

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/rise-above-bad-behavior-explicit>

Stanford organizational psychologist Bob Sutton describes how people can reduce the emotional toll that jerks have on us by changing our own perception of them. Citing studies in cognitive behavior and stories he's collected for his new book "The Asshole Survival Guide," Sutton talks about how reacting with kindness, empathy and even curiosity can help one psychologically detach.



## Transcript

Another thing you can do, another sort of approach is, when somebody is treating you like dirt, get some empathy for them.. Even if they don't deserve it, start feeling sorry for them.. Sympathy for the devil.. Somebody at Google, this was years ago, described to me how when somebody is nasty, "I think of them as a guy with a bad user interface "and a good operating system." So sort of Google-ish stuff.. And if you look at research on forgiveness, what you're doing in that situation is, even if the asshole doesn't deserve it, by forgiving them what happens is, there's a lot of evidence that when you forgive people, you ruminate less about it.. It bothers you less.. So even if it's not helping them, it's helping you.. Rise above it.. This is the Michelle Obama, when they go low, we go high.. So if we go back to revisit Philz Coffee, this was, oh, about a year and a half ago, I had some conversations with Jacob Jaber..

He's the CEO of Philz Coffee.. His father was Phil himself.. And so I said to Jacob, "What do you do with asshole customers?" And he said, "Our philosophy," and we'll see if this gets past the censors, "Our philosophy is be nice to them.. "Fuck them, but be nice to them." And then we did some subsequent interviews with some of the folks at Philz Coffee, and they had this whole philosophy, which was, when they're nasty, you kill them with kindness.. And the reason you do it is, first of all, they pride themselves in giving good service, but it's also this feeling of superiority that you won't stoop to their level.. So that's another method you can use.. Then, this is one that's especially evidence based.. There's very good evidence that, especially a series of six or seven lab studies from UC Berkeley about a year ago, that when people have something upsetting, they break up with their partner, they fail an exam, when they respond to it by saying, "Gee, a year from now when I look back at this, "a month from now, a week," rather than focusing on how upset they are now, they'll have less anxiety, less depression, and less sadness.. So if you can look back from the future rather than now, that helps.. And to go back to military academies, one of the more interesting emails I got was from a guy who wrote me, he was describing how he got through the Air Force Academy..

So he said, again, "I'm a first year cadet." And he said, "They'd be screaming at me," and he said he'd do two things.. The first thing is really interesting, 'cause it's really subtle.. He said, "I would look at the person's eyebrow "rather than their face, "because then I just focus on the eyebrow.. "Then I wouldn't get the whole performance.. "And the other thing I would do is "imagine it was three years later, "I was in my plane, and I was flying.. "And really, this wasn't much to get through." And to me, this is a really good example of temporal distancing, 'cause he was imagining being in the future, looking back to what he was experiencing now.. Finally, this one is really interesting, because an unnamed Stanford administrator told me about this.. In general, a lot of these strategies I'm talking about are what psychologists call emotional detachment, ways when you've got somebody who is being nasty, attacking you, upsetting, to sort of seem like you're watching a movie unfold in front of you rather than being part of the scene.. So to emotionally detach.. This is one of my favorite ones..

So this is an administrator I know well.. And he describes how he deals the assholes at a certain university we're all sitting in right now.. And he's somebody I know who's especially skilled at it, and here's what he does.. And it's kind of amazing that I don't use this strategy and I'm not capable of using it.. So maybe it'll work for you.. It doesn't seem to work for me.. He imagines that he's a doctor who studies asshole-ism.. And what he does when he has somebody who's acting like a jerk in front of him is he tells himself how lucky he is to have such an amazing specimen of this behavior and to have it happening close up, sort of like adding to your stamp or your bug collection.. And it works, and this person, who some of us in the room know well, he's very good with assholes...