

HOW TO GET ALONG WITH ALMOST ANYONE

By H. Norman Wright
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Life seems to be one continuing challenge of getting along with parents, friends, employers, employees, fellow workers, fiancés, spouses, children, landlords, and all the other people we deal with in our lives. Ever since Adam and Eve, the members of God's human creation have had problems getting along with one another.

The Kind of People Who Get Along

Who are the people you know who appear to get along well with others? What is so special about them? What qualities do they possess which make them people persons? The people I know who get along well with others are enjoyable to be with. They show genuine interest in others. When they are with you, they are really with you.

I think of a man I know who is very gracious, friendly, and refined in his dealings with people, whether they are his friends, his coworkers, or the waiters who serve him. His pleasant manner is not put on; it's genuine. And he gets along with almost everybody. When I'm with him, he treats me as an individual. I am accepted for who I am and viewed by him as a person of worth. He listens to me and appreciates my contributions to the conversation.

Do these qualities describe how you would like to be treated? Are these qualities evident in your dealings with others? It takes time to develop the qualities I find in my friend. I'm still working on them in my life. Fortunately, we all have the capacity to learn them and put them into practice.

Three Vital Qualities for Getting Along

During more than twenty-five years as a professional counselor I have continued to study, learn, grow, and even change my ideas and approaches to people's problems. But one ingredient has remained largely unchanged. I still believe that the three most vital qualities for getting along with people are *genuineness, love, and empathy*.

Genuineness. To get along with people, you must be genuine. This is the quality of being who you really are without a front or a facade. A genuine person is able to express his true feelings in appropriate ways, rather than suppress them or mask them. When a person is being genuine with you, as the saying goes, "What you see is what you get!"

Some people have a hard time being themselves. How stressful to always be putting on an act. And when you always put up a false front before others, you may start to confuse your true identity with the "character" you are portraying. You may begin to wonder, *Who am I really?* That's one of the delights of being a Christian. We can accept who we are because of the way God sees us through His Son Jesus Christ.

A main ingredient in genuineness is sincerity. When someone is sincere, you can relax in the comfort and security that he or she is trustworthy.

Our word *sincere* comes from a Latin word which means "without wax." In ancient times, fine, expensive porcelain pottery often developed tiny cracks when it was fired in the kiln. Dishonest merchants would smear pearly white wax over the cracks until they disappeared, then claim the pottery was unblemished. But when the pottery was held up to the sun, the light would reveal the cracks filled in with wax. So honest merchants

marked their porcelain with the words *sine cera*--without wax. That's what is meant by genuine sincerity: No hidden cracks, no ulterior motives, no hidden agendas.

Love. The ability to love people is a second vital quality for getting along with others. Love draws people together. I'm not talking about emotional sentiment, but kindness, fairness, patience, and so many other characteristics of love from the Word of God.

Let's be brutally honest: There are some people you work with, fellowship with, or are related to whom you don't like. Yet the Bible tells us to love everyone. How can we reconcile these two realities? How can we love people we don't like? Love is not just a feeling but an attitude and a willful act. To love someone means to wish for and work for that person's best interests, and to seek God's blessing upon him or her--whether or not we like that person! In fact, the unlikable or obnoxious individuals are usually the ones who need our real, selfless love the most.

Empathy. The third vital quality for getting along with people is empathy. Empathy comes from the German word *einfulung*, which means to feel into or to feel with. Empathy is viewing life through another's eyes, feeling as another feels, hearing the story through the perceptions of the other person. Christians are called to empathy by bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) and by rejoicing with others in their joys and weeping with others in their pain (Romans 12:15).

What do you have to offer others? Why do I ask such a question? Because what you offer the people you're trying to get along with is often what they will offer you in return. If you offer anger, you are likely to receive anger in return.

If you offer criticism, you will be criticized in return. But if you offer concern, compassion, respect and love, you will probably be on the receiving end of those qualities as well.

CHANGE STARTS WHERE THE BUCK STOPS

There are times in our lives when we've said, "If only so-and-so would change, everything would be so much better!"

To get along in relationships where changes are necessary, you need to start by changing yourself. Changing yourself just works better than trying to change others. And even if you see no changes in other people, your own changes will make life better for you and will reflect God's Word and power in your life. When you change, your bad relationships can turn to good relationships, and your good relationships can get even better.

If someone around me is grumpy and snaps at me, I may feel like snapping back. Our typical response to an attack is either to become defensive or to counterattack. But why should I let another's behavior dictate the way I behave? If I someone is having a bad day, he or she doesn't need further negative input from me. What is needed is a kind word, a smile, an empathetic comment, or an offer of help. The change needs to start with me. It's amazing what can happen when we respond to negative people in a kind, loving, positive way.

Yes, there are some people who are unpleasant to be around and difficult to get along with. True, there are occasions when the other person is the major problem in the relationship. But regardless of how much he or she may be at fault, the most direct route to a change in someone else is to make the necessary changes in yourself.

The emphasis in this book is not on

developing creative and clever ways to get *others* to change. If any change occurs in someone you relate to, it will happen because of the change in *you*. We should continually be making changes in our lives to grow, mature, and conform to the teachings of the Word of God in our lives.

Change is Difficult but Possible

Many people find change difficult because they live their lives on automatic pilot. They don't really think about what they do or say. They have an entire repertoire of programmed responses tucked within them. Whenever they encounter a situation or a relationship, they react without having to think. We are all creatures of habit to a great extent. We develop habits over the years. We may not be aware of how deeply ingrained those patterns are until we catch ourselves doing them almost unconsciously.

Whatever you do again and again becomes a habit. If you smile at your coworkers every morning, it will become a habit. If you respond with defensiveness each time people question you, it will become a habit.

Here's the rule: Whatever you practice, you become. If you argue with people regularly, you become an argumentative person. If you criticize people often, you become a critical person. If you keep bringing work home from the office, you become a workaholic. Repeated behaviors become habits. And are you aware of what it takes to change a habit pattern? To replace a negative behavior with a positive one, you need a minimum of eighteen days of conscious repetition of that behavior to give it a chance to lock into your system. A habit seems to have a life of its own. Just like every living being, a habit will fight to stay alive. When you try to change a pattern of behavior, your habit will resist the

change. Changing behavior patterns is a massive battle. It can only be won when you focus on replacing old, negative behaviors with positive, new behaviors.

GETTING PERSONAL ABOUT LOVING PEOPLE

In our endeavors to get along with people, it is important that we take time to discover what others perceive as love.

Love is the key ingredient in any deep personal relationship such as marriage, family, or friendship. But if you define love differently than does the other person in the relationship, and you express love in your terms instead of his or hers, the relationship may deteriorate instead of improve. You need to know what your partner considers important in the relationship. You need to understand how he or she wants to be cared for, ministered to, nurtured, and loved.

Several characteristics of love are common to all successful relationships.

Safety and Security. People want to feel safe and secure in their relationships. They want to be able to breathe a sigh of relief among others and say, "It's nice to relax with someone, let down the protective armor, and be myself."

Support. People want and need to feel supported by those who care for them. It helps to know you're not facing the world alone. You can depend on others to stand with you in difficult times, even when they don't necessarily agree with your stand. Do you have some supportive persons in your life? Are you a supportive person to them?

Sense of belonging. We all have a built-in, God-given need to belong, and we all know the pain of being excluded or rejected. The sense of belonging comes from being included by others. It makes you feel significant because someone else has opened his or her own private world

to you. It's easy to get along with those who accept you, open their hearts to you, and include you in their lives.

Care. Everyone needs somebody to care about and nurture him or her. When you nurture someone, you invite him or her to take a special place in your heart. You express your care through your words as well as your deeds. It's almost impossible not to get along with someone who genuinely cares for you.

Acceptance. I want to be accepted by others and so do you. When we accept others for who they are, we free them from the pressure of being molded into the persons we want them to be. When you accept others, you become compatible with them and get along with them, whether as marriage partners, roommates, or coworkers.

Loving the Unlovely

It's easy for us to love and get along with the attractive, intelligent, neat, and articulate persons around us. But many of the people God calls us to love do not fit into those acceptable classifications. Tony Campolo tells a story which beautifully illustrates what can happen when we reach out to love the unlovely:

Teddy Stallard certainly qualified as "one of the least." Disinterested in school. Musty, wrinkled clothes; hair never combed. One of those kids in school with a deadpan face, expressionless--sort of a glassy, unfocused stare. When Miss Thompson spoke to Teddy he always answered in monosyllables. Unattractive, unmotivated, and distant, he was just plain hard to like. Even though his teacher said she loved all in her class the same, down inside she wasn't being completely truthful.

Whenever she marked Teddy's papers, she got a certain perverse pleasure out of

putting Xs next to the wrong answers and when she put the Fs at the top of the papers, she always did it with a flair. She should have known better; she had Teddy's records and she knew more about him than she wanted to admit. The records read:

1st Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but poor home situation.

2nd Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.

3rd Grade: Teddy is a good boy but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

4th Grade: Teddy is very slow, but well-behaved. His father shows no interest.

Christmas came and the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's class brought her Christmas presents. They piled their presents on her desk and crowded around to watch her open them. Among the presents there was one from Teddy Stallard. She was surprised that he had brought her a gift, but he had. Teddy's gift was wrapped in brown paper and was held together with Scotch tape. On the paper were written simple words, "For Miss Thompson from Teddy." When she opened Teddy's present, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet, with half the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume.

The other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk over Teddy's gifts, but Miss Thompson at least had enough sense to silence them by immediately putting on the bracelet and putting some of the perfume on her wrist. Holding her wrist up for the other children to smell, she said, "Doesn't it smell lovely?" And the children, taking their cue from the teacher, readily agreed with "oo's" and "ah's."

At the end of the day, when school was over and the other children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson ... Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother ... and her bracelet looks real pretty on you, too. I'm glad you liked my presents." When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her.

The next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a different person. She was no longer just a teacher; she had become an agent of God. She was now a person committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her. She helped all the children, but especially the slow ones, and especially Teddy Stallard. By the end of the school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement. He had caught up with most of the students and was even ahead of some.

She didn't hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day, she received a note that read:

Dear Miss Thompson:

I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class.

*Love,
Teddy Stallard*

Four years later, another note came:

Dear Miss Thompson:

They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it.

*Love,
Teddy Stallard*

And four years later:

Dear Miss Thompson:

As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, MD. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now. Dad died last year.

*Love,
Teddy Stallard*

Miss Thompson went to that wedding and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat. She deserved to sit there; she had done something for Teddy that he could never forget.

The Teddy Stallards in your life need love too. They need to feel your support, acceptance, and caring. They need to feel special. Who knows what great things your love will release in their lives?

IT'S JUST COMMON SENSE ... OR IS IT?

Getting along with other people takes more than common sense. It takes wisdom. By wisdom I mean the ability to discern, to understand, to have insight, and to use good judgment. That's a big order! Some people equate this kind of wisdom with age. But wisdom doesn't just happen with age. Wisdom is something which can be worked on and developed.

Wisdom is the practical translation and application of the Word of God to everyday life. God's wisdom, resident in His Word and available to you through His Spirit, will equip you to get along with people. In this chapter we will consider several specific applications of God's wisdom to our interpersonal relationships.

Words from the Wise

Those who have healthy relationships with others use their words wisely. They are living examples of the wise words of Proverbs on the subject of communication: "A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!" (Pro.15:23) "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver." (Pro.25:11) "Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones." (Pro.16:24) "He that hath knowledge spareth his words: and a man of understanding is of an excellent spirit. Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise: and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding." (Pro.17:27-28)

The words you use connect you to other people. But *how* are you connected: By a cord that binds you together or a barrier which keeps you at a distance? One company decided to do something about words which kept people apart. It established a policy forbidding the mailing of any letters on company letterhead which contained the word *I*. Instead, employees had to use words which shifted the focus from the sender to the receiver: *You, yourself, and yours*. Or they used warm, "together" words like *we, our, and ourselves*. Emphasis was placed on using courteous words which often are missing from our vocabulary: *Sorry, please, thank you, and excuse me*.

However, even when we're careful in choosing our words, it's important to understand the potential for misuse. Ask, don't order. Most people don't like to be told to do things. And with any request, use the magic words *please* and *thank you*. These words draw people together instead of drive them apart.

A Person of Understanding

A term often used in the Bible in conjunction with wisdom is

understanding. Proverbs 18:2 reads: "A (self-confident) fool hath no delight in understanding, but that his heart may discover itself." This person is not concerned about getting along with others or listening to others. He is so intent on drawing attention to himself that he doesn't take time to understand the aspects of a situation, problem, or relationship. In contrast, a person of understanding keeps an outward focus in order to discern his supportive role in situations and relationships. The writer of Proverbs extolled the benefits of understanding: "Happy (blessed, fortunate and enviable) is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold." (Pro.3:13,14)

A major characteristic of a person of understanding is revealed in Proverbs 14:29: "He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding: but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly." A person who lacks wisdom and understanding will have difficulty controlling his anger. And a person who cannot control his anger will have difficulty getting along with people. Explosive anger has been called the curse of interpersonal relationships.

Show a Little Kindness

Do you know what it feels like to be taken for granted? You continue to give of yourself over a period of time and yet there is no response to, or recognition for, your efforts. Even though we should be able to give freely and lovingly without expecting anything in return, most people respond well when their efforts are acknowledged. Being wise and sensitive to recognize and appreciate the contributions of others is a surefire way to get along with them.

Sometimes people need to be gently

reminded about the need for sensitivity and appreciation. I remember a wife who knew how to encourage her husband in loving and helpful ways. She said to him, "Honey, if I die before you do, you would spend quite a bit of money on flowers for my funeral, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would, dear," he answered, somewhat shocked at her question. "Why do you ask?"

"I was just thinking that all the flowers in the world won't mean much to me then. But a little flower from time to time while I'm still alive would sure brighten my days." From that day on she received one beautiful flower each week from her husband.

Over the years, a number of wives have shared with me that the only time they hear anything about the way they care for their husbands is when favorite shirts or clean socks are not in the drawer. And that's usually just one day out of thirty. On the other twenty-nine days, when all the clean clothes are in place, the wives never hear a word of appreciation for their efforts. These women desperately need their husbands to encourage them, compliment them, and thank them in small but meaningful ways.

There are many ways we can pass out "flowers" to brighten the lives of people around us. One practical way is to send notes, cards, and letters expressing love, friendship, appreciation, and thanks to the people in your life.

People are drawn to those who are appreciative and repelled by those who seem indifferent. One survey I read illustrated this point. The survey described the various reasons why customers stopped shopping in a certain department store. One percent of the customers stopped shopping due to death. Three percent moved away from the area and five percent changed stores because of a

friend's recommendation. Nine percent left because of competitive prices and 14 percent were not happy with the products. But an overwhelming 68 percent decided to shop elsewhere because of attitudes of indifference expressed by employees. Think about it.

ARE YOU TURNED ON TO TUNING IN?

People are desperately hungry to be listened to by others. You can probably think of a number of people who talk to you. But who listens to you when you want to talk --I mean really listens? And on the other side of the coin, who do you listen to? We would all get along better with others if we knew how to be listeners. But, unfortunately, good listeners are often hard to find. Often everybody's talking, but nobody's listening!

I heard a story about a man who was determined to prove how inattentive people are in their listening. Once, when passing through a receiving line at a wedding reception, he greeted each member of the wedding party with a pleasant expression and a warm smile while saying, "The alligators are loose." Each person he spoke to smiled back and thanked him. One woman even said, "Oh, I'm so glad you like them. I made them myself." People hear, but they don't always listen.

Listening is giving sharp attention to what someone else is sharing with you. Notice that I didn't say "what someone else is *saying* to you." Often what others share with us is more than what they say. We must listen to the total person, not just the words he or she speaks. Listening requires openness to whatever others share with us--feelings, attitudes, concerns, etc., as well as words. Listening also means putting yourself in a position to respond to whatever is being shared

with you.

When people know you hear them, they will trust you and feel safe with you. And if you are a good listener, others will be more apt to invite you into their lives as a guest. Those you listen to will also learn through your example to respond openly and lovingly to what you share with them.

The Caring Listener

Since the Word of God calls each believer to be "swift to hear" (James 1:19), we must understand what it means to listen. Listening means caring for and empathizing with the person you are listening to. In listening you are trying to understand the thoughts and feelings of the speaker. You are listening for his or her sake, not yours. You are not thinking about what you are going to say when the speaker stops talking. You are not engrossed in formulating your own response. You are concentrating on what is being said.

Obstacles to Good Listening

One obstacle to good listening is defensiveness. A defensive person does not really listen when another speaks, but uses this time to formulate rebuttals, excuses, or exceptions to what is being communicated to him or her. The defensive listener is mentally arguing with the speaker instead of receiving with care what is being shared.

Another form of defensive listening is to interrupt the speaker by voicing a premature conclusion. Interrupting a speaker with your conclusion is easy to do when you feel that you have been through the conversation before and know where the speaker is heading. But often our expectations are wrong.

Other obstacles to listening are the biased attitudes we often hold toward

certain individuals or groups. A tone of voice or a particular accent may irritate you, so you tend not to listen to people who speak that way. You may be tempted to ignore someone who reminds you of an unpleasant relationship from your past. You may screen out angry or sarcastic comments because persons with those qualities bother you. You may be more biased toward what is shared by a man than by a woman, or vice versa. You may listen more intently to your superiors than to your subordinates. Pessimists usually tune in to the bad news while optimists listen more closely to the good news.

Another obstacle to good listening is your mind's tendency to wander. We humans have the capacity to think at five times the rate we can speak. So when someone is speaking to you at about a hundred words per minute, and you are processing the information at five hundred words per minute, you may find your mind wandering. You must learn to pace your listening to the speaker or your mind will take off on a journey of its own.

THE FITNESS OF FITTING IN

Is it possible to relate to people who are different from us? Yes! You have two options. First, you can commit yourself to the lifetime project of trying to remake everyone you know to be more like you. Yes, you're right: I'm being facetious. There is no way you can change everybody to be like you. So you really only have one option, and that's to become flexible enough to fit in with the people you can't change.

Learning to become flexible requires that you take a close look at yourself and honestly answer several key questions: What am I like? What are my chief characteristics and traits? If I had to describe myself to someone else so he or

she would really understand how I think, behave, respond, and communicate, what would I say?

Similarly, you need to seriously investigate and evaluate the traits of those you want to get along with. How are you alike and how are you different? When you begin to understand the individual differences in the people you relate to, and allow yourself to flex to fit in with those differences, you're on your way to getting along with them. People *want* to relate to those who understand them, who complement them positively, who speak the same language, and who take their unique approaches to life into consideration.

Sometimes you can build a healthy rapport with someone by being flexible enough to adapt the pace of your speech to his. For example, I heard about a man who learned to pace his conversation to that of the people he talked on the phone in his business. If the caller spoke slowly, he spoke slowly. If the caller spoke rapidly, he did the same. He credited a 30 percent increase in business to his flexibility in pacing his speech.

When you heighten your sensitivity to others, you will notice the uniqueness of others. You will be able to connect on their frequency more readily.

Adapting to Different Sensory Perceptions

Another way people are different which requires flexibility for getting along is represented by a question I ask at least once a week in counseling: "Does your spouse want to *see* it or *hear* it?" Why do I ask that question? Because each individual perceives life through a dominant sense: Seeing, hearing, or feeling. Often people--especially husbands and wives--don't get through to each other because they are appealing to the wrong sense. To get along

with people, we need to flex to accommodate the sensory perceptions of others.

A visual person talks about how things look rather than how they sound or feel. For example, most men are visually oriented, primarily experiencing life through their eyes. When a man imagines or remembers, he does so in mental pictures. He prefers face-to-face conversations and meetings instead of telephone conversations. He prefers reading a letter himself instead of having it read to him. He wants to see for himself how a new article of clothing looks instead of having it described to him.

Flexing to relate to visual persons at home or work requires that you approach them through their eyes. Put all verbal communications in writing: Notes, letters, memos, etc. Use diagrams. Yes, you can still communicate verbally, but be sure to back up what you say with something the visual person can see. That's why visual aids are so important in teaching. And that's why some spouses don't feel loved by their partners until their spoken words are validated by a love note, card, flower, or something else which is perceived visually.

Some people are more hearing oriented, relating more to sounds than to sights. You need to tell these people more than you show them. Auditory people like to talk and to hear others talk. They usually like long conversations, and they are adept both at hearing what is said and what is *not* said. How you speak to them is as important as what you say. As one husband said, "I finally woke up. For years I gave her presents and sent her notes, but these things never seemed to register. But since I started giving her one spoken compliment a day and telling her how much I love her, she's a changed woman!"

Other people are more feeling oriented than seeing or hearing oriented. They crave closeness and love. They are usually more intuitive than logical or analytical in their responses. If you were a car salesman wanting to relate to a feeling-oriented person, you wouldn't say, "Hey, you really look good behind the wheel." Nor would you try to sell a car by saying, "Notice how quietly it rides." Rather, you would say, "Don't you feel comfortable and relaxed in the driver's seat? Wait until you get the sensation of driving this car on the open highway." To get along with feeling-oriented people, you need to flex in order to relate to them through their feelings.

OFFERING CONSTRUCTIVE GUIDANCE

When you have an opportunity to offer constructive guidance (there's a new term for criticism!), remember not to do so in a negative, destructive, condemning way.

There are many times when we must offer criticism designed to edify and guide. Here are five kinds of criticism to consider: *First*, we need to provide constructive guidance to the people for whom we are responsible in the work environment. If you do not correct sloppy or inaccurate work, you will end up being responsible for a problem. When you affirm and compliment people consistently for their good work, you will find it easier to correct them for their poor work.

Second, if you are a parent, you are responsible to guide, teach, correct, and discipline your children.

Third, you may need to provide constructive guidance to protect the rights of yourself and others. You may find it necessary to confront a loved one concerning irresponsible behavior such as using drugs or alcohol, overeating, or driving recklessly. I have talked to

numerous spouses in counseling who were terrified of their partners' driving habits. I have actually asked taxi drivers to slow down because I felt they were driving unsafely.

Fourth, constructive guidance is often needed in the intimate relationship of a marriage. Marriages in which partners never desire a change to occur in each other exist only in storybooks. Learning to live together as husband and wife requires the mutual application of loving constructive criticism over the long haul.

And, *fifth*, there are times in emergency situations when criticism is needed. Often in these crisis moments, constructive guidance is shouted as a command. It's a time for immediate action, not for discussion.

As you prepare to share a complaint or criticism with someone, it is vital that you have gathered all the accurate data on the issue. Ask yourself these three questions: Am I really aware of all the facts? Am I seeing the issue accurately? Is there any way in which I am contributing to this problem or keeping it alive? Also, you must be sure that a similar or worse condition does not exist in your own life (see Matthew 7:3-5). Then offer your constructive guidance using the following steps:

Be brief. Be as concise in your comments as you can be, and be sure to stick to the essentials. Try to limit what you have to say to two sentences. Criticism is often easier for others to receive if you give it in the form of a question with a smile on your face. For example, in confronting a coworker regarding his procrastination, you might say, "Have you had a chance to get that information I requested last Tuesday?" When the person responds with his intention to complete the task by tomorrow, add, "Great! I'll look for it

then. You can leave it in my box."

Be specific. Don't use vague, general remarks. The other person may not be able to decipher your innuendoes and get the message. For example, a parent walks into his child's room, looks around with hands on hips, shakes his head in disgust, and says, "I can't believe this place. Where are you hiding the pigs? Can't you be neater?" This criticism is lacking clear constructive guidance.

Put your criticism in plain, positive language. The parent could say, "Jimmy, I would really appreciate it if you would pick up your dirty clothes and put them in the hamper, then hang up your pajamas." Such a clear, specific directive gives the child a greater possibility for a correct response.

Avoid blame and labels. When you complain about or correct others, you may be tempted to label them in relation to their offense. You say someone is irresponsible, unreliable, careless, or sloppy. But just because your spouse occasionally forgets to water the house plants doesn't mean he or she deserves to be labeled an irresponsible person. Labels like these are unfair, often hurtful generalizations.

Also, absolute terms like *never*, *always*, *every day*, and *every time* are usually inaccurate and should be avoided in criticism. An employee may be late for work three or four times a week, but he's not *always* late. These labels distract from a solution and invite an argument.

Make your responses warm and supportive. Share statements like, "I liked what you had to say in answering my criticism. We can talk over some additional suggestions this afternoon. How does that sound to you?" Or consider saying, "I realize that the situation didn't go very well for you. But I am concerned about what we can do

together to work it out."

Be patient. Acknowledge to yourself and the other person that it will take time to make any changes in response to your criticism. The pattern of progress is often two steps forward and one step backward.

Be open to feelings. Acknowledge how the person being criticized must feel by saying something like, "I can appreciate how upset you must feel at this time." Invite the person to share his or her perspective on the problem and listen carefully to what is said.

When you focus on the desired behavior, you are more likely to receive the desired behavior. When you focus on what the person has done wrong, that behavior is more likely to reoccur. For example, if you say, "You never help me pack when we're going on a trip," you're reinforcing the negative behavior. But if you say, "I'd appreciate it if you would help me with the packing when we travel," you have a better chance of getting the response you want.

Be sure to acknowledge in a positive way when your constructive guidance is received by someone. Affirm every small step in the change process. A spoken thank-you or a note of appreciation will go a long way. This is not only a necessary step in keeping criticism positive, it is vital. When you go the extra mile through acknowledgment and affirmation, you will be different and so will the other person. When the efforts of those you correct or guide are noted, they will be more open to change the next time. This is what getting along with people is all about.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

What kinds of people are the most difficult for you to get along with? What kinds of people cause you to feel frus-

trated, overpowered, torn apart, victimized, set up, confused, frightened, or angry? Chances are, the three types of problem people we are going to discuss in this chapter are the sources of much of your difficulty in getting along with others. We're going to learn how to do some positive relating to negativists, noncommunicators, and controller/dominators.

Dealing Positively with Negativists

Most people generally reflect upon and evaluate thoughtfully new ideas and approaches. Not the negativist. He or she walks around carrying a bucket of cold water just looking for a place to dump it. The negativist looks pessimistically at most situations, saying, "It's not worth considering. We tried it four years ago and it didn't work then. It will never work."

Negative members have an eroding effect on families, neighborhoods and businesses. You feel like screaming at them, "Life isn't built on defeat and despair! Why can't you be positive for a change?" But badgering them usually doesn't do any good. In fact, it may even make things worse.

How can we get along with these people who seem to spread gloom, despair, and discouragement everywhere they go? Here are a couple of important tips:

Fervently pray for them. The first tip for dealing with the negativists in your life is to cover them with prayer. Pray for them on a regular basis. Especially pray for them when you know you are going to be with them at work, at fellowship, or at a family gathering.

Lovingly interact with them. As you involve with negative people, avoid getting caught up in their arguments. You cannot argue them out of their negativism. Their defensiveness and need

for control will always spur them to outargue you, even if their arguments are illogical.

I had a seminary student several years ago--I'll call him John--who was a classic negativist. But some of his fellow students had learned how to respond to John lovingly despite his negative attitude.

One day I overheard Randy, one of John's friends, offer a suggestion to a project they were discussing. John responded in his predictable, negative fashion, "It won't work. It's not worth trying."

Randy wasn't fazed by John's negativism and he didn't try to argue with him. Instead he said, "You know, John, that's always a possibility. It might not work. Let's consider that as the first option. Assuming that it doesn't work, what are a couple of other options we could consider?" Randy kept the focus on the problem instead of John's cold-water approach.

In time they were considering several possible alternatives to the project. As they discussed the options, Randy even voiced some of the negative possibilities for each option himself. As he did, John seemed to relax, apparently encouraged that someone was listening to him, considering his perspective, and still willing to work with him. I was amazed at Randy's skill at interacting with John without reacting to his negativism.

Sometimes, when negativists still won't respond to the kind of loving interaction which Randy displayed, you need to move forward with what you intend to do. But the way you move ahead against the negativist's opposition is vital. Simply discounting their opinions and steamrolling over them will tear down your relationship. You must acknowledge and affirm the person by saying

something like, "I have a better understanding of your reasons for thinking the idea won't work, and I appreciate your listening to the other possibilities. But I think I will go ahead with what I originally proposed and give it a try. However, I value your continued perspective as we move along."

The negativist may or may not accept your explanation. But that's not the main issue. After you have tried your best to solicit his or her support, you must move on with what you know to be right, irrespective of the negativist's response.

Communicating with the Noncommunicator

People were created to communicate with each other. Unfortunately, some people never got that message. They are the noncommunicators, the silent people, the clams.

Noncommunicators are all around us. They are our children, parents, coworkers, and neighbors. Perhaps the most difficult setting for dealing with a clam is in a marriage. After more than twenty-five years of counseling, I have lost track of the large number of silent marital partners who have come through my office. Some of them took a half-hour to answer a simple question from their spouses. Others communicated like they were sending telegrams—as few words as possible to get the message across.

Many of them *want* to talk, but they just don't know how. An indispensable means of encouraging communication with all kinds of people is to show care and concern by being good listeners. Here are some additional steps you can take to help you get along better with the clams in your life.

Accept their silence. Decide in your mind to give noncommunicators permission to respond the way they do.

This will reduce the pressure and frustration you feel.

Ask open-ended questions. When talking to a nonresponsive person, avoid asking questions that can be answered yes or no. Use open-ended questions, those which require a full answer. For example, instead of asking, "Did you like the concert?" invite a greater response by asking, "What did you like about the concert?" Another open-ended approach that will draw out the silent individual is to say, "I'm interested in your perception of this issue and I think you have something important to add. Tell me what you're thinking."

Confront silence directly. Another way to invite nonresponders to interact is to address their silence directly. For example, you may say, "Kim, I'm looking for a response from you and you appear to be thinking about something. I'm curious what your silence means at this time." Then wait with an expression of interest on your face, perhaps tilting your head to one side to show that you expect a response.

Once I heard a mother prompt her quiet child to reply by saying, "Johnny, you can tell me what you're thinking out loud or you can whisper it in my ear or you can write it in a note. Which would you like to do?" Her creative approach gave Johnny a choice in the matter—and it usually worked.

Controlling the Controller/Dominator

I really don't believe these people were born to be so hard to get along with, but they have certainly learned to dominate and override others. I've seen them in all professions. They are easy to notice and hard to ignore. They have an incessant need to be in control of people and situations.

Some controller/dominators are unaware of the extent of their domineering tendencies. Some are more aware, but they exercise control quietly and behind the scenes. Still others are explosive and obvious. Some of the more obnoxious controller/dominators are very competent people, which makes them even more frustrating to be around.

As we consider how to get along with controller/dominators, we must remember the basic principles for relating to any difficult person: Realize that God loves them and Jesus Christ died for them. And my persistent question to you regarding the dominators in your life is, "Are you praying for them?" What a difference your prayers will make as you take the following steps for getting along with these people!

Don't fight control with resistance. Don't try to fight fire with fire; it won't work. Instead, assure yourself that you don't need to be intimidated by them, and that you can learn to respond to them in a positive way. Dominators gain a significant amount of their power and control from those who resist them. If you decide not to pull on your end of the rope, there will be no tug-of-war.

Two-thirds of the battle of resistance with dominators is in your mind. You talk with yourself about the dominators and how you feel about them. You focus on their unpleasant behavior and how you wish they would either change or leave. You probably rehearse previous encounters with these persons and anticipate the worst scenario at your next meeting. You keep these negative "instant replays" and "previews of coming attractions" rolling in your mind, and you become physically drained, tense, and anxious as a result. You are so focused on these films of resistance that you are unable to focus on other areas in your life.

If you want to enter the mental film business, create some new films to project in your mind which show you responding in a healthy, affirming, non-intimidating manner to the dominator. See yourself responding calmly to him or her instead of resisting. As you create these mental images, see yourself standing before this person with the arm of Jesus resting on your shoulder, giving you strength. Remind yourself of His constant presence.

Lovingly share accurate facts. Since controller/dominators are so dedicated to being correct and precise, you will get along with them better if you speak from an information base which is accurate. Dominators tend to believe that other people don't really know what they're talking about. If they encounter someone who speaks from thorough knowledge and indicates that he or she has done the necessary homework, they may take that person seriously. However, this presentation of accurate information must always be done lovingly and considerately.

Listen, listen, listen. This is a basic step for getting along with all varieties of difficult people. As you listen to the dominator, acknowledge his or her ability and the accurate things he or she says. Affirm this individual even when you are struggling with your own personal feelings about him or her. Often this person is starving for encouragement and affirmation.