

Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors, Part One

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Certain kinds of challenging behaviors can be devastating and demoralizing for individual community members as well as for the whole community. Photo: Mario Purusic

At first Dwight seemed to have all the makings of a great new community member. He was industrious and engaging. People in the community were impressed by the young man's brilliance and energy. He rapidly learned the construction trade and soon joined an onsite building company. He made friends with some of the most respected community members. He joined several committees, where he took minutes or facilitated meetings, and even began facilitating the community's monthly whole-group business meetings.

Fast-tracked for membership, Dwight joined his community before completing the usual six-month provisional period. He was elected as an officer of the group's Homeowners Association, and in that role oversaw all physical infrastructure committees. He and another member I'll call Charlie became good friends,

as close as brothers. They started their own new construction business and an onsite farm venture. Dwight was a young superstar. Everyone loved him.

Well, not *everyone*. Early on, it became clear that Dwight sought out only the more powerful, longtime community members for friendship, but ignored and seemed to dismiss newer or less active members. For example, the community became polarized about how quickly and in what ways it would develop sustainable agriculture. The group's entrepreneurs, members who intended to be organic farmers, including Dwight, wanted to develop onsite agriculture more quickly, grow food and raise livestock, and have the freedom to try different farming methods. The passionate environmental activists and vegetarians wanted to proceed slowly, forbid livestock, and limit the methods

farmers could use. Dwight could barely control his disdain for those who had views other than his own. He was sometimes outright rude to them or belittled them behind their backs.

The more influential Dwight became the more he seemed to exhibit this more difficult underlying persona. He had rather grandiose-sounding plans and life's mission. He seemed to expect deference, to feel entitled to special treatment.

"It's as if he has ice in his heart."

My good friend Rose became especially close friends with Dwight and his girlfriend. But after a while, he began cheating on his girlfriend and lying about it, which gradually became obvious to Rose, to her sorrow. She and others in their community began feeling baffled and even frustrated by Dwight's behaviors.

After a while, Dwight seemed to have little to no empathy anymore. He cut off former friends, sometimes studiously ignoring them as if they weren't in the room. Whenever he wanted something from them he'd simulate warmth and kindness again, but only until he got what he wanted.

At one point Charlie experienced a severe emotional shock involving a love relationship, feeling deep personal loss and insult. Devastated and reeling with turmoil, Charlie inadvertently wrecked several of the expensive components of a system he was installing on a job. He and his business partner Dwight were obligated to replace what he'd destroyed—a \$5000 cost.

Charlie felt not only wretched, but now also shame and pain for being so miserable and distracted that he caused their business an unexpected loss. That evening he poured out his heart to Dwight, his best friend, assuming he would understand and empathize. Dwight was not only *not* sympathetic but contemptuous, berating Charlie for allowing himself to be so emotionally affected and distracted that he made such an expensive mistake. Charlie was stunned—when had his best friend become this pitiless stranger?

Rose became increasingly concerned and asked Dwight several times to please stop treating people so badly. But nothing changed.

"It's as if he has ice in his heart," I told Rose, as I'd met Dwight many times too. It felt to me as if he had a kind of cold, remorseless rage at the core of his being.

Finally, when Dwight began lying to her too, Rose decided that for her own peace of mind and to no

longer feel frustrated and helpless about his behaviors, she would limit her interactions with him.

"I don't understand you anymore," she emailed Dwight. "And I don't think you understand me either. I want us to stop having any personal interactions—to not talk on the phone or visit each other anymore. And from now on email each other only about community business."

Rose's message to Dwight was straightforward—setting clear, unambiguous limits and boundaries—but it did not at all demean, criticize, or otherwise put Dwight down (which "I've had it!" statements often do) nor did she put herself down. Her statement wasn't vague or mean-spirited. She did no diagnosis, arm-chair psychoanalysis, labeling, preaching, scolding, or rebuking. No further pleas for understanding; no more attempts to appeal to a sense of compassion.

Rose finally understood what would and would *not* work with Dwight and set clear limits and boundaries with him. She had wised up.

As you'll see in this series on especially challenging behaviors, I think we *all* need to wised up.



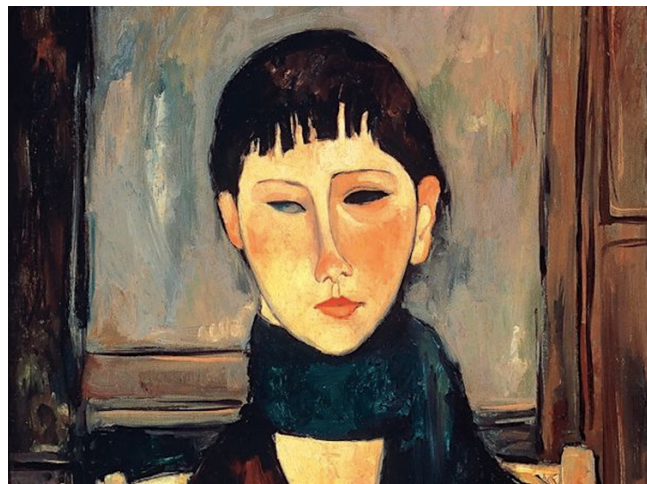
The more obvious form of these behaviors are characterized in part by arrogance and a sense of entitlement.
Ivan Krasko, Portrait of an Unknown Woman.

Not Your Normal Bad Behaviors

What I mean by *especially challenging behaviors* are egregious, baffling behaviors and apparent attitudes like Dwight's that are frequent and persist over time, not the occasional garden-variety rudeness, touchiness, or outbursts of frustration that we all do sometimes. I'm referring to attitudes and behaviors that can confuse, intimidate, and overwhelm.

These can become so hurtful that other community members can become reluctant to join a committee or

team with someone like this on it. People can dread participating in meetings with the person, or attending shared meals or other community events because of who might be there. In my experience most people living in community are decent, congenial, and cooperative, but even just one community member with these characteristics can make a huge difference in the whole community's sense of peace, safety, and well-being.



People with the less obvious version of these behaviors can seem shy and withdrawn, but secretly feel superior and entitled, as well as envying and resenting others.

Modigliani, Ritratto di Maria.

Mavis and the "One-Two Punch"

A community member I'll call Mavis seemed to function in two different modes, going by what I saw in her community and what people there told me. She could be generous and welcoming: hosting dinners at her home for new members, organizing study groups on various topics, and serving her community in various roles and on different committees over the years.

Yet she could also be highly critical of others, while hypersensitive to criticism herself. Sometimes she'd respond to feedback with "punishing behaviors" such as criticizing people in return, or imitating their voice in a mocking tone. After initial "I'm *warning* you" signs—scowling and a harder, heavier voice—she could escalate rapidly to what seemed like full-blown rage, sometimes threatening people with "You'll be sorry!" One person described her impact as "like being hit by a Sherman Tank." Many in her community were wary of her. Some called her "the community bully."

Several of the younger, newer people told me they were afraid to give Mavis feedback or ask her to change her behavior because of her "One-Two Punch."

The first punch, they said, was the attitude: "I'll treat you any way I like!" The second was: "And don't you dare try to give me any feedback!"

Damned if you do; damned if you don't.

She also appeared unwilling to apologize. "I've never heard her apologize to the community or to any person here about anything, ever," one member told me.

This wasn't the whole story. Mavis didn't *always* exhibit sudden fierce anger, act entitled, or speak critically of others. She could be giving and kind. Sometimes she was open to feedback and *did* apologize. Her hurtful behaviors were things she did sometimes but not all the time.

Once several younger, newer people organized a facilitated community meeting with Mavis. They thought a public forum with many people present would be a safe enough space to share their experiences and ask that she treat them better. I got to sit in on and observe that meeting.

Knowing they'd be nervous that night, some of the young people wrote down what they wanted to say. I saw several of these notes, which for some reason were in tiny handwriting on small scraps of paper. (I wondered if such small notes helped them feel safer, as doing this would make them potentially smaller targets.)

That evening everyone sat in a circle, with some of the newer younger members holding their tiny lists of grievances. The facilitator had planned to invite each person to share what was relevant and important for them, what emotions this had brought up, and what they wanted Mavis to do differently. However, when Mavis arrived she basically took over the meeting. She declared emphatically she didn't want to hear from anyone about whatever they thought she'd done wrong. After warning everyone not to try to give her feedback that night, she described how challenging her life had been recently and asked people to be understanding of her difficulties rather than being critical. She was seeking understanding and compassion, she said, not condemnation. She declared meetings like this should be about coming from the heart, and if people just wanted to complain they shouldn't be there.

The facilitator remained silent.

I watched several young people fold up their tiny lists and stuff them back in their pockets, eyes on the floor.

Mavis received no feedback that night. The old One-Two Punch worked again.

Olive as Aggressor, Olive as Victim

The challenging behaviors of a now-deceased member of in my own community whom I'll call Olive were so troubling some of us were actually afraid of her. She was fierce and adamant when expressing opinions. She seemed to see herself as entitled to special treatment, yet often expressed feeling victimized by others. She dominated most meetings, either insisting with piercing hostility on her view of an issue, or, when people disagreed, behaving as though she'd just been wronged and humiliated.

"You're *disobedient!*" Olive spit out.

Darcy was one of Olive's work exchangers. One day Darcy's duties included moving a mattress. She couldn't lift it by herself and couldn't find anyone nearby to help. When Olive learned the mattress hadn't been moved, she was outraged, as if she'd been ill-treated and harmed. She berated Darcy fiercely. This went on for several minutes, while Darcy, used to a professional work environment, looked on in astonishment.

"You're *disobedient!*" Olive finally spit out.

Olive had not only expected Darcy to do all her assigned tasks as a work exchanger—but, like a Marine Drill Sergeant, Olive felt entitled to immediate *obedience* as well.

What's Going On Here?

When mental health professionals consider behaviors and attitudes like these—self-centeredness and presumed entitlement, little to no empathy for others, sudden bursts of outrage, and unrealistic, grandiose notions of oneself and one's abilities—they use the terms *narcissism* and *narcissist*.

However, this article series is about narcissistic *attitudes* and *behaviors*. Most of us aren't therapists and not qualified to diagnose anyone—and we certainly shouldn't "diagnose" fellow community members!—but *we* are qualified to observe behaviors and apparent attitudes that seem to trigger widespread hurt and confusion in the group.

While narcissism isn't considered a mental illness by mental health professionals, when someone consistently exhibits five or more of certain narcissistic behaviors and attitudes professionals identify them with the diagnostic term *narcissistic personality disorder*, one of several "character disorders" in psychology.

It's a *character* disorder, they say, because people who consistently do this experienced such severe

trauma at such an early age that they were unable to properly develop their character. Given their trauma, they could not develop the basic moral characteristic of empathy, and therefore couldn't grow into caring, decent human beings. In children who were this badly traumatized, professionals say, the capacity to develop empathy and decency was replaced by suppressed rage and an unconscious certainty that they are actually defective and worthless. They compensate for with what is called a "false persona" of apparent superiority, self-centeredness, and entitlement (like Dwight's initial "superstar" guise), to keep themselves from experiencing a desperate but suppressed fear that their real self—which they unconsciously believe is defective and worthless—will eventually be revealed to others. As his community knew well, Dwight had had a miserable, stressful childhood, with exacting parents who demanded he excel athletically and academically. No *wonder* he acted like that.

People with narcissistic behaviors can exhibit—not occasionally, like many of us, but frequently and consistently—one or more of the behaviors and attitudes in the list below.



People with both versions of these behaviors can erupt in outbursts of *Indignation*, even *rage*. Photo: Ergin Akyurt.

Mental health professionals categorize these in two ways. "Overt" narcissistic behaviors and attitudes seem arrogant and often self-aggrandizing, like those in the left column of the list (think Dwight).

"Covert," "fragile," or "vulnerable" narcissistic behaviors and attitudes include some of those on the right column, and secretly, many on the left, but expressed in far less obvious ways. People exhibiting covert narcissistic attitudes and behaviors may in fact appear fragile and insecure, as if victimized by others, while also emanating a subtle but frightening air of vengeance (think Olive).

Sometimes they seem to do both (think Mavis).

More Obvious Overt, Extroverted Narcissistic Behaviors:

(Grandiosity on the outside, insecurity on the inside)

Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness
Entitlement
Impaired empathy
Lying; exaggerating accomplishments
Rapidly escalating anger; sudden angry outbursts
Grandiosity
Craving attention
Criticizing others
Mocking or jeering at others
Invalidating, demeaning, or belittling others
Bullying others

Less Obvious Covert, Introverted Behaviors:

(Insecurity on the outside, grandiosity on the inside)

Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness
Relishing vengeance
Manipulating others; using people
Hypersensitivity to criticism
Projecting their behaviors & attitudes onto others
“Gaslighting” others (telling someone what they directly observed didn’t actually happen)
Envy others; resenting others
Limited self-awareness
Grooming newer or less confident members to be their allies and support their version of reality

In my experience researching and visiting communities and living in community for many years, I’ve seen



Community members who interact with people behaving in these ways can feel frustrated, confused, and disoriented.

Photo: Ospan Ali

the negative impact of such behaviors on individual community members, including on myself, as well as on whole communities. I’ve come to realize that these aren’t the occasionally annoying or disruptive behaviors we often see in others or do ourselves, but something far more serious. These attitudes and behaviors are not usually successfully resolved by using Nonviolent Communication (NVC) language, conducting Talking Stick ^{Circles}, bringing in community consultants, or organizing mediations.

Why People Who Live in Community Are Especially Vulnerable

And worse, cooperative, congenial, neighborly community members—particularly if they’re empathetic and compassionate (like Rose and Charlie)—are the

most vulnerable to these behaviors, and the most likely to get hurt.

I believe there are at least two reasons for this:

(1) The nature of community living itself is that we seek cohesiveness; we yearn to all be on the same page. We want to be happy; to feel like family. We aim for a high level of caring for everyone; we aim to resolve community conflicts with empathy. Most community members expect the best of people, and want to give everyone a second chance. Unfortunately, people like Dwight, Mavis, and Olive often take advantage of this forgiving community culture, which is a ripe environment for these behaviors to flourish and continue unchecked—a perfect storm.

Community members are the most vulnerable to these behaviors, and the most likely to get hurt.

Few of us like to set hard boundaries or place limits on people. Almost everyone would like to avoid this, especially in communities. So when these kinds of challenging behaviors occur in a community setting, most people either don’t know what to do, or else assume that *just living in community itself*—with its camaraderie, shared enjoyable activities, and neighborly acts of good will—will eventually heal people of their harsh or hurtful behaviors.

(I call this the “With Enough Hugs You Can Heal Anything” fallacy.)

And if living in community doesn't heal them, then surely using Nonviolent Communication (NVC) will help these people feel seen, heard, and empathetically "gotten" enough to behave more responsibly and cooperatively.

(I call this the "With Enough NVC You Can Resolve Anything" fallacy.)

And . . .

(2) Many community members don't understand or even believe that these attitudes and behaviors could even occur in a *community*.

Or, they don't believe such behaviors and attitudes could actually exist in someone they know.

Or that such behaviors could exist at all.

Why do communitarians find it so hard to understand this? I think it's because many people who live in community not only feel natural empathy and compassion for others, and feel fine about themselves most of the time, but also mistakenly believe everyone else experiences life the way they do. So it's practically impossible for them to imagine the inner world of people like Dwight, who have such a constant high level of suppressed anxiety and outrage that, while able to create the appearance of warmth and kindness for short periods, they don't actually feel (and *cannot* feel) empathy for anyone. They can only simulate it for so long before it becomes exhausting to keep pretending.

Empower ourselves by learning everything we can . . . So we'll know what to expect.

What Doesn't Work

Let's say someone in your community frequently and consistently displays one or more of these narcissistic behaviors. Maybe at first you expected they'd "get it" about living in community sooner or later and then would start treating you and others courteously and fairly.

When this didn't happen, you may have tried, like Rose, asking the person to please stop their hurtful behavior and treat people better. You may have tried using skilled NVC language in heartfelt conversations about feelings and needs, hoping to appeal to what you assumed is everyone's innate capacity for empathy, mutuality, and cooperation.

When that didn't work you may have tried your community's version of Sharing Circles or even a

formal mediation process such as Restorative Circles. You may have written long private or even public emails encouraging the person—or pleading with them—to please live up to the community's shared values and behavioral norms. These steps may have made a temporary difference in how the person behaved. But only for a little while, until they became exhausted by the effort and reverted to their usual behaviors again.



People living in community are often more vulnerable to these behaviors than people in mainstream culture.

Photo Toa Heptiba

Or maybe each of these actions didn't make any difference at all. Like Rose, you may have been confused, disappointed, and frustrated. You may have eventually felt baffled and helpless.

The problem wasn't that you weren't skilled enough or didn't try hard enough. It's that the methods that normally reduce interpersonal tensions and resolve conflicts simply don't work with this pattern of behaviors.

Three Crucial Steps

In my experience, we can take three steps to protect ourselves and feel more emotional peace and safety, while still feeling empathy and understanding for people with these behaviors:

(1) Empower ourselves by learning everything we can about patterns of narcissistic behavior...*so we'll be more realistic. So we'll know what to expect.*

The next article recommends books and videos specifically about these behaviors and how people can protect themselves, and suggests what people can do to feel safer and more peaceful and empowered in our relationships with community members who exhibit these behaviors.

(2) *Lower our expectations* that the person can respond to our requests for empathy, mutuality, and community cooperation. Having realistic expectations about people with these behaviors—what they can and can't respond to—makes us far less likely to be negatively affected by them, and so we don't keep throwing ourselves onto the jagged rocks of expectation that *this time* the person *will* care about others, and are able to change and will *want* to change.

(3) *Set limits and boundaries* with the person who does hurtful things that affect you, as Rose did with Dwight. (More on this in the next article.)

Notice, these steps do *not* try to get the person to see the harm they're causing or change their behaviors. For people with these behaviors, this just doesn't work.

Coming Up

In the next articles on this topic in *Communities* magazine we'll look more closely at lots of these behaviors, including covert behaviors; successful setting of limits and boundaries; and what *else* we can do—as individuals, small groups of members, or whole communities—to no longer feel frustrated, baffled, or scared, and no longer at the effect of people with narcissistic behaviors.

We *can* help ourselves and our friends feel safer, calmer, and more peaceful in community.

Empowering with Information, NOT Labeling or Diagnosing

Unfortunately, addressing this topic in *Communities Magazine* can be misinterpreted as a way to label, dismiss, or "other" people with these behaviors, or as presuming to "diagnose" them as psychologically unfit. This is *not* my motive for writing this article series. Nor am I trying to provide ammunition with which to retaliate against any community members.

Rather, I want people who may be dealing with community members who do these things to become informed and educated about these behaviors, as this is the *first* step in empowering ourselves and no longer being so vulnerable to their effects.

In my experience it is possible to feel empathy and compassion for people with these behaviors—to *not* "other" them—while still learning enough to protect ourselves, but never using this information to label or diagnose others.

—DLC

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We can learn to deal effectively with these behaviors and feel safer, calmer, and more peaceful again.

Photo: Levi Guzman