

# ã Rude World

PTA meetings are not peaceful. Politicians are not polite. And yikes, the Facebook comment section. If we try a little harder to meet all this rudeness with grace, writes Jennifer King Lindley, we just might save society, or at least keep our blood pressure down.

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A lot of people these days—and no, they aren't all your grandmother—are bemoaning the death of civility. We witness shoving in a crowded elevator, snarky comments online, or yelling in traffic, and it does seem like the world is going to h-e-double hockey sticks in a handbasket (how's that for manners?). But whether or not the perception is true—after all, nitwits in your grandparents' generation cut in line, too; it just wasn't broadcast via Instagram Stories—we are feeling the strain. A January 2017 poll by the communications firm Weber Shandwick found that 69 percent of respondents said they thought the U.S. had a major civility problem. "We are in an age of rudeness," says Lisa Mirza Grotts, an etiquette expert in San Francisco. "And it seems to be getting worse." You can blame technology, of course. We sometimes focus more on our phones than on the faces and feelings of actual people. Then there are the Twitter wars and politicians shouting at one another on the news. You can also blame long work hours. "Sixty percent of employees say they act uncivilly because they are overworked and stressed and don't have time to be nice," says Christine Porath, PhD, professor of management at Georgetown University and author of *Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace*.

What you might not realize is that all this rudeness takes a toxic toll. A 2017 study in *Journal of Organizational Behavior* found that employees suffered from stomach problems, sleeplessness, and headaches days after being dissed on the job. Other research has shown that experiencing, or even witnessing, rudeness can hurt our creativity and our working memory. "Often rudeness is ambiguous, so we use up a lot of cognitive resources trying to figure it out," says Trevor Foulk, PhD, assistant professor of organizational behavior at the University of Maryland in College Park. (Did my roommate leave those dirty dishes in the sink because she's inconsiderate or because she had to rush off?) Says Porath, "We look to others as mirrors of our own value. So when people act rudely toward us, it can make us feel we're not deserving of respect."

What can we do about it, since smartphones, television, the Internet, and, well, human beings are here to stay? Be nice. Let things go as much as you can. And follow this expert advice on handling

# 1 When It's a Stranger.

## **WHAT YOU WANT TO DO:**

Give that subway shover or loud-phone-talker-in-the-library a piece of your mind—though you'll probably never see her again. Why? “Even a small act can tap into a well of deep feelings. It may bring up all the other times you felt disrespected in some way” and may make your blood boil, says Joyce Marter, a therapist and the founder of Urban Balance, a counseling practice in Chicago.

## **WHAT YOU SHOULD DO:**

Speaking up may only increase tension. Instead, take a deep breath and resist the urge to engage. Most important, remember that the offensive behavior has nothing to do with you. The person could just be having a bad day; she's not intentionally trying to irritate you. Second, “it's not your job to teach the world manners,” says Grotts. “And if the person is truly unpleasant, he won't learn from anything you say anyway.” When you fume because the last treadmill user left sweat all over the handles, you experience a cascade of stress hormones that can, in time, wreak havoc on your health. It can help to calm this automatic response through practicing a mantra, says Jennifer Riggs, a neuroscience coach in Boston who works with professional women. Try, “It's not about me,” and repeat it silently until you cool down. The goal is to create space and shift your perspective away from that stressful moment, adds Riggs. Think about a happy place, like the beach, or something that makes you feel good. The aim is to eventually create new habits or thinking patterns in response to these kinds of slights.



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remaining silent would cause you lengthy, ongoing distress. Example: The plane passenger next to you has her music turned waaaaaay up, and you can hear it even though she's wearing headphones. "There are tiny acts of social thuggery," says Amy Alkon, a science-based manners expert and author of ***Good Manners for Nice People Who Sometimes Say F\*CK.*** "Something is being taken from you—your time, your peace, your space." You will likely be flustered in the moment, so Alkon advises thinking out how you will react to these aggravations in advance. Address the person with the respect and empathy you wish she were showing you. "It's called emotional matching. We naturally mirror the other person's tone," says Ryan Martin, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. "Instead of getting into a screaming match, the person is more likely to respond to your concern in a reasonable way." So open by giving the offender the benefit of the doubt: "You may not realize that your music is loud enough for the rest of us to hear. It doesn't help that we're sitting in such tight quarters! Would you mind lowering the volume a bit?" If the person is simply clueless, she will probably apologize, says Alkon. If she's a jerk, your saintly reaction should at least cause her some satisfying chagrin.

## **2** When It's a Coworker.

### **WHAT YOU WANT TO DO:**

Vent to other coworkers, vent to your friends, vent to your roommates...or maybe you just mutter under your breath about the guy in marketing who always leaves the coffeepot empty. Either way, it's

may go home and start fighting with your spouse or kids," says Riggs.

### **WHAT YOU SHOULD DO:**

Avoid the meanies! Take another route to the conference room if you have to pass someone who always has a sarcastic, biting comment. "We remember negative encounters much more intensely than we do positive ones," says Catherine Mattice Zundel, founder of the consulting group Civility Partners. "Even the slightest uncivil encounter can keep you distracted and stay with you for a long time." To help change the office vibe, initiate a charm offensive instead of a gossipfest. If rudeness is contagious, so is courtesy, says Porath. Research from the Gottman Institute discovered that couples who stay together and have happier marriages make five positive comments for every negative one. That can apply to work relationships, too. Some organizations have instituted a 10-5 rule to help create a more cordial vibe: If you are within 10 feet of someone, make eye contact and smile. If you are within five feet, greet them with a hello. (Sound hokey? Research found that worker satisfaction jumped measurably.) "You can also create a happier atmosphere by showing those around you that you are interested in them and present," says Porath. Then people will be more considerate to you.

### **THE EXCEPTION:**

When the rude person is someone you can't avoid (your boss, your partner on a long-term project) and it's a pattern of disrespect, not an occasional gaffe you can ignore, you may need to speak up. Zundel recommends this three-part conversation: (1) State the problem. "Jamie, when you were talking to me yesterday about the mistakes I'd made on that report, you were yelling at me." (2) State the consequences of the person's actions. "When you do that, it makes it hard for me to learn how to fix the mistakes so I can avoid them next time." (3) Offer a solution. "I am really interested in learning how to improve, so in the future it would be helpful if you could talk with me about my mistakes and coach me through them instead of raising your voice." This respectful, constructive tone works with bosses, too, she says. And if you're the boss and an employee is the offender? Focus on what you do want, not on the behavior that's driving you nuts, says Zundel: "When you want someone to stop being late, you want the employee to be on time. Say that in your conversation rather than the negative."

## **3** When It's Online (or via Text).

### **WHAT YOU WANT TO DO:**

email/text/comment in return. What's worse: The detachment of the Internet makes bad behavior seem consequence-free. Friends say more hurtful things on Facebook than in person; you're more likely to rant about shoddy customer service in a post than say something to a salesperson's face.

### **WHAT YOU SHOULD DO:**

Maybe, just maybe, don't check your phone first thing in the morning. Reading Twitter skirmishes and comment brawls before work will make you extra alert to rudeness around you all day, a phenomenon known as priming. "Our brains have evolved so that if we see one bad thing, we know the likelihood of other bad things is high. If you see one wolf, you must be in wolf territory," says Foulk. When you get to the office, your rudeness radar will be on high alert. So when someone says something open to your interpretation ("Nice shoes"), you'll bristle. And, again, try to give people the benefit of the doubt and let things go. "Venting online feels good in the moment but is more likely to make you feel worse afterward," says Martin. In one of his studies, published in *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, college students who had been asked to write such tirades reported being in worse moods after doing so. If you get into the habit of dealing with anger in this unhealthy way, ranting can become your go-to method in real life, says Martin. Remind yourself that it's easy to take emails and texts the wrong way when you lack tone of voice. (Emojis don't make up for it. Sorry.) "You may be interpreting ambiguous messages as rude when they aren't meant that way," says Martin. So stop and think before you fire back a response, and try to respond as if the sender's underlying motive was the most gentle, benign one possible, which it absolutely may have been.

### **THE EXCEPTION:**

If you simply can't manage to reply without your own sarcasm or without digging a deeper hole, then write back and ask for clarification in a restrained, polite way: "It seems like you might be upset that I already made a reservation. Are you? I just want to see everyone and have fun. Happy for you to pick the place." If possible, have a face-to-face conversation. Stroll over to the sender's cubicle for a check-in or—gasp—call a friend and actually talk.

## **FOLLOW REAL SIMPLE**



The Surprising Ingredient You