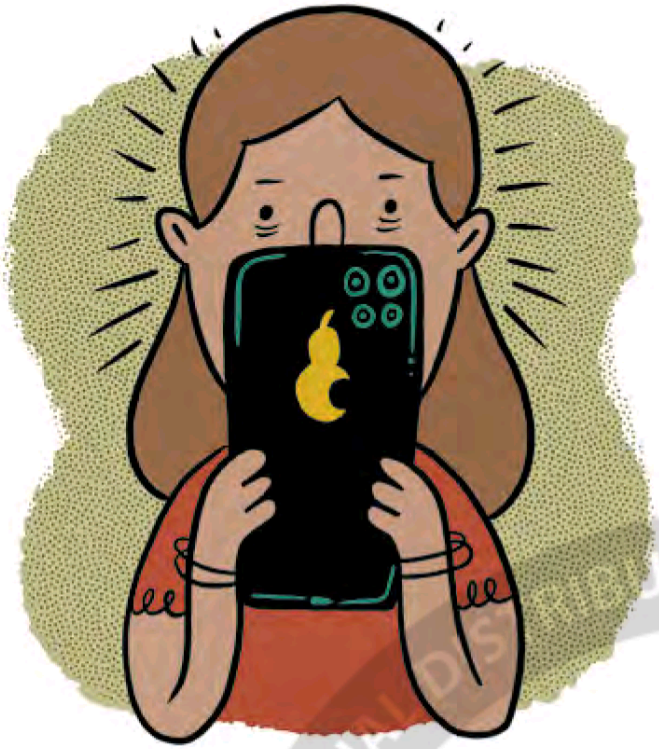
So before you hastily rage at the Tech-Addict's blatant rudeness, focus instead on building a better conversation than whatever's going down on Instagram.

You might never be able to achieve this, given the power of today's clickbait, so if you're close enough to a person, Carrington advises you to cheekily ask them: "What's on that thing that's so alluring?" Chances are they'll apologise and sheepishly tuck the phone away. (But if the answer is something real, talk about it.)

Better yet, avoid the situation in advance by saying something like, "I'm really interested in catching up properly, so how about we leave our phones in the car?" If they indeed have that flat tyre or sick kid, you won't have to assume it's because your stories are boring.

## THE DRAMA QUEEN

"The Chatterbox on steroids" in Carrington's words, the Drama Queen (or King) is someone who similarly dominates the conversation, chatting your ear off about all the wild things you will never believe are happening in the "Worst. Week. Ever!" (The boring details of your week, meanwhile, can't possibly compare with what's going on in their life, so don't even try.)





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"This person's always exaggerating because they want to be the centre of attention," says Gerber. The more they do this, the more we pull away from the over-the-top emotions of a life in constant crisis.

"We tend to avoid them because keeping up with the drama is an energy sucker," says Carrington. "But this only means they'll turn it up. They've often exhausted other people in their lives so they come on even stronger." The Drama Queen desperately wants your attention and she's also terrified she'll lose it; she's putting on a show in hopes you'll never look away.

Resist the urge to cut her off; instead set boundaries you can both stick to. "Be really clear in advance about what you're willing and not willing to do," says Carrington. Maybe this means you'll talk about her ex for 20 minutes but no longer.

## THE FRENEMY

Though all these personalities are difficult, perhaps none is more so than the Frenemy – someone who is equal parts friend and enemy, a subtle and complicated phenomenon. "I call this a see-saw friendship," says Gerber. "Because of the highs and lows, you never know what you're going to get." One day your friend is fun to be with; the next they seem a bit mean – and you have no clue why.

"The Frenemy is passive-aggressive and motivated by their perceived lack of value," says Gerber. "They're rolling their eyes at anything that you have, or do, that feels like it's undervaluing them." To feel better about themselves, the Frenemy is desperate to knock you down a little bit at a time.

When dealing with a Frenemy, protect yourself by recognising a negative judgement and not taking it personally. "These people are almost firing arrows at you," explains Wisner, "so you can dodge the arrow; let the arrow pierce and hurt or offend you; or catch the arrow and stop it." Options A and B are easy in the moment, but C is the brave choice if you want things to change. To start a difficult conversation, Wisner suggests saying, "That doesn't feel sincere to me. Did you mean that?"

That might address a particular jab, but if you actually want to fix and save the friendship – and maybe you don't



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– you're going to need to dig deeper. "These people are competitive on the surface, but underneath they're insecure and highly distrustful," says Gerber. To turn a frenemy into a real friend, you're going to have to talk about it. "Tell them what you're looking for in a friendship and what you're willing to offer," she says. "But if they can't or won't have that conversation, well, that's your answer."

## THE OVERSHARER

Unsolicited commentary about someone's love life, their best friend's messy divorce or whatever just happened in the bathroom are all clues you've got an Oversharer on your hands. Whether they're telling too much or asking for details you're not comfortable sharing, this persona has neither a filter nor boundaries.

Why would anyone in their right mind list their irritable bowel syndrome symptoms over brunch? Because of two specific human qualities: the first is an unwritten personal boundary that's far from yours. "The discomfort you feel comes from a difference of standards about what topics of conversation are OK," says Chuck Wisner, a leadership adviser. "What they consider to be acceptable, need-to-know information is different than what it is for you."

At the same time, the Oversharer is also trying to get closer to you by revealing more about themselves – and hoping you'll do the same. "We tend to label these people as nosy, invasive or rude," notes Gerber, "but they really just want to be liked and accepted."

To satisfy the Oversharer, and simultaneously veto the endless commentary, consider sharing something else – still personal but less invasive – that satisfies their urge to connect. When they really cross the line, say something that indicates your boundary is being crossed. "That's private!" says everything.

A compliment also works wonders with an Oversharer, adds Gerber, because it refocuses the conversation in their direction while subtly resetting your boundary. For example, I could have given this wise response to my nosy family friend at the baby shower: "You made having kids look so easy! How did you do it?"

I missed my chance that time. But next time, I'll be ready to face an Oversharer – or the other challenging people it takes to make a world. R

### Whimsical Wins

Counting nose hairs in cadavers, repurposing dead spiders and explaining why scientists lick rocks are among the winning entries in 2023's Ig Nobels, the prize for humorous scientific feats. AP NEWS



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