

# Handling Difficult People

What to Do When People Try to Push Your Buttons

By John Townsend, OMF Literature, 2006

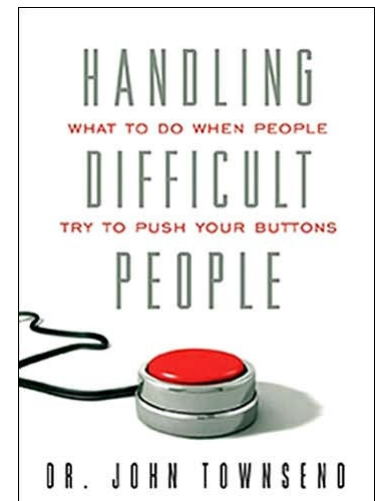
Let's face it, hard as we try, none of us can avoid contact with difficult people.

more the person you were meant to be.

BOOK OF THE WEEK:

Some people just seem to make life hard for everyone, causing conflict and stress wherever they are. Often they aren't even aware of their effect on others around them, including you!

No, you can't always avoid difficult people, but in learning to relate with them more effectively, you'll discover that you are becoming more and



[read the summary](#) ➔

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## Why You Need This Book

This book offers insights regarding how to deal with problematic people. These insights will help you learn to respond properly to these people and deal with them better than ever before.

## Who's Pushing Your Buttons?

Most of the time, the difficult person pushing your buttons is someone you care about - your spouse, a parent, someone you're dating, or a co-worker, neighbor, or friend. There are all sorts of difficult people, and they can be found in many areas of your life.

Life with a difficult person is like having a giant traffic jam in your connection, blocking all the good things you want in the relationship. But as the other person "gets it," begins to take ownership of his problems, and then begins to change, the jam gets unblocked and the traffic flow resumes, distributing all the good you are wanting.

### MAKING LIFE BETTER

You are looking for improvement, perhaps a lot of improvement, but not perfection. Do you have idealistic or perfectionist leanings? Toss perfectionism out the window right now if you want success with your button-pusher.



## Release What Doesn't Work

Take a look at some of the unsuccessful things people do with button-pushers, why they do them, and how they can stop doing them. It's time to let them go.

**DENYING.** You may find that you minimize your button-pusher's hurtful, annoying, or selfish actions. You may say to yourself or others, "He has so many good qualities" or "He's just having a bad day. Denial keeps your head in the sand, wishing and hoping that things aren't as bad as they really are.

**REASONING AND REMINDING.** Probably the most common error is to believe that the solution you need is all about reason and logic, a meeting of the minds. You think that if the difficult person truly understands that what you are asking for is a good thing, he will comply and change.

**REACTING AND BLASTING.** This capacity to react and blast away is due to some dependency you have. That is, you are looking for something from your difficult person, perhaps warmth, affirmation, or love. Then when it is not forthcoming, you respond with desperation and high emotion.

**BACKING OFF.** This is the opposite of reacting and blasting. There is a polite, hopeful part in you that is somewhat conflict avoidant. So you wait politely until the button-pusher sees the errors of his ways and comes to you to help him change.

**FEELING RESPONSIBLE.** Taking too much responsibility for the problem also happens when you put yourself in charge of the difficult person's choices and the outcome. This is often due to some lack of personal definition and separateness.

**ENABLING.** If you are enabling your button-pusher, you may think you are caring, but in effect you are hating him.

**THREATENING WITHOUT FOLLOW-UP.** When you deliver empty or inconsistent threats, you are training your difficult person to ignore you. So if you bark, be prepared to bite. If you aren't, get yourself a muzzle!

**GIVING UP TOO SOON.** This is the "one time should do it" approach, the hope and expectation that one appeal, or one confrontation or invitation or threat or consequence, should be enough.

**MAKING LIFE BETTER**

A good antidote to denial is to go to a safe and truthful friend who knows your situation. Ask if you are avoiding the seriousness of your difficult person's situation.

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**MAKING LIFE BETTER**

What do you most fear about reclaiming your happiness from your button-pusher? How will you begin to overcome that fear?

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## Reclaim Your Happiness

One of the most powerful principles to help you begin to see change in your relationship with a difficult person involves reclaiming control over your own happiness.

*Own Your Life.* Get involved in whatever was good and meaningful before the problem with your button-pusher began. Plug into people who will empathize but who also let you know they want a more robust relationship with you than just problem-solving.

*Depend on the Right People.* The solution is to end your dependency upon the button-pusher and place it instead with people who can fulfil your needs for affirmation, empathy, structure, and reality.

*Face Your Fears.* Face the fears and become a new person. Be in charge of your life, instead of waiting for a difficult person to change before you have a life.

## You Need People for Life and Growth

Relationships provide valuable support, whether you are dealing with a difficult person or not. These supports are like your computer's operating system, the foundation that makes everything run.

*Acceptance.* You need people in your life who don't require you to have it all together in order to be connected and safe.

*Understanding.* It helps that someone truly "gets" your experience.

*Feedback.* Ask for help to grow as a person and don't resist any authentic feedback.

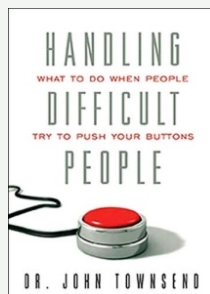
In addition to people who can provide the supports listed above, you also need other things from people willing to help you navigate your situation with a button-pusher. Here is what to look for:

*Normalization.* This is the ability to convey a sense that you are not aberrant, different, or bad for having a button-pusher. Your life is difficult, and that's the way things are.

*Wisdom.* Defined as the capacity to live skilfully, wisdom provides the path you need. People with wisdom can direct, guide, correct and provide insight for you about your situation.

*Experience.* Role-playing with people in your support system gives you experience and confidence.

### ABOUT THE BOOK:



**Author:** John Townsend  
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**123 pages**

*Reality and Perspective.* Most people who care about a difficult person feel uncertain and disoriented about their own opinions, thoughts, and experiences. Safe and sane people can reorient you to what is real.

*Holding the Line.* Safe and sane people serve as guardians of these limits when you are in danger of not following through.

*Direct Dealings.* There are times when other people can help by being directly involved with the button-pusher.

MAKING LIFE BETTER

Who are the people in your supportive network? List them and also list which of the processes they can offer. What kind of help do you need to ass to your support system?

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## Use Words Well

If you aren't talking to your button-pusher about the problem, he might take that as a sign that you are happy with the way things are.

Every conversation has two dimensions: tone and content. Tone has to do with how your voice sounds, and content is what you say.

### TONE: TALKING FROM YOUR HEART

- *Be Warm.* Warmth conveys safety and care, and that stands the best chance of keeping your button-pusher from becoming even more wary or defensive than he already is.

- *Speak from Your Experience.* Talk from the heart. Use "I" statements as much as possible, staying with what you feel, think, and perceive.

### CONTENT: A CONVERSATIONAL GAME PLAN

- *Affirm the Good.* Begin by affirming what is good in the other person and in your relationship.

- *Hear Him Out.* Hearing out your button-pusher at the beginning of the conversation will help him hear you later. So don't go into the entire problem yet; just touch on it to give him context.

- *State the Problem.* State what the problem is and how it affects you and others. Talk in terms of what can be seen, observed, even measured.

- *State the Problem's Effect.* Tell the button-pusher how the problem affects you and your relationship. The more you show how what he does hurts the "we," the better your chances of breaking through his resistance.

- *Own Your Stuff.* There may be more that you need to own that the other person has not mentioned.

- *Request Change.* Say what you want to see change. Keep it uncomplicated. You want him to stop doing a negative thing, or to start doing a good thing that he is neglecting.

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Plan the conversation you need to have. Write out the steps then write what you might say that pertains to your situation. Role-play the conversation with a good friend, a counsellor, or another of your support people.

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## Know When to Loosen Up

So after having begun our campaign to get the button-pusher to change, when do we know when to back off and start lessening the pressure? Here are some tips:

*When change goes along with words.* You must insist that the person actually do things differently: start being more responsible, stop the criticism, end the drinking.

*When change is sustained.* This doesn't mean there won't be slip-ups and regressions. But a period of sustained


change will indicate that the person is truly doing things differently.

*When there is evidence of heart change.* When a person is sorry about the pain he has caused you and others, that is good news. Look for true and authentic remorse and contrition.

*When he gets into the growth process for himself.* Give a lot of credence to your difficult person's intentions if he gets into some structure for spiritual and personal growth.

MAKING LIFE BETTER

Natural consequences don't fit every situation. Which type of consequence is best for the situation you have with a difficult person?




## Relationships Revisted

Your button-pusher is in your life, and you are in his, for a purpose, and that purpose is always about growth and redemption. Like you, he needs grace and forgiveness as well as limits and consequences. Do not make the mistake of looking upon him as a curse to be borne or a burden to be survived.

MAKING LIFE BETTER

Commit yourself to remaining in the process and write out your commitment and why it matters to you.



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