

# “Help me deal effectively with toxic people”

A whopping 84% of women say they've had at least one toxic 'friend' or family member. Here, easy ways to free yourself from life's bullies and reclaim your peace



## Inner circle?

### Spot the patterns

Recognizing patterns in behavior is key to identifying a toxic person, says expert Tessa West, Ph.D., revealing that two main tactics they employ are *kitchen-sinking* and *stonewalling*. “Criticism is a hallmark of toxicity, but instead of focusing on one thing, they throw the ‘kitchen sink’ at you and attack you as a person.” Another common, yet less overt, sign is *stonewalling*, when they stop all communication and you're left wondering why, says West. “The patterns are real, and they're not your fault.”



### Choose your forum

“As soon as toxic people contact us, our blood pressure soars,” says West. Take back control by choosing how *you* want to

communicate. “My ex-husband would text me one-off comments,” she reveals. “So I said, ‘I’m taking you off text and we’re going to email from now on.’” Email is more formal and forced him to regulate his emotions and be more coherent. “And unlike texts, which I felt compelled to read right away, I *choose* when I read email, and that made a huge difference.”

### Tap ‘lil pig’ wisdom

“We need to be like the third little pig, who built brick boundaries,” declares expert Sarah K.

Ramsey. “That may mean walking away or simply seeing certain people less often, like visiting your in-laws every *other* year for the holidays. Remind yourself that you have choices, and you can find the boundary that works for you.”

## Wider world?

### Make like a ‘gray rock’

Whether it's an intrusive neighbor or someone who just loves to complain, simply being *boring* is often your best defense. “‘Gray-rocking’ describes staying quiet and not engaging them,” explains expert Sherrie Campbell, Ph.D. Once they realize they're not going to get a reaction, they often move on. “The ‘gray rock’ tactic is a great way to create distance because it doesn't require confrontation—*silence* is your superpower.”

### Sidestep work jerks

If the difficult person is a co-worker, you might consider lodging a complaint. And while our temptation is to go straight to the top, West advises gathering information first. “Find out what their *strengths* are and lead

with that, by telling your team leader, ‘I know X is a top salesperson, but...’” Acknowledging what their appeal may be makes you look more objective. Adds Ramsey, “Toxic co-workers often don't harass just one person—gather your ‘troops,’ so you can say, ‘I'm also concerned about how X spoke to Susie.’ Pointing out a pattern strengthens your argument.”

### Lean on supportive allies

The more you validate your experiences, the more resilient you'll become, says Campbell. “Sometimes self-love feels selfish after we've been treated badly,” she acknowledges. “But sharing your story with people you trust will help you feel everything you need to feel, including anger, so you can move on even stronger.”

## Our expert panel



**Tessa West, Ph.D.**, author of *Jerks at Work*, is an associate professor of psychology at NYU and an expert on both personal and professional relationships.



**Sarah K. Ramsey** is the author of *Becoming Toxic Person Proof* and host of the podcast *Toxic Person Proof*. More at SarahKRamsey.com.



**Sherrie Campbell, Ph.D.**, author of *Adult Survivors of Toxic Family Members*, is an expert on family estrangement. More at DrSherrieCampbell.com.