

Responding to Rude Behavior

Objective

To increase the likelihood you will respond appropriately when someone is rude to you.

What to Know

Sometimes it seems like rude behavior is all too common. Have you ever been in a conversation with someone, and they said something inappropriate or rude? Whether it's a friend, sibling, co-worker, boss, or stranger, you might not have known how to respond. And did you know rudeness is contagious? A recent study found that once someone witnesses or experiences rudeness, they are more likely to react in a rude or unkind manner. In addition, rude behavior has been shown to reduce creativity, increase aggression, and lead to poor work performance. So, if you're faced with rude behavior, how can you respond without making things worse?

There's no perfect way to respond to rude behavior, and it depends on your relationship with the person and your comfort level with addressing the situation.

Here are some suggestions for responding appropriately when someone is rude to you.

1. Have awareness and empathy. Even if the behavior or remark is completely uncalled for or inappropriate, take a step back and try to understand where the person is coming from—rather than taking it personally. This doesn't justify the behavior, but it can help you create some distance and avoid blaming yourself or attributing their behavior to their character instead of the circumstances. For example, if a car speeds and cuts you off while you're driving, you might assume the driver is rude and reckless. But perhaps they're rushing to the hospital because of an emergency.

2. Pause. Take several seconds—or longer—to breathe, observe your feelings, and consider your response. When you pause instead of immediately reacting, you give yourself time to be more objective, see things for what they are, and speak with intention and clarity.

3. Detach. If the remark or behavior is intentionally rude, simply disengage. You don't need to prove a point. And remember—some people thrive on conflict. Perhaps the person is trying to pull you into an argument. Resist engaging in situations like this.

4. Advocate for yourself. Use 'I' statements, remain calm, and respond clearly. For example, you could say, "When you yell and swear, I feel disrespected and no longer want to talk with you."

5. Maintain boundaries. You don't have to over-explain your boundaries—you just need to clearly state them so others will understand them. You might say, "Please don't say that again, or I will walk away."

6. Don't bother responding. Sometimes you can't reason with people who aren't open for

discussion or willing to take responsibility for their behavior. So, while it's important to express yourself assertively, remember that some people might not be receptive to feedback. Focus on what you can control, like limiting interactions or even ending the relationship. Consider your relationship with the person and how much time and energy you want to invest.

7. Use nonverbal cues. Sometimes, the best response might be nonverbal. For example, you could shake your head, turn away, leave the room, or show hurt in your facial expressions.

8. Ask questions. If you're uncomfortable being direct, try asking questions. Use a "what" question so the other person can reflect on what was said or done.

9. Use humor. A rude person creates tension and anxiety in themselves and everyone around them. Perhaps they're being rude because they're stressed, upset, or angry. Humor can create a diversion and break the tension, allowing everyone involved to laugh it off. For example, joke about a shared experience, or use self-deprecating humor to disarm. Finding a way to insert a little humor might be just the thing to help lighten things up.

What to Do

Effectively responding to rude behavior takes practice. Whether someone cuts in front of you in line at the store, or a co-worker makes a rude remark, you'll be better equipped to react appropriately if you follow the above suggestions. Over the next month, record situations where you are faced with rude behavior. Using the chart on the following page, write down the date, what happened, who was present, and how you responded (ideally, using one or more of the above suggestions). Then, reflect on what you can do differently next time.

What was the most difficult thing about this activity?

Using the tips in this worksheet, did you find it easier to deal with rude behavior? Explain.

What else can you do to respond appropriately when someone is rude to you?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
