



Dealing with Difficult Family During Lock-down

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Kim wished she could live on an island away from the constant badgering of difficult people in her life. Her grandmother would call her daily to disseminate the latest gossip on her family. Her brother was constantly comparing her success to his even though they did not share the same profession. Her boss was an overbearing bully who expected more and more. Her husband was demanding, controlling, and frustrating. And that was life before the lock-down. Now, she was forced to be in the same house with her husband, brother, parents, and grandmother.

The first couple of days were ok but then the fighting began. Verbal assaults, nit-picking, guilt-tripping, and angry outburst became the norm. At first, Kim believed that there was something wrong with her but after talking to a friend who witnessed a recent family gathering, Kim began to see things differently. It was not her, it was them.

She took this time to evaluate herself and realized that she tended to surround herself with hard-to-please people. Under normal circumstances, she enjoyed pleasing others but this was exhausting as the more she gave, the more they wanted. She had to do something different.

Developing boundaries is a good place to start. Especially, now. Boundaries make people feel more in control of the situation while setting limitations for their own reactions. Here are some suggestions.

1. **Step back.** Try seeing things from the difficult person's perspective. Take a few moments to step back and separate the person from the issue at hand. This can improve the perspective. For instance, Kim's grandmother was lonely and gossip was her way of connecting.
2. **Watch the response.** Difficult people tend to react in anger, become defensive or lie when confronted. Their reaction should not dictate the reaction of others. Kim learned to monitor her response regardless of how they escalated.

3. **Watch non-verbals.** Kim listened with her ears and eyes to what was being said. She focused on repeated words or phrases and uncomfortable or anxious body language. These were clues to hidden meanings.
4. **Can't change others.** Identifying what makes a person difficult and accepting it without trying to change it is overwhelming at first. But with practice, this becomes much easier. Make mental allowances for any known traumas the person may have experienced that could contribute to their behavior.
5. **Look for the positive.** The negative aspects of Kim's family so outweighed the positive, and therefore, she had forgotten the good times. It took active participation on her part to remember the difficult person's positive traits. Everyone has some positive.
6. **Do self-care.** Frequently, a difficult person refuses to acknowledge another person's needs but that doesn't minimize their importance. Kim began taking mini-breaks during her day to breathe deeply and walk outside. This helped her relieve stress.
7. **Speak carefully.** Be firm and yet kind in communication, using as few words as possible. The greater the volume of words, the greater the intensity of the discussion. Answer only the question that is asked.
8. **Be realistic.** Set realistic expectations about the results of a conversation/confrontation while anticipating the possible outcomes without overthinking the matter. By expecting an unpleasant reaction, Kim was better prepared when it occurred.
9. **Walk away.** Know when to walk away and abandon the discussion; making these decisions in advance. Kim realized that the difficult person does not need to be in charge of when she has had enough. She can make that decision.
10. **Redirect conversations.** Take the initiative. When a conversation takes a negative turn, Kim redirected the matter away from the hot topic. By leading, instead of following, she felt more in control.
11. **Avoid traps.** Eventually, the difficult person will try to instigate a defensive response by making a false accusation. This is done to catch a person in an exaggeration or a lie so they can avoid suspicion concerning their own actions. Avoid this trap.
12. **Know the triggers.** Study the difficult person in a variety of settings to understand their triggers better. This simple tactic can minimize the number of intense conversations. Kim examined her husband and discovered several triggers that she actively avoided.
13. **Use humor.** Don't belittle or be sarcastic. Gentle humor in combination with good timing can lighten an atmosphere and minimize any hurt feelings. Just be careful not to embarrass the difficult person as this might cause even more damage.

Even after confrontation, most difficult people will not change. Kim learned that people cannot change what they refuse to acknowledge. And difficult people rarely admit their demanding nature. This is not about trying to influence them; rather it is about Kim's approach in helping her to feel in control.



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