

# Dealing with a Difficult Boss

## Objective

To identify the problems you are having with your boss, and to identify realistic strategies to reduce your related stress.

## You Should Know

A study by [Life Meets Work](#) found that 56 percent of American workers claim their boss is mildly or highly toxic. Another study, by the [American Psychological Association](#), found that 75 percent of Americans say their “boss is the most stressful part of their workday.”

Having a toxic or difficult boss can affect everything about your workday—it seems like you’re trying your best, only to get criticized or ignored; you lose your appetite; you wind up talking or complaining among your colleagues rather than getting work done.

Dealing with a difficult boss can also cause problems beyond the workplace, such as insomnia, nightmares, depression, anxiety, irritability, loss of self-confidence, relationship conflicts, and so on.

But you’re not quite ready to throw in the towel. In fact, you’d really like to stay on the job, if only the “boss situation” would change. In this worksheet, you will first assess your current situation and then develop some strategies for dealing with a difficult boss.

## What to Do

First, take a step back and think about your boss and his or her behavior. What kind of problems are you encountering? Are they mostly related to your boss’s personality? Communication style? Performance expectations? Time management? Excessive demands? Lack of attention? Something else?

Summarize your current situation below:

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What is your boss's "type"?

- **Narcissist.** Self-absorbed and self-centered, blames others for everything, claims credit for things others achieve. Narcissistic bosses make it all about them. Often unable to be empathic or collaborative.
- **Power seeker, bully.** Pushes to win an argument or conflict and exert authority. Shames or criticizes you publicly or privately. Intimidates or actively threatens. Belittles others who have a difference of opinion.
- **Never available.** Always too busy to talk with you or give you feedback. Takes times off and leaves you in the lurch. Doesn't respond to your emails or requests for meetings or information.
- **Micromanager.** Always hovering and inquiring about what you're doing. Perfectionistic. Advises you how to do things, rather than lets you figure things out. Offers unsolicited feedback. Focuses too much on petty details rather than the big picture.
- **Rage-a-holic.** Flies off the handle, is moody, disorganized, excessively critical. Blames everyone else and is very demanding, sometimes unrealistically so.

Write below what type of boss you have, or describe his or her personality style in your own words.

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Next, think about what your own expectations are of what a boss "should" be. Are your natural desires for praise, encouragement, constructive criticism, time, clear direction, or clear expectations realistically aligned with the job description or this boss's personality? Are there adjustments you could make, such as seeking support elsewhere in the company or requesting a regular meeting time that is not currently available? Is your resentment so high that you're thinking of nothing else except your toxic boss, thus actually performing poorly?

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Now that you've assessed the situation more clearly, here are some tips from the experts about what might help you cope with your difficult boss:

- Be polite and professional with your boss and your colleagues. Avoid gossip. It could come back to haunt you.
- Listen before reacting.
- Don't burn any bridges by acting impulsively out of resentment or anger.
- Think about your boss compassionately—is s/he going through a hard time? Are you personalizing too much?
- Assess yourself accurately to see if you can make adjustments in your approach to your boss.
- Raise your game—that is, *do your best work* (nose to the grindstone) and see if that helps.
- Request a meeting to discuss your concerns. Be specific. Use “I” statements (“I am working hard to understand the expectations but I’m frustrated that the tasks seem unclear. Can you help me understand them?”).
- Be aware of when you feel defensive about something. Try to hear both sides.
- Be open to receiving suggestions and advice.
- If you feel paralyzed by a request, say, “I need to think about that and I’ll get back to you.”
- Recognize that bosses have a tough job sometimes by setting limits or sharing bad news. Try not to take it personally.
- Share your feedback or point of view openly and honestly. Take your time.
- If you feel yourself shutting down or wanting to escape, take a moment to collect yourself, perhaps grounding yourself in your feet or taking a few breaths.
- Take some time off if possible to gain perspective and assess your priorities and goals.
- Consult with colleagues in a constructive manner.
- Document fully any abusive or inappropriate behavior.
- Meet with your HR representative, if applicable.
- If things don’t improve, consider asking for a transfer, if available.
- If things are just too toxic to continue, look for another job.

On the lines below, write down some positive strategies that you would like to use the next time you encounter your boss. Be creative. Be realistic. And be patient with yourself.

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**More to Think About**

1. From the options above, which strategies seem the hardest for you and why?

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2. Which strategies are the easiest to imagine? Why? Can you commit to trying a hard one next time?

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3. Try journaling about your past relationships with bosses or authority figures, particularly if you had critical parents. What did you learn?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?

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