

## **A Major Reason Why People Can Be Jerks Sometimes, and What to Do About It, Part 2**

Art Maines, LCSW

In last week's column we looked at the "why?" of difficult or "jerky" behaviors. We considered how people consciously or semi-consciously use defensive reactions to ward off perceived threats, especially to their position or viewpoint. We also acknowledged the disruptive effect people who overuse defensive reactions can have on the relationships in a community, and the importance of recognizing its protective purpose. Now we turn our attention to the "how" part. How do you deal with this in more skillful and effective ways?

A major sign of emotional health and maturity is the ability to self-examine, what many psychologists and therapists call the "observer self." This means being able to look at our own behavior in such a way as to see how to modify it to achieve a better outcome. However, a person's capacity to do that in the middle of a defensive reaction is just about zero. That's why confronting someone acting like a jerk about their behavior, motives, logic, or intentions is bound to fail.

What's better is to start with the intent to understand. There are several reasons why someone may be difficult, but seeking to understand the fear and perceived threat beneath the reaction may yield better results. Start talking more slowly than normal to the person, with a softer voice that conveys genuine interest. Ask open-ended, curious questions that show your willingness to listen. This frequently helps to soothe the person and helps them be more open to reasonable discussion.

Note that some people are only interested in dominating or controlling others and are not necessarily acting out of fear. They actually get pleasure from playing this game. This is a completely different story than ordinary, run-of-the-mill jerky behavior and most often calls for boundaries. Thankfully, we see almost none of this here at Sts. Clare &

Francis.

The other, and often harder part for us regular people, is to seek to understand what got triggered in us. When we judge someone else to be a jerk, we have almost always just fallen into a defensive reaction ourselves. Use your observer self to catch this, ponder what's wrong about the situation, and redirect yourself as best you can back towards understanding and problem solving.

The ultimate driving force for handling other people's difficult behaviors is the purpose we are trying to achieve. In our community context, I propose that our purpose is to create safety, respect, and connection that fosters healthy sharing of our life's spiritual journey. This flows into and informs all three aspects of what Frank calls the "three-legged stool:" Service, community, and spirituality. Healthy people make healthy relationships, which makes a healthy community.

Everyone behaves badly at times, and the really difficult people behave badly most of the time. This is just a part of life. Nevertheless, all of us can reach for mastering our own and others' difficult behaviors. Remember that all of us are imperfect, doing our best to be together in shared meaning and purpose.

*Art Maines, LCSW is a graduate of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. He has over 15 years of experience as a counselor and psychotherapist. One of his specialties is relationship improvement and communication coaching.*