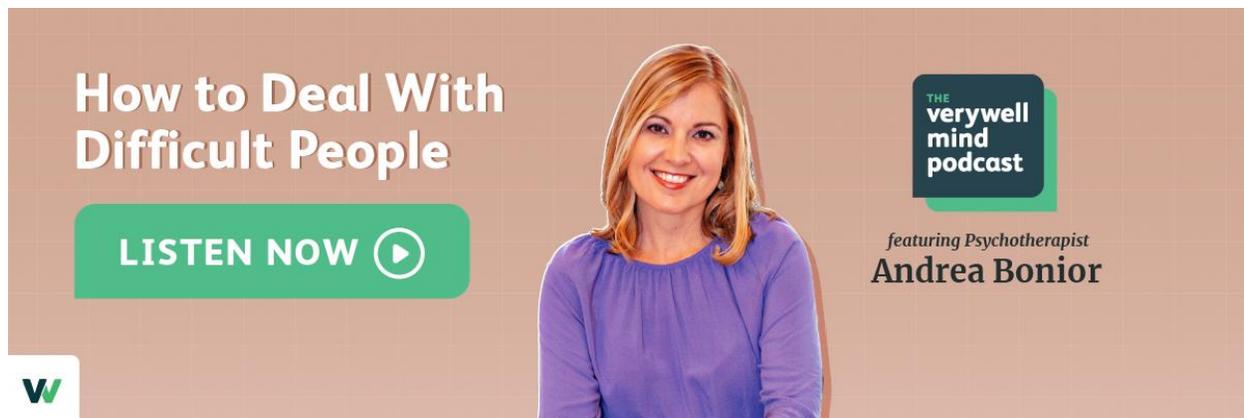




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## 220 – How to Deal with Difficult People with Psychotherapist Dr. Andrea Bonior

Amy Morin:

Welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast*! I'm Amy Morin, the editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength. Every Monday, I introduce you to a mentally strong person whose story and mental strength tips can inspire you to think, feel, and do your best in life. And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys! Don't forget to subscribe to us on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week.

Now, let's dive into today's episode!

Do you allow a difficult person to ruin your day sometimes? Do you let other people bring out the worst in you? Do you spend a lot of time rehashing conversations you had with someone wishing that you had handled things differently? If you answered yes to any of those questions, today's episode is for you.

No matter where you go in life or what you're doing, you're bound to deal with difficult people. And if we're honest, sometimes it's us who are the difficult people. But it's easier to notice when other people are being difficult. Maybe you have a wishy-washy friend who backs out of plans at the last minute or a family member who seems to think that they know everything. Maybe you have a colleague who gives you tons of unhelpful

advice. Fortunately, though, there are strategies that can help you skillfully deal with all of these kinds of people. And to help us with that today is Andrea Bonior. She's a psychologist and author of a really good book called *Detox Your Thoughts*. She's been on the show before. To hear her talk about how to handle negative thoughts, go back and listen to episode number 34. She's also the host of a new podcast called *Baggage Check*.

Some of the things she talks about today are how to speak up to difficult people, how to navigate tough conversations, and how to manage your emotional responses to others. Make sure to stick around until the end of the episode for The Therapist's Take. It's the part of the show where I'll give you my take on Andrea's strategies and show you how you can start applying them to your own life. So here's Andrea Bonior on how to deal with difficult people.

Amy Morin:

Andrea Bonior, welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast*!

Andrea Bonior:

Thanks so much for having me.

Amy Morin:

Maybe I should say welcome back because you were on our show once before and we talked about detoxing your thoughts. It went along with your book.

Andrea Bonior:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

But I wanted to have you back to talk about something that a lot of our listeners have been bringing up to me lately, which is about dealing with difficult people. I don't know whether people have gotten more difficult say since the pandemic or our tolerance for difficult people has shifted. But I'm hearing from a lot of people who are saying things

like, "Gee, I'm struggling to deal with somebody in my life right now. I don't know what to do." Or, "I'm working on boundaries more than ever and I'm having a hard time." Are you hearing anything like this in your practice as well?

Andrea Bonior:

All the time. And I really think both things are true that you mentioned. I think we're somewhat out of practice from the pandemic of dealing with people in general as much as we usually do. And so a lot of us might have developed some quirks that make us a little tougher to be around. And also too, our tolerance for other people has gone down too. And so I think we have this perfect storm where people are going back to the office sometimes and having to interact in ways that they're not used to anymore. And if everybody's gotten a little bit quirkiest, it's tough. And even in social situations, there could be friends that now you're just spending a lot more time with, which is wonderful except for the fact that now these friends are driving you up the wall because you have a lower tolerance now. So absolutely, I'm hearing it. I'm finding that in my clients there's a lot more relational sort of interactional type of things we need to work through.

Amy Morin:

And I wonder if part of it too for some people is that they got a break from it. It's almost like we forgot if you work in a toxic place or you have people that are bugging you all the time, once you got a break from it, that relief just reminded you of, "Oh, this is kind of nice." And then when you get back into it and you think, "All right, here we go again." But now I have choices and options in how I respond to difficult people, whereas maybe before you didn't realize that you did.

Andrea Bonior:

Mm-hmm. Exactly, exactly. And I think self-awareness is going to be such an important theme today. Like you said, really sort of noticing, okay, how am I a little bit different? How has my patience changed a little bit? How have I been interacting a little bit less tolerably with other people? And I think self-awareness in terms of really being honest is going to be really key.

Amy Morin:

Well, I want to run down some specific situations. The ones that I'm hearing about the most from people and the struggles that they're having with the types of difficult people they're encountering. The first one is people who seem to know everything. I think that during the pandemic, a lot of people feel like they suddenly became experts in everything and they feel like they have to impart their wisdom on other people. I know I'm experiencing this in my own life too, where people are like, "You know what you should do it with your business?" Or, "You know what? You should write your next book." But it's never anybody who's been an author or it's not anybody who has a business similar to mine who seems to be offering the advice, yet they're very specific about exactly what I should do and how I should do it and how if I don't follow it, then somehow there's something wrong with me. How do you deal with know-it-alls to really give you a lot of unsolicited advice about what you should do and how you should do it?

Andrea Bonior:

Yeah. It's so interesting that it's so easy to have all these presumed answers when you're not close to the situation. I find that too, the people who have the least experience in a situation have the easiest time spouting off the simple answers, because it seems like it should be simple. So I think the first thing to do is really watch your body language so that you can take a tone if it's in person of not escalating things further. Some people immediately let their frustration show and the other person gets defensive because they say, "Wait, you're not listening to me." And I think that's especially true if it's a loved one. Your sister's always trying to give you advice and she gets extra frustrated because you just tune her out and you make it obvious you're tuning out. So have sort of a respectful demeanor.

Some people like to say, "Uh-huh, I'll take that into consideration." And remember that you don't actually have to tell someone right then and there that you're going to do what they say. I think a lot of us feel like to be kind, we have to say, "Oh yes, that's a wonderful idea and I'll do that." Instead, we can say, "Hey, I appreciate you saying that." Or, "Hey, I'll think about that." And you can have that script in advance if you know that

you're going to be working with somebody or interacting with somebody who tends to be this way.

We can appreciate somebody's opinion while also deciding that we're just going to file that away in the mental circular file and make it something that we don't think of anymore. But we can thank them for their time and be respectful. And I find that that's less likely to escalate the situation. And whenever we're dealing with difficult people, it's really key for us to not escalate the situation.

Amy Morin:

Definitely. And there's different scenarios. Sometimes it might just be the stranger, passerby who's telling you, hey, you know how you should mow your lawn when you're outside doing something. Well, thank you very much and you can move on and you don't have to report back. But other times it might be like our mother-in-laws telling you how to parent your kids. And then she follows up with, "Well, I told you not to do that." And then it becomes a little bit of a different situation of how do you deal with somebody who's maybe always inserting themselves into your life.

Andrea Bonior:

Right. For sure. When there's a pattern of it and it's going to be a continued intrusion, it is important to think about a longer term strategy. And often that does involve having a really difficult conversation. So that might involve really choosing a nice quiet time, using those I statements that we always talk about with couples therapy and saying, "I have to tell you, I've been feeling a little upset about a lot of the times I feel like you're judging me and I feel like you're giving me advice and if I don't follow it, that it's somehow feeling upsetting to you. And I wondered if we could talk about this because it doesn't seem to be working. And I always appreciate your opinion, but I feel like sometimes we're getting into a dead end here because if I don't follow your advice, I feel like I'm disappointing you."

Those type of conversations are very awkward, but I think they're very important to have because otherwise we just get used to a certain pattern and we secretly grow resentful and that it's harder and harder and harder for anything to change.

Amy Morin:

I'm glad that you acknowledged it's awkward because I think sometimes we talk about just sit down and have a conversation, confront the issue and we make it sound like it's really simple to do, but it's hard. It's hard to sit down with somebody and say, "Actually, I'm struggling with this or I'm having a hard time dealing with that." And to confront it head on isn't always easy to do.

Andrea Bonior:

Mm-hmm.

Amy Morin:

Another big one that I hear from people is backhanded compliments.

Andrea Bonior:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

And it's so cringeworthy when you hear someone give one when they say something like, "Oh Andrea, that's a really nice shirt. I like it a lot. It looks way better than one you had on yesterday." When people say those kinds of things, how do you respond?

Andrea Bonior:

Yes. I find that taking a pause is best in this situation because really a lot of times the pause serves multiple purposes. First, it can allow the other person to really hear what they've said. Sometimes people actually don't realize how bad it sounded. And so the pause kind of has their words sitting there still in the air and it can lead to some increased insight on their part of, "Oh my goodness, that sounded really awful what I said." But the pause also, once again, helps us from escalating.

So the first step is to pause and then just ask yourself, what am I hoping to have happen next? Am I hoping to just totally move out of this conversation so I can move forward? Am I hoping to actually tell them that this hurt me? Because those are going to

lead to two different ends. So if you're hoping to sort move out of the conversation, you can do that pause and you can say literally something like, "Okay, well..." And then move on to something else. Or some people when the comment is really cutting will say, "Wow!" And then move on. And I think sometimes that can come across a little passive aggressively, but I think it's also a way of hitting the brakes.

Now if you want to let the person know in the moment that it's hurtful, you can certainly do that too, but be wary that it might not be the forum where they're actually going to hear what you have to say. So you can say something like, "Huh, I'm not sure how to take that. I'll have to give that some thought." Or, "Wow, I'm surprised that you would say something like that." And you can sort of see how they react. And if they're apologetic or they're willing to actually hear what you have to say, then you might have some luck with being able to let them know that they hurt you. Or if they immediately get defensive, "Well, what do you mean? I said I liked your shirt." Then you're going to just have to recognize that they're not in a place to be able to hear what you have to say and to validate your feelings.

Amy Morin:

Yeah. And should we take that into consideration, what we think their intent is? I know some people say passive aggressive things on purpose, they're trying to make it sound like they're being kind to you when they're not, but they know that they're not. But I also feel like other people struggle to give a compliment in a way that's genuine or they end up putting that twist on the end as a way to like, they think it's motivating you to maybe do better again next time. Should you take that into consideration when you decide how to respond?

Andrea Bonior:

Yes, I do think that motive matters. And I think this is where empathy comes in too. We can sometimes have empathy for the person's situation. Maybe it's a relative that we know that is going through a really hard time in other ways. Or maybe it's just a friend that we know had a bad day or maybe we know it's a person who kind of struggles with social interactions and says the wrong thing at times. Even though their heart is in the

right place, they just have challenges communicating well. I think in all of those situations, our empathy will help us say, "This person wasn't trying to hurt me and I don't need to let them seem like a bad person in my mind."

Amy Morin:

And some of the people I know who do it, I suspect there are some self-esteem issues involved and they want to look like they're a team player, like they're being kind. But at the same time they can't help but put in some kind of a dig to make themselves look a little bit better. It's tough to be around those people sometimes because they do it quite often. They may not even realize that they're doing it or how often it comes out of their mouths.

Andrea Bonior:

Yes, yes. And I think this is really true for us too. I mean, there are no doubt people listening who, we have to be honest, who might have these patterns themselves. And so I think if we're going to think about how to deal with difficult people, we also have to think about how to be honest with ourselves when we are the difficult person. Because we might be wonderful and kind in many respects and then we might have habits just in certain situations where we're really tough to deal with. I've known people who are so kind and generous, but in certain situations they get really insecure and they start to be rude or snappy and they're not the persons that they usually are. And I think it's important for us to recognize that none of us are our best all the time.

Amy Morin:

And that's a good point because it's so easy to blame other people for being difficult without looking at the times when we are difficult. It's not that you're either a difficult person or you're not. Certain circumstances will bring out the worst in you or times when you're in situations with certain people or when those insecurity buttons get pushed, all of us can resort to some not so nice behaviors too.

Andrea Bonior:

Exactly.

Amy Morin:

Let's talk about not following through with commitments, because something else I'm hearing from people is they'll say, well, I'll ask somebody like, "Hey, I'm moving on Saturday, I just need a couple people to come help. Do you think you could?" And people don't want to commit yes or no or they'll say, "Yeah, I think I can." And then come Friday night they're like, "Well, actually I have something else to do tomorrow." And the person would say, "Well, if they would've just told me on Tuesday they couldn't do it, I would've had somebody else lined up. But because they waited until the last second or they refused to commit or they backed out at the last minute, they really left me in a tough situation."

I'm hearing that a lot lately. And again, I don't know if it's because of COVID, we're not used to committing to things or we overcommit and then we just aren't used to being out in public and doing these things as much so then we back out or what the deal is, but that's a tough one to deal with. How do we deal with people who either won't commit or when they do commit, they flake out on us and leave us hanging.

Andrea Bonior:

I agree. I think this is growing ever more common. Honestly, I saw it start a bit before COVID I think. Not to blame everything on technology, but I do think technology really helped usher in an era of always knowing if maybe something better was going to come along and being able to flake out at the last minute. 15, 20 years ago, if you were going to flake out on someone, you might not be able to let them know right then and there and so you couldn't flake out at the last minute because they'd literally be waiting at the airport for their ride or whatever. So I think part of it is it's just so easy to flake out and then part of it is, "Well, there might be a better offer. I'm aware on Instagram of the fun that everybody else is doing. I don't want to miss out on that so maybe I'll change plans at the last minute."

But I think this is a case of short term versus long term comfort. So many of us choose the short term ease of not saying no because it's more comfortable than saying no. But then long term, we damage our relationship. And I tell people all the time, you will always damage the relationship more if you become known as being unreliable or

somebody who cancels at the last minute constantly compared to just asserting yourself from the beginning and saying, "You know, I don't think that I can help you this weekend. I'm so sorry." And so try to pause and try to remember that and think about the fact that trust is so important. And when you bail at the last second over and over again, trust starts to erode in a relationship.

It's like the people who are running late and so they text, "I'm almost there, I'm almost there, I'm almost there." They're still a half hour away. But in the short term, the comfort of telling the person you're almost there, it's so tempting because oh, the person's not going to be as mad at me if they think I'm already there. But then a half hour later, the person is more angry than ever because they thought that you were just walking in the door and you were still a half hour away.

So really try to have that mentality that you're not just living for the next five minutes of comfort. You've got to make the decision that is not going to damage the relationship in the long term and pause before you say yes to think maybe I should be saying no. I work with women all the time I think who have a problem with this. And I say, "No can be a full sentence." Because I think the people who do this are, they say, "Well, I'm really busy this weekend, but then... Oh, I don't know, I guess I could squeeze it in." And then the next thing they know they've said yes.

So if you're on the receiving end of this, if you've got a friend who always does this to you, I think it's important to initiate a conversation and say, "You know, the past few times that we've been committed to doing something at the last minute, I know you've changed your mind. And I understand you've got a lot going on, but would you mind next time when we make plans, if there's a big possibility that maybe it won't happen, I'd just rather know then. And it's not going to hurt my feelings, I'd just rather know so that I can plan." And really being honest that it does take a negative toll when somebody bails at the last minute.

Amy Morin:

And something I'm hearing from people too is they'll say, "Well, I committed to this but yet I'm going to take care of myself this weekend so I'm not going to go." And they kind of brush it off as saying, "Well, this is self-care," by backing out. And there are times

when yes, we all commit to things or you're on the fence about going and if you don't go, maybe nobody cares if you don't show up. But if you commit to helping a friend with a project and you know that they're depending on you and then you bail at the last second because you're like, "Actually, I need a relaxing day." We don't think about the lurch that leave somebody else saying that it was really us who overcommitted and we should have said something first. And self-care comes in when we decide whether to take the commitment or not, not at the last second when we might be leaving somebody hanging.

Andrea Bonior:

Yes. Oh, that's so true. And I tell people all the time, self-care isn't the emergency pressure release valve of now I've got to just stop doing everything because I'm so burnt out. Self-care is being honest with yourself and with others in day to day life so that you're not setting yourself up for commitments that are going to make you want to run at the last second. And the truth is, sometimes I do see self-care being used something as an excuse in relationships. I'm all for self-care, it's something that I help people cultivate all the time. But I also think every now and then there's the person who's like, "Eh, this friend gets on my nerves and I shouldn't have said yes. So you know what? I'm not going to go and that's just because I don't want to and I need to take care of myself tonight."

And I can certainly empathize with that, but long term it's not doing anyone any good to put that off to the last second. And again, if we're in a relationship with somebody, even just a friendship, we owe them just a little bit of courtesy in terms of generally sticking to our plans. I understand things come up, I understand people who are socially anxious, they might feel at the last minute that this is just too much. I can't handle this and I get that. But they might take that into consideration over and over again each time so that they can also honor the relationship and not create a pattern where they're making it harder on themselves because their friends are all going to be pretty angry with them. That doesn't help that person either.

Amy Morin:

And I like what you said before about technology because I think you hit the nail on the head that technology makes it easier for us to say, yes, I will do that unless something else better comes along and then I will go find something else to do if I see that there's something cool going on this weekend and it looks like more fun than that thing I committed to.

Andrea Bonior:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

What do you do if you have a friend who's always in that gray area of like, "Well, I don't know what I'm doing on Saturday but I'll keep that in mind." Or maybe, they give you the maybe response and you're looking for a clear-cut answer. Because if they say no, maybe you'll ask somebody else. Or if they say no, you need to find somebody else to help you with something, what can you do with those kinds of people?

Andrea Bonior:

Yeah, I think sometimes if it's a close friend in the moment you can say, "Well, is there anything specific that you're waiting on so I know?" Or you can say, "Okay, I get you don't know now, but would it be possible for you to let me know by Wednesday night so that I can plan food or whatever it is." I think you can ask for more specifics. And if it's a super close friend, you can be honest that maybe you even use a sense of humor that this is a pattern like, "Oh, I had a feeling I wouldn't get a straight commitment yet, but can you let me know? I do need to figure out how much wine to order or something like that." And I think we owe it to be honest with those situations. Because in the alternative, we don't say anything, the event rolls around, the person still hasn't committed one way or another and it adds to our mental stress and it adds to our clutter in our brains and it damages the relationship once again.

Amy Morin:

And I think the worst is too, when somebody shows up and you think they don't really want to be there and they spend the whole time texting or maybe looking for other plans

or if you're in a networking event and somebody's talking to you, but they're really just scanning the room looking for somebody cooler to talk to. What do you do in those events? If you have a friend who maybe is like, "Yeah, I'll show up." But then the second they get a better offer, maybe they bail during the event or they're always texting other people to say, "I'm looking for other people to hang out with at the same time." How do you handle that one?

Andrea Bonior:

In one of those situations, at some point, and it's funny because I just helped a client with this. At some point, it comes down to what do we consider a friend? And part of friendship really is feeling valued by the other person, feeling like you are able to be prioritized and that there's reciprocity, that you're putting in effort and commitment and they're putting in effort and commitment too, and that you truly enjoy each other's company. And I think all of those things are in doubt. If you've got a situation when somebody is coming to your events or your gatherings or hanging out with you, but they seem to be elsewhere, it means that maybe they don't really enjoy things as much as you might hope a friend would or that they don't prioritize you the way that a friend would.

And again, this might happen here and there. Somebody's distracted, they're waiting on a certain text from someone else, they wonder if their boss is going to be at this party or whatever. That's understandable. But when it's a chronic feeling like the other person would rather be somewhere else instead of really engaging with you in the friendship that you think you have, I really think it is time to ask, is this somebody that I should consider part of my close circle anymore? Or is this somebody that might be on an invite list for some big grand thing, but I'm not going to really put much value in hoping that they're going to really prioritize me?

Amy Morin:

Yeah, that's tough to come to that conclusion. But sometimes I think that's the case is to know, all right, I'm fairly far down on this person's priority list and maybe I have them too far up on mine and it's not reciprocal.

Andrea Bonior:

Yeah. And if it's a close friend that will always be in your life or if it's a family member, I think you can have these types of conversations. But the truth is we have different seasons for friendship. Someone we might have been close to for a really long time, it might have drifted off and that's okay. Or we might have different types of friends. We might have that gym buddy that is great for motivating us and exercise, but if we need somebody at 11 o'clock at night because we're missing our mother who has passed away, we're not going to call the gym buddy necessarily. And I think it's okay. I think friends don't have to be one size fits all to each other. And so sometimes when we're dealing with difficult people, we can still retain other parts of the relationship. "Oh, this person is still really good at giving me work advice," for instance, "even if I don't ever want to order at a restaurant with this person because they're a real nightmare." You know?

Amy Morin:

Yep. I think that's a really good point too. How about pessimist? When we're dealing with somebody who always points out the negative, it's tough. So maybe you're excited because you just got a new job and they're really quick to say, "Well, here's all the drawbacks." Or, "You probably aren't going to like this one in a few weeks too." Or you share some other exciting news and they always point out all the potential pitfalls. How do you deal with somebody like that in your life?

Andrea Bonior:

Yeah, I think the first question to ask yourself is, what am I hoping to get out of this interaction? Because I've had clients go through this, they're constantly upset that their mom was a negative Nelly when they shared their daily news. And part of me thinks, well, you've had this pattern going on for 10 years and you still call your mom every day and tell her your news and hope that she'll be positive. So where is the problem there? Part of it is the calls in the first place or part of it is what you're sharing. What do we actually expect? And so I think with a person who always finds the dark cloud, we have

to be realistic that maybe we're not going to share as much about ourselves if we're constantly unable to change that pattern.

And maybe we've talked to them, we've given them feedback, "Mom, it really hurts. This was really exciting to me and you only pointed out the negative." And if nothing changes, we have to be honest with our self that maybe we'll still have frequent contact, but we'll talk about movies or we'll talk about pop culture or we'll do Wordle together or we'll make goals about trying new recipes and we'll cook together, but I'm not going to constantly tell them every little thing of my daily life and hope that they're not going to give personal jabs because that's who they are.

I think just short of that though, you can say, "Hey, you know, I was kind of hoping to get some cheerleading here." Or, "Oh, I was kind of hoping that you'd be excited." Or, "Oh, I took this as good news and I'm kind of surprised you see it that way." And give them a little bit of an element of understanding that they've hurt us. But again, the one thing that I have seen over and over again is when people expect a pattern to change that's been so ingrained for years and years and years, it's an uphill battle. And I think a lot of times we get freedom by saying, "Okay, I'm not going to expect my mom to be my cheerleader in this situation, but man, she's really great to cook with and that's good enough for me."

Amy Morin:

And that's a good point, the fact that you raised that concern about a parent, because I think sometimes that's what happens as parents especially think that they're helping us by pointing out the potential pitfall that maybe we've overlooked. And if we expect like, okay, they're finally going to be excited about this new job, this new move, this relationship I'm in. And then you share the news with them, with that expectation of they're finally going to be happy with what I'm doing. And then it's so disappointing when they're like, "Well, here's what's going to go wrong with this new plan you've come up with."

Andrea Bonior:

Completely.

Amy Morin:

I like that idea of sometimes it's about us adjusting our expectations or about making it clear ahead of time. I'm going to share this with you. Yes, I know there's some risks involved, but maybe I just need you to cheerlead or giving it after the fact. If you have a friend who occasionally points out the downsides, maybe after the fact saying, "I'm really excited about this, I had hoped you would too, but perhaps we're not on the same page." Something like that, just to make them aware of their response. Because again, sometimes people don't realize what they're doing.

Andrea Bonior:

They don't. I find it's the same, the people who always just give advice instead of listening and you really want them to listen. And it's helpful sometimes to say, "I don't need to hear any advice just so you know, but I just want to get this off my chest." You hear that a lot of times in certain gender dynamics too. It's sort of the classic stereotype that the man wants to say, "Well, here's what you should do and you should tell your boss this." And a woman might say, "But I wasn't asking you what I should do. I just wanted to vent here as we're cooking together." Right?

Amy Morin:

Right, yes, that's super important to make it clear, but it was what it is that you want out of the conversation sometimes before you start talking.

Andrea Bonior:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

One more for you. We hear so much about toxic positivity. It's something we've talked about on the podcast, but it's hard to deal with people sometimes when you share something like, "I'm really nervous about this job interview I have on Friday." And the person says to you, "Oh, don't worry about it, you'll be fine." Or you had something that happened and maybe you're waiting for test results. And they say something like, "I'm

sure it'll turn out well. Don't even worry about it." You're like, "Yeah, but you don't know that." And sometimes we just want to be validated that we're worried or we're concerned or we're having a hard time. And when somebody says it's not a problem and you're saying, "No, actually this is a problem to me," it's really hard to respond to. How do you deal with people like that?

Andrea Bonior:

Yeah, I think you'd be honest that, "Hey, I see things differently." You can kind of get into a tug of war, and here's where it's tricky. The person says, "Oh, I'm sure it'll be fine." And you can say, "I'm not sure that it will be, that's why I'm upset about this." And then you can once again sort of tell them a little bit more about what you're looking for. You know, "I'm really nervous about this and I wonder if you could just sit with me in this nervousness. Kind of what I'm looking for is just a shoulder, or I'm just looking for you to bear witness to the fact that this is really tough for me." I think people who are in grief, this is a classic scenario because a lot of their friends and loved ones might either disappear because they don't know the "perfect thing" to say, or they just want to reassure the person, "Well, I know you're hurting now, but you're going to feel better and this will pass."

And it's like, that's not what the person needs right then. The person needs somebody to just bear witness. And so I think when it's somebody close to us especially, we can say, "I'm just struggling with this and I just feel better talking about it and I don't know that it's going to be fine. I know you think that, but truthfully I see things differently. I don't know if it's going to be fine, but I just need you here with me as I talk about it." And I think also too, we can recognize that we might be bringing up uncomfortable things for them. I think a lot of people are threatened by other people's bad news because it means it could happen to them. And if the world is a scary and unpredictable place for my friend, then that means that something awful might happen to me too.

And so I think a lot of times what our friends are really doing is guarding against that unpredictability and trying to make sense of the world. No, it'll all work out in the end because that's what happens in the world and it's a just place where good things happen to good people and all that. And it's frightening that that's not always true. So I

think we can have some compassion for where they're coming from, even though they're not helping us in that moment. They're trying to find their own order and their own piece because it's scary for them to maybe imagine that we're in a scenario that might go wrong.

Amy Morin:

I like that. And I guess the themes of today have just been about recognizing when these things come up, if there's patterns to be braved and try to point it out or acknowledge it. Remember that we can control our own behavior. We can't control other people, but also to be more self-aware of the times when perhaps we're being the difficult people in situations too.

Andrea Bonior:

Yes, exactly. Having insight into ourselves goes so far, and I think so many times when I work with people who are struggling with other difficult people, part of the key is the work begins with you to really notice your reactions. Do I immediately fly off the handle with this person? Do I escalate things? Do I ruminate on these interactions and think that they were my fault? Does this person remind me of somebody else in my life? Or have I kind of cultivated part of this interaction being bad because of the way that I respond? And the more insight we have into ourselves, then the more we can choose paths that are healthy because we can see what our foibles are and we can see where we're vulnerable and be honest with ourselves so then we can account for that vulnerability.

Amy Morin:

I love that. And it's like a dance, right? And when we change our steps, the other person often changes theirs. But if we keep dancing right along with them, then we get taken along for the ride and end up doing and saying things that perhaps we also didn't mean to say or do.

Andrea Bonior:

Yes. So true. So true. Yes, human interactions, I mean, there's just no end to the complexity, right?

Amy Morin:

Right.

Andrea Bonior:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

Well, Andrea Bonior, thank you so much for being on the Verywell Mind Podcast again.

Andrea Bonior:

Thank you so much for having me, Amy.

Amy Morin:

Welcome to The Therapist's Take! This is a part of the show where I'll give you my take on Andrea's strategies and share how you can apply them to your own life. Here are three of Andrea's strategies that I highly recommend.

**Number one: pay attention to someone's behavior more than their words, but take their situation into consideration.** Some people are really quick to declare others as being toxic, and they cut them out of their lives (sort of the buzzword these days about "toxic people"). But sometimes their behavior isn't toxic. It's just a sign that they're having a difficult time in their lives. Like, your friend with anxiety might cancel plans often at the last minute, or a family member who's struggling with depression might not respond to you right away. That doesn't mean that they don't like you though. So I appreciated that Andrea said, "It's important to talk to someone about the behavior that you're seeing."

If you don't know the rest of the story, it's easy to make assumptions and tell yourself a story about how their behavior has something to do with you, but that might not be the case. So go to them and say, "Hey, I noticed that you've canceled our plans the last few

times at the last minute. Is everything okay?" The point isn't to cause them to feel guilty or to express your anger but to show genuine concern and see what they say. Of course, it's okay to talk about how you feel and to set some boundaries. But when you understand the reason behind their behavior, you might also find it's helpful to problem-solve together. A friend who has anxiety and cancels plans might appreciate it if you just invite them over to your house, or maybe you go to their house so that they can spend time with you where they feel more comfortable. A friend with depression might appreciate regular text messages from you, but they might let you know that if they don't respond, it's nothing personal. They just might feel too overwhelmed to send a text message back.

**Number two: tell people what you need.** Other people don't read your mind. So if you want someone to just listen to what you have to say, tell them that upfront. Or if you know someone is likely to point out the potential pitfalls of your plan (and you don't want to hear those things right now), ask for the positive. Of course, asking doesn't necessarily mean other people are going to do what you're asking for. They might still point out the negative where they might offer you unsolicited advice, but give them a chance by telling them what you want them to do right now. So I appreciate that Andrea said to be proactive about telling people what you need.

**Number three: look for the good and manage your expectations.** Andrea says, "When you're dealing with a difficult person, remember the good parts about them." That's great because often if we label someone as a difficult person, we forget that they aren't difficult about everything all the time. In fact, they might be really helpful about some things. If you have a friend who gets really stressed about planning things, maybe you decide to step aside when she's planning a party and choose to enjoy her company when you're just having dinner at a restaurant and she's less stressed. Or a family member who goes on political rants, you might decide to end those conversations quickly and talk to them about a subject that you want to hear more about. You can always learn something new even from difficult people. Of course, you might just be learning more about yourself and your ability to have patience, but you also might learn new things from them by focusing on the things that you can enjoy about them.

And I bet if you work on looking for the good, you will discover something good about them. Just don't expect them to change because you're probably going to be left feeling disappointed. You might just accept that they're always going to brag about something or that they're always going to point out the negative, and that might help you manage your reactions to that a little bit better.

Those are three of Andrea's strategies that I highly recommend. Pay attention to someone's behavior more than their words, tell people what you need, and manage your expectations. To hear more of Andrea's actionable tips, check out her new podcast, *Baggage Check*.

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share this show with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.

Do you want free access to my online course? It's called "10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential." To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is [podcast@verywell.com](mailto:podcast@verywell.com). We'll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and for listening to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!* And as always, a big thank you to my show's producer (who's usually really patient when it comes to dealing with difficult people), Nick Valentin.