

# Compassion for Challenging Behaviour

## Guide



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This guide is intended as a starting point for conversations, to increase understanding for those who may have a different relationship with these topics than you do. The approaches mentioned in this guide can be part of a transition toward an understanding of human experience that will ideally foster deeper and more compassionate connections, for individuals, groups, and the entire world.

### **Tolerating Differences**

Ideally individuals can learn to understand each other's backgrounds and why they find some behaviours challenging. They can begin by tolerating, then maybe come to accept, and even to have compassion for challenging behaviours.

Knowing more about someone's personal background is often a first step toward having compassion for their behaviour. Some challenging behaviours may be difficult to tolerate, let alone accept or respect. Tolerant may be all that is possible for a while. Over time, respect can be earned in a progression from tolerance, to acceptance, to respect.

- Tolerating differences. 'Don't ask, don't tell.' An important first step, maybe as far as some people are willing or able to go.
- Accepting differences. 'Agree to disagree.' Growing understanding and the beginning of empathy.
- Respecting differences. 'Live and let live.' Mutual understanding and growing empathy.

An especially challenging behaviour can diminish respect, and it may take some time to earn it back. Tolerating a challenging behaviour is often aided by understanding it and cultivating compassion for it.

### **What are Challenging Behaviours?**

An individual may perceive some behaviours as uncomfortable, dangerous, disturbing, or 'inappropriate.' These behaviours can challenge what an individual believes to be safe, normal, or 'appropriate.' Such behaviours may include:



Speech – what someone says.

Behaviour – what someone does.

Posture or Attitude – how someone says or does things.

Crime – activity defined as illegal or illicit by agreement or convention.

## Professional Support

Sometimes compassion is not what is needed. For certain challenging behaviours, individuals may benefit from professional support. These include situations like:

- Addressing serious mental health conditions, where behaviours may cause harm to self or others.
- Discovering hidden agendas or lies, like infiltrators or provocateurs, with the deliberate aim of disrupting a group's activities.
- Discovering evidence of crime – monetary, organised, or hate crime.

Consider seeking support from a professional -- someone with training, experience, and capability -- to address these kinds of challenging behaviours.

## Why Are Behaviours Perceived as Challenging?

### Personal Style

A behaviour may clash with an individual's personal style. As an analogy: some people behave more like cats, and others behave more like dogs. Cats and dogs can find each other's behaviour challenging. Neither is better or worse, they are simply different. Individuals may be unwilling to change behaviours they value as part of their personal style.

### Cultural Background

'Appropriate' behaviour can vary by culture. Depending on their context and cultural background, individuals may have different expectations or beliefs about 'appropriate' behaviour. Individuals may find challenging behaviours that are 'normal' in a different culture.

The same behaviour may be viewed differently by different cultures. For instance:

culture A's view (appropriate)	culture B's view (inappropriate)
physical affection	harassment
emotional expression	rudeness
critical feedback	shaming
appreciation	gossip
humour	micro-aggression



## Socialisation

Shame can be used to teach children to tell 'good' behaviours from 'bad' ones. If a child behaves 'badly' this can reflect poorly on the child, and on all of their caregiving adults. Some cultures, where individuals' behaviours are closely tied to their immediate and extended families, use shame to enforce cultural norms about 'good' behaviour. People socialised by shame can have strong beliefs about being 'raised properly,' knowing 'who their people are,' what is 'shameful,' and how misbehaviour can have large consequences for individuals, families, and the wider society. They may find challenging the behaviour of those from a different background where such consequences were smaller or absent.

## Sensitivities and Preferences

An individual's history contributes to their personal sensitivities and preferences. For instance, someone whose eyes are sensitive to bright light, with a history of headaches or migraines, may prefer to wear sunglasses, to meet in areas with indirect lighting, or prefer incandescent to fluorescent light bulbs. Some people prefer certain behaviours over others, related to their personal sensitivities.

## Coping Strategies

Over time, individuals can develop coping strategies for their sensitivities, often related to their core beliefs about themselves and the world. They may have gone through a process of trial and error with various coping strategies, and come to prefer certain ones. This can correspond to strong preferences about maintaining specific behaviours as part of a coping strategy, which can feel extremely important, even like a matter of life and death. Individuals may be unwilling to change behaviours that are part of a hard-won coping strategy, and may view others' behaviours not only as challenging, but as a threat to their well-being.

## Reactions and Responses

Some challenging behaviours can be reactions. Such behaviours can feel involuntary, especially when a sensitivity 'triggers' a coping strategy. It can feel like an individual 'has no choice' – the behaviour is so habitual that it arises before they can think about what they are doing. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is a way to investigate triggers and reactionary behaviour to allow individuals more choices. Ideally individuals can learn to notice when they are triggered, pause before reacting, and choose how to respond (see [Mindfulness + Resources](#)).



## Psychological Trauma

“Psychological trauma is the unique individual experience of an event or enduring conditions, in which:

- The individual’s ability to integrate their emotional experience is overwhelmed, or
- The individual experiences (subjectively) a threat to life, bodily integrity, or sanity.

(Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995, p. 60)

Psychological trauma overwhelms an individual’s ability to cope, and leaves that person fearing death, annihilation, mutilation, or psychosis. Traumatic circumstances commonly include abuse of power, betrayal of trust, entrapment, helplessness, pain, confusion, and/or loss. This broad definition of trauma includes responses to powerful one-time incidents like accidents, natural disasters, crimes, surgeries, deaths, and other violent events. It also includes responses to chronic or repetitive experiences such as child abuse, neglect, combat, urban violence, concentration camps, battering relationships, and enduring deprivation.” – Esther Giller, 1999.

“Catastrophic events are traumatic in their impact, but I define trauma differently. Trauma is not what happens to a person, but what happens within them. In line with its Greek origins, trauma means a wound — an unhealed one, and one the person is compelled to defend against by means of constricting their own ability to feel, to be present, to respond flexibly to situations. Wherever we’re wounded, there’s scar tissue that forms, and scar tissue is always harder, less resilient, and less flexible than the tissue that it replaces. When psychological trauma happens, our psyches become more rigid and harder, less flexible and responsive. We become more rigid in our responses to life, to ourselves, to relationships, to stimuli.” – Gabor Maté, 2019

Trauma may be broadly grouped into four categories:

1. direct experience of the trauma first-hand
2. witnessing someone else's trauma first-hand
3. hearing about or imagining a trauma second-hand
4. ancestral or historical trauma (see below).

Individuals can develop challenging behaviours as part of a coping strategy, often related to a history of psychological pain, suffering, or trauma. They may have an experience of trauma either in their present context, or in their past history.

## Historical Trauma

(Wikipedia)

The effects of trauma can be transmitted collectively and intergenerationally. First identified by social worker and mental health expert Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart to describe



Lakota communities, historical trauma has now been found to affect many populations. Though the details may differ, the effects are similar. The after-effects of war, genocide, slavery, or colonisation can continue to linger for several generations. Patterns of childhood abandonment, neglect, or abuse may be visible across three generations. Symptoms may include psychological conditions and vulnerability to certain diseases. Communities and families can be affected by cycles of violence that are difficult to disrupt.

Addressing historical trauma aims to help individuals transition toward adaptive coping strategies. Successful approaches also rely on changes in communities and cultures (see [Transition in Group Culture](#)). Individuals and communities affected by historical trauma can benefit from re-connecting with their culture, values, beliefs, personal and group identity (see [Connection to Self, Others, World](#)). Especially people who were denied connection to important aspects of their original culture for many years.

In a process that can take some time, it is possible to recover from any trauma and transform one's relationship to it (see [Peace Principles](#)). With support, individuals can transform their deepest wounds into their most powerful gifts – a pattern seen in several kinds of transition.

## Showing Support

(Starhawk)

Community organiser and theologian Starhawk recommends several ways to show compassionate and empathic support for those affected by psychological trauma:

<p><b>Admit Your Ignorance.</b> “I can't imagine how you feel.” “I don't know what to say.”</p>	<p><b>Listen.</b> Simply being willing to listen can be supportive. Bonus: be non-judgmental.</p>
<p><b>Don't Tear Open the Wound.</b> Healing takes time. Rushing can add harm. Avoid re-stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Protect.</b> Give space and time to allow their nervous system to return to baseline.</p>
<p><b>Don't Blame the Victim.</b> They are coping with a trauma. Defending against accusations does not help recovery.</p>	<p><b>Advocate.</b> Explain the situation to others to increase their support.</p>
<p><b>Encourage Creative Integration.</b> Healing benefits from time to re-integrate and reconnect to creativity and identity.</p>	<p><b>Do the Dishes.</b> Tend daily practicalities so they don't have to.</p>
<p><b>Support Strength and Resilience.</b> Avoid enabling addiction or disempowering. Help them re-learn how to stand on their own.</p>	<p><b>See the Person as Whole.</b> Identity includes strengths and wounds. Be more defined by present choices than by past challenges.</p>



## Recognising Trauma

(Starhawk)

Starhawk suggests several ways to recognise behaviours based on trauma.

**Horizontal Violence:** within cultures that have been historically and systematically oppressed, individual or collective anger and frustration may result in violent or challenging behaviours. Since large socio-economic systems and institutions may feel out of reach 'vertically', behaviours may be directed 'horizontally' at those nearby and within reach (see [Oppression and Power](#)).

**Perpetual Victim:** 'blaming, blurting, bleating.' Those who are healing from psychological trauma may over-identify with the role of the victim and exhibit behaviours that reinforce their social status as a victim. 'Blaming' others may enable them to avoid taking responsibility. 'Blurting' may enable the use of unsupportive, hurtful, or inappropriate language. 'Bleating' may try to excuse problematic behaviours, or enlist assistance to remain a victim.

Ideally, Transitioners can help people to:

- reframe traumatic experiences to support personal resilience.
- support empowerment without enabling maladaptive coping strategies.
- support 'victims' to grow and develop into whole beings.
- integrate trauma and transform it into strength.

## The Drama Triangle

(Stephen Karpman)

The role of Victim is one of three dramatic roles described in transactional psychologist Stephen Karpman's Drama Triangle. Many challenging behaviours are associated with Drama Triangle roles. Karpman usually draws an inverted triangle with the Victim in the downward position, the Persecutor and the Rescuer in the upward positions.

**Victim. 1-down.** Disempowered and in need of support.

**Persecutor. 1-up.** Empowered by persecuting a Victim.

**Rescuer. 1-up.** Empowered by resisting a Persecutor and enabling a Victim.

The roles are motivated by profit – how they can best gain advantage – and people can switch roles if it appears it will 'yield a better payoff.' The roles are transactional, and do not support truly relational connection (see [Connection to Self, Others, World](#)). Families or group cultures can be based on unconscious assumption of roles, perpetuating a Drama Triangle or another of Karpman's various transactional triangles.



Acey Choy proposes that these roles can transform into a 'Winner's Triangle,' which is less transactional and more relational.

**Vulnerable. 1-even.** Empowered in their vulnerability, not needy, able to support themselves.

**Assertive. 1-even.** Empowered to speak their truth without disempowering others.

**Coach. 1-even.** Empowered to empower others rather than enable them.

In a process that can take some time, it is possible for individuals to transition away from Drama Triangle roles toward Winner's Triangle roles, reframing the source of their empowerment ([see Marty de Jonge article](#)). With increased awareness, individuals can have more compassion for challenging behaviours based on Drama Triangle roles.

## Helping vs. Enabling

It can be difficult to discern when compassion for a challenging behaviour is helpful rather than enabling. Sometimes compassion is helpful, and supports an individual struggling with a challenging behaviour. Showing compassion can re-frame their negative self-talk, and help them feel less isolated in their struggle (see [Negative Self-Talk](#), see [Empathy and Compassion](#)). Some challenging behaviours, however, mostly enable an individual to maintain a maladaptive coping strategy or a role in a Drama Triangle. Ideally these behaviours can be identified, understood, and adjusted as part of a transition toward empowerment.

Sometimes asking someone to change a challenging behaviour is best for everyone. Approaching challenging behaviours differently can be part of a transition in a group's culture (see [Transition in Group Culture](#)). Individuals can contribute to such a transition by cultivating their own compassion.

## Cultivating Compassion

Compassion does not usually arrive all at once. Like in gardening, it can be cultivated, encouraged to grow a little at a time. Individuals can improve conditions and strengthen the roots of compassion.

Compassion involves being personally resilient enough to meet someone in their pain, turn towards them, and find ways to support them. Compassion derives from the Latin words for 'suffering together,' implying an attempt to ease a burden by sharing it; and a willingness to be in relationship for some time. While expressing empathy can be short-term, compassionate support often involves a longer-term relationship with another person, their pain, and finding ways to support them. An individual offering compassionate support ideally attunes to another's suffering so as to respond to it in a good way – appropriate to the context of who and how they are; and respecting the boundaries of both giver and receiver.



For example, if my work colleague exhibits challenging behaviour, I can show them compassion in several ways. I can:

- view the behaviour as based on a coping strategy
- understand they may have been reacting rather than responding
- empathise with how they may be feeling
- encourage them to seek support or practice self-care
- offer to support them, while considering how to support my own well-being
- give them feedback about how and why I find their behaviour challenging (see [Offering and Receiving Feedback](#)).

Cultivating compassion for challenging behaviour may include things which at first seem difficult, like conversations or conflicts which may feel uncomfortable (see [Re-Framing Conflict](#)).

Navigating discomfort is often part of any kind of transition, and cultivating compassion is about gradually getting better at turning towards discomfort with curiosity, humility, and courage.

This can feel especially difficult when:

- another's reality seems alien, or opposite to one's own
- another's expression of beliefs or values feels uncomfortable
- an individual doesn't like another's habits, behaviours, or attitudes.

Sometimes the habits, behaviours, or attitudes individuals don't like about themselves are the same ones they don't like about others. Cultivating compassion for one's own shortcomings can grow one's compassion for others'.

Any kind of transition can benefit from patience, courage, kindness, and forgiving easily. Individuals can strengthen their 'muscles' for turning towards the discomfort of challenging behaviours so that expressing empathy, cultivating compassion, and building trust all become more common.

## Related Resources

### [Seeking Support](#)

Self-Care series [01](#) [02](#) [03](#) [04](#) [05](#) [06](#)

[Connection to Self, Others, World](#)

[Negative Self-Talk](#)

[Empathy and Compassion](#)

[Mindfulness + Resources](#)

[Transition in Group Culture](#)

[Offering and Receiving Feedback](#)

### [Feedback Culture](#)

[Re-Framing Conflict](#)

[Peace Principles](#)

[Sharing and Celebrating Failings](#)

[Transition and Social Justice](#)

[Enhancing Cultural Competence](#)

[Respect for Diversity](#)

[Oppression and Power](#)



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