

## Dealing with Difficult Situations

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“We can’t direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails” is an old saying that holds a lot of truth, but is often difficult to carry out in the moment. Being in difficult and stuck situations have the potential to lead us to a state where we are in ‘reactive’ mode versus being in a more resilient, problem-solving focused mode. Any of us can get caught up in overthinking, over-feeling, or overreacting to a situation. It’s human. But doing it often can surely cause problems in relationships, work, in our units, and in our overall effectiveness.

Key strategies in managing difficult situations include developing a sense of resiliency and working on overall problem-solving skills. Resiliency is the ability to bounce back, or the ability to be an effective problem solver, in the face of adversity or stress. I can attest to this being a life-long work in progress, even for those like me that have been teaching these skills for nearly 20 years.

We cannot stop difficult situations from happening, but we can work on how we react and respond. **Here are different methods I challenge you to practice, use, and teach to others that could help you respond more effectively in difficult situations:**

**3 P’s (Pause, Perspective, Patience).** It is critical that you gain an understanding of the entire situation before responding, specifically if you are feeling upset about the situation. Ask yourself “is there another way to explain what is happening,” “do I have all of the information,” and think about what clarifying questions you can ask. Take in more information before giving a response. *Most actions and decisions do NOT happen in a vacuum, find out more about what may be going on.*

**Seek first to understand.** Learn where the other person is coming from, the rules/regulations they are bound by, learn from their experience in the matter, explore what influences their decisions/actions, etc.

**Boundaries.** As much as you can, allow yourself time to think before responding. It’s ok most of the time to delay a returned text, email, or phone call. Or to say, “I need some time to think about this,” there is no fault in that. Also, if you find they are being inappropriate, unprofessional, or harassing, it is appropriate to step back and to seek consultation.

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**Consultation.** Get out of your own head, talk it out. You may receive validation or useful feedback to help you develop a plan of action. You may also receive feedback that your own reactions may be skewed, which can help give you improved perspective and develop an improved course of action – we often don't like this type of feedback but hearing it from someone you trust can help in these situations.

**Expectation management.** Be realistic, especially with matters of the military, which we all know do not often work on our timelines. Expect delays at times.

**Acceptance.** I cannot stress this enough – acceptance does NOT mean liking something, it means acknowledging the person, situation, or experience for what it *actually* is. We don't have to like something to accept it, but we need to acknowledge reality. Once you acknowledge a person or situation for what they or it actually are, you can then make a decision about how to best operate with that person or within that situation. There is power in being able to do that.

**Listen.** This also cannot be stated enough. One of the top reasons for conflict is spending too much time focused on what you want to say next and not enough time truly *listening* to what the other party is trying to say.

**Focus on a solution.** You don't have to be a master negotiator to know that compromise, finding a different path to a mutual goal, or diverting from an original plan can also lead to an acceptable outcome. Sometimes focusing on an acceptable outcome for both parties versus what your ideal outcome is will result in a solution.

**Show respect.** Others will be much more willing to listen to you and hear your perspective if you show empathy (understand where they are coming from), active listening, respectful tones and attitudes, military bearing, and non-aggressive non-verbal cues. Avoid eye rolling, deep sighs, cutting off, rigid posture (crossing arms, pacing, scowl on your face, etc), and loud tones. Imagine being talked to or addressed that way, you'd shut down and become defensive, too. Don't put the other person in that situation.

**Pay attention to the rest of your life.** *I tell anyone in crisis or going through a tough time that the top 2 things you can do to help yourself are connection to others and staying with a routine.* The other things will eventually work their way out. Your life has many areas of concern (work, school, family, physical health, spiritual health, recreation, friends). When one area is giving you troubles, focus on the other areas to help you maintain routine. Problems in one area can feel consuming, but those other areas of your life are also part of who you are and can continue to be nourished and attended to, even during problem times.

**Want to discuss this more?** Contact me at 608-616-2067 or [nicole.r.espil.civ@army.mil](mailto:nicole.r.espil.civ@army.mil)