

5 Ways to Protect Yourself from Toxic Behavior

Welcome back to Bounce Back Stronger, the podcast that explores ways to find peace and purpose no matter what happens.

This week, I'm doing a solo episode to tackle a subject that has been on my mind a lot lately – and maybe yours, too.

What is it?

How do we deal with the mean people in our lives? And how do we stop wasting precious energy on them?

First, I'm going to share one of the most life-changing pieces of wisdom I ever received about this particular topic. But to do that, we must go back about ten years to one of my early yoga teacher training classes.

Let me set the scene.

The room was bathed in flickering candlelight and soothing Tibetan bell sounds filled the air. Everyone was sitting silently waiting for the teacher to begin class. And maybe that pause in activity is why I noticed a jarring plasticky smell. After a year or so of teaching yoga, I would be able to identify it as the tell-tale sign of a new yoga mat. But I was only training to be a yoga teacher at that point.

The smell just added to my angst that day. It's been a lot of years since then, so I'm not sure why I was so fired up. Was it the divorce negotiations, a bully at work, or a driver in the Whole Foods parking lot?

Whatever it was, I was full of indignant New Age anguish about some rude transgression.

So, when the instructor of that day's yoga teacher class asked what we were having difficulty with, I blurted without any self-restraint, "I can't stand mean people."

Then he asked the question I would learn was his go-to, "Tell me more."

"Like, I get so pissed off at people who are mean. Why can't they get therapy, take yoga, and do "the work" like we do?"

The teacher turned to a beautiful pony-tailed woman to my left. I knew we were of similar age, but she appeared serene, radiant, and calm. I, on the other hand, was bloated, fried, and sweaty.

"Jenna, is there something you would like to say?"

"Because that is where they are on their path," Jenna answered.

What is this bs? "What do you mean?" I asked.

She smiled and nodded, but not in a know-it-all way, like she rang some imaginary buzzer in a metaphysical Wheel of Fortune. No, she said it in a tender, loving, I want to help you way.

I instantly wanted to be like that.

Jenna continued, "They are still suffering and don't know the way out yet."

The teacher nodded and smiled his Buddha-like smile. He said, "And it's possible the universe put them in your path to teach you."

"Ugh." Wait, did I say that out loud? I quickly looked around to see if anyone heard me. It was clear by Jenna's smile that at least she had. But her face wasn't mean in any way. Her mouth was wide and her eyes soft. I smiled back at this woman, who would later introduce me to my Reiki teacher and psychic. And years later she would also invite me to do my first book signing at her studio.

Her words were probably among the most important anyone has ever said to me. I had a long-standing issue with mean people because of my childhood and without hearing this wisdom, I would still be dragged under by this Achilles heel.

And let's face it, we all have mean people in our lives.

You know who they are: the ones who speak over you, belittle everyone else's ideas except their own, purposely exclude you from opportunities, create impossible deadlines and then shame you when you can't meet them, change up the requirements for a task at the end and make you redo it, steal credit for your work and never give any kudos, and send aggressive and shaming messages that set you off balance for the rest of the day.

The truth?

This is their problem. And there is nothing you can do to change their toxic behavior.

So what can you do with this person?

Buddhism provides a great path to managing the bully in your life.

First - Don't get drawn into hatred of them. It does not impact them, and it makes you unhappy. Accept the way they are. Like my yoga friend said, this is where they are on their journey. And no matter how much enlightenment you have cultivated for yourself, they are never going to change because of it. And please, please, please stop expecting anyone to save you from them. I have replayed this scenario many times and finally learned that no one can save us from mean people but ourselves.

And we don't save ourselves by retaliating unless we have more power in the situation than they do – most times it only worsens the situation, especially in systems not built on love and kindness.

Instead, I've found it more helpful to lean into Buddhist philosophy with its profound teachings on mindfulness, compassion, and detachment; it offers practical tools for navigating the mean people in our lives.

Here are five ways these philosophies can help:

- **Recognize Their Toxic Behavior Without Reacting** - One of the core practices in Buddhism is mindfulness—the ability to stay present and aware of your thoughts, emotions, and environment without getting swept away by them. When dealing with a toxic person, mindfulness helps you observe their behavior objectively. Instead of immediately reacting to their triggering behaviors, you can take a step back and assess the situation. This calm awareness prevents you from being manipulated and gives you the clarity to respond wisely rather than out of anger or frustration. Also, try not to numb the feelings they might trigger in you. It is better to feel them as opposed to waking up bloated and dehydrated because you ate or drank something to escape the discomfort.

How can you apply this in your life? When confronted by challenging behavior, take a few deep breaths to center yourself before responding. And actually, you don't have to respond to that Slack message or email or that jab at all. You can even pretend you missed seeing or hearing it. Or, if you have to respond, send it to a manager or someone in charge first and ask how best to reply. You don't have to be in this alone.

- **Embracing Compassion** - All humans experience suffering, which often manifests in harmful behavior towards others. Deep-seated insecurities and an insatiable need for

validation often drive a mean person's actions. By cultivating compassion, you can see the suffering behind their behavior. This doesn't mean excusing it but rather understanding it, which can help you approach the situation more calmly.

How can you apply this in your life? When dealing with a difficult person, silently wish them peace and freedom from suffering. As Sharon Salzberg suggests in her *book Love Your Enemies*, I include the difficult people in my life in my morning Metta Meditation and keep them in mind as I say – May you be happy, May you be healthy, May you be safe, May you live with ease. This may seem impossible, but think of it this way – they are less likely to be angry with those around them if they are happier or healthier or feel safe or are living with more ease. And seeing them in a slightly different light might lessen the negative energy you expend toward them (which mostly only hurts you in the end).

- **Let Go of the Need for Approval** – Many times, the bully in the room thrives on controlling others, often by seeking to undermine their confidence and self-esteem. Buddhism encourages the practice of non-attachment, particularly to external validation and approval. By letting go of the need for their approval—or anyone's for that matter — you take away their power over you. Your self-worth becomes rooted in your own inner peace and understanding, not in the fluctuating opinions of others.

How can you apply this in your life? Reflect on the impermanence of external approval. Regularly remind yourself that your value doesn't depend on others' beliefs about you -

but on your own integrity and self-awareness. You are enough and valuable as you are now.

- **Set Boundaries with Kindness** - Buddhism places great emphasis on right speech—speaking truthfully, kindly, and with a purpose. When dealing with an intimidating presence, it's essential to communicate your boundaries clearly and assertively but also with kindness. Right speech can help you avoid getting entangled in the difficult person's manipulations and protect you from unnecessary conflict. This balanced approach ensures that you're neither passive nor aggressive but maintain your dignity and peace. And we don't have to be the ones who stand up to someone mean. If their behavior is difficult for you, they are likely difficult for everyone. Karma is real and sometimes we need to let it play out. If possible exit the situation entirely until Karma has the chance to play out.

How can you apply this in your life? Before confronting a difficult person, plan your words carefully. Use "I" statements to express your feelings and needs without blaming or attacking them. And again, you don't have to respond at all or do it alone (remember to enlist a manager or other authoritative person).

- **Rely on Your Inner Peace** - Ultimately, true protection lies within. External circumstances, including difficult people, are beyond our control. However, by cultivating inner peace through meditation and other spiritual practices, you create a sanctuary that cannot be disturbed by external gunk (that *is* the technical term by the way). This

inner refuge becomes your greatest strength when dealing with mean people, allowing you to remain calm, centered, and resilient in the face of their provocations.

How to apply this in your life? Develop a daily meditation practice to strengthen your connection to your inner peace. (If you are interested, there is more on this in episode three and four of this podcast). When faced with negative behavior, mentally retreat to this inner sanctuary, knowing that the person's actions cannot disturb your true self.

Dealing with toxic behavior is never easy, but instead of responding in kind, we can be mindful, compassionate, unattached to the outcome, and set peaceful boundaries, which will protect our well-being and maintain our dignity in the face of manipulation and hostility.

Just like that new yoga mat smell, there will always be another person ready to take out their toxic dreck on others. But hopefully, with a little practice at pausing to remember the divine and special person you are, you will be able to see them as another teacher on your pathway to a more peaceful life.

That's all for today. I hope this episode was helpful. If it was, please subscribe, drop a review, or share it with your friends and family. That's the best way to get it in the hands of those who may benefit. Also, if you want to learn more about my books and services, visit donnayferris.com.

And if my daughters Sienna and Sylvie are listening - I just want you to know how proud I am of you. And I love you sooooo much.

Bye now.