

# **A Major Reason Why People Can Be Jerks Sometimes, and What to Do About It, Part 1**

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We've all had to deal with jerks in life. You know the kind: Inappropriate, loud, obnoxious, domineering, self-righteous, and a host of other, sometimes colorful, words. They make life difficult just by being around them. A very funny and astute psychotherapy trainer I heard one time said the formula of insults+agreement from others = jerk.

People like this can really interfere with the smooth functioning of relationships in a community. We wonder why they're being so difficult. Many avoid them or talk behind their back. Certain personalities may try to confront them, often ending up in a shouting match. None of this is particularly effective.

So what's with these people? Why ARE they being so difficult?

Most of the time, psychologists point to the phenomenon of the defensive reaction to explain this behavior. A reaction of this type is nature's weapon against perceived threats. Therefore, defensive reactions arise from a person's misperception or over-perception of threat, usually to their position or viewpoint in a community setting. The behavior is called defensive because it's supposed to ward off a threat.

Defensive reactions of the jerky variety are not completely accidental. Rather, they are intended, whether consciously or semi-consciously, to offend. The stronger the defensive reaction, the more troublesome the behavior, and vice-versa. It's as if the person is enacting the saying, "The best offense is a good defense." They believe, on some level, that they are under attack and they have to neutralize the threat with overwhelming force.

The principle of that defense underlies jerky behavior is crucial to keep

in mind, because dealing with it effectively calls for us to acknowledge its protective purpose instead of or in addition to its attacking quality. Understanding there are more choices for managing this problem than we may at first think brings a greatly improved ability to deal with it. More about that next time.

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