

# Is Your Coworker a Jerk, or Does He Need a Doctor?

Understanding people's behavior will keep the workplace running smoothly.

By Barbara Jaurequi

**M**ost Americans spend the bulk of their waking hours at work. Some say that Americans' "best" hours are given to their employers. Workers can accept that reality if they like their jobs and workplace. But when employees find themselves working with really difficult people, life at work can be extra trying or downright exasperating.

Why certain people are "really difficult" isn't always clear. It's true that some people are simply annoying or interpersonally inept. However, some difficult coworkers may be legitimately mentally ill and in need of professional intervention.

Considering that about one in four adults suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year, it's not at all unlikely that at some point you may find yourself working side by side with a person who is clinically mentally ill. Mental illness and oafish behavior may have similar effects on people but you need to deal with each one differently. Someone who's behaving badly but isn't mentally ill can usually change when you use such tactics as motivation, training, discipline interviews, and coaching. But a person with a mental illness will have a tough time changing without being treated by a professional. If you fire someone for bad behavior, that person could sue you for bias, because mental illnesses are covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which forbids discrimination on the basis of physical, mental, and emotional disabilities.

Differentiating between clinical symptoms and personal traits can be tricky. To recognize the difference between people with legitimate disorders and people with chronic "jerk-itis," you have to know what you're looking for.

## What Are the Most Common Mental Illnesses?

How can you tell a garden-variety jerk from someone who needs mental help? Here's a list of the most common mental illnesses and ways to differentiate them from simple bad behavior at work:

### MOOD DISORDERS

A mood-disordered individual with major depression will likely demonstrate excessive lethargy that's chronic, changing little from day to day. You can tell the difference between such a person and a jerk because jerks will become

“Mental illness and oafish behavior need to be treated differently.”

lethargic only when there's work to be done and will have lots of energy when fun things are happening.

### ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder can cause sufferers to be irritable, careless, hyper, forgetful, disorganized, extremely talkative, and distractible. A non-ADHD "jerk," however, won't demonstrate all these symptoms simultaneously. She may talk your ear off when you need to get back to work. She may "forget" to do certain tasks because she's lazy. She might keep the environment a mess because she simply doesn't care if it's messy. An ADHD sufferer, on the other hand, will show continual symptoms, such as fidgeting with objects, forgetting things, and becoming distracted, as well as being unable to pay attention, follow directions, or control impulses.

### BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER

People with BPD struggle to maintain stable connections, including relationships with coworkers. They vacillate between idealizing their coworkers and demonizing them. Borderlines are highly defensive and tend to revile those who criticize them. Ultimately, they see themselves through the eyes of others and have a very weak sense of self, so they can't maintain close connections with family, friends, coworkers, or anyone in their life.

Jerks, on the other hand, don't necessarily have unstable relationships in all realms of their lives. They may take more credit for accomplishments than they deserve; they may brag about their successes. But, once again, those things just make for annoying coworkers.

It's important to note that BPD affects a very small portion of the population (approximately 6%). So bear in mind that your extremely irritating coworker may not be mentally ill.

### NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY DISORDER

A person with NPD is different from a coworker who is conceited and selfish. Clinically diagnosed narcissists



exploit others for their personal gain without remorse. They are miserably unhappy when the spotlight is removed from them. They feel entitled to special treatment and are obsessed with their own “wonderfulness.”

Non-NPD jerks don't exploit others without guilt or internal conflict. They typically feel some remorse and shame for exploitive behavior and might even apologize.

Narcissists rarely (i.e., never) apologize. Jerks can be fair. They may grumble about certain parameters, but they typically follow the rules. They may brag about themselves but don't go out of their way to elicit compliments from others, as would a narcissist. Furthermore, they're not devastated when excessive praise doesn't come their way. And NPD is rare; only 6.2% of Americans are clinically diagnosed with the disorder.

## What to Do

It's important to note that other medical problems can cause coworkers to behave in ways that are unusual and concerning or annoying and obnoxious. Brain tumors, head injuries, medication side-effects, hormonal imbalances, and stress can all trigger troublesome behaviors. So take care not to jump to conclusions about the behavior of fellow workers.

If you suspect mental illness in a coworker, subordinate, or supervisor, you need to determine if you can or want to handle the challenges of working with that person. Keep in mind the following:

**If a coworker is the problem, it's best to take your worries to a supervisor** rather than confronting the coworker directly.

**If a subordinate is the cause of the problem, deal with it directly** but with sensitivity. Make observations

in a non-confrontational way. For example, don't say, “You clearly have a personality disorder.” Say, “I've noticed that your attitudes and behaviors change significantly from day to day and I'd like to talk to you about that privately.” Be relaxed when addressing the issue. If a supervisor is easy-going and approachable, suffering staffers are more likely to open up.

If the employee acknowledges that there is a problem, help him or her make a plan for recovery and symptom management. Talk about some job-related goals the employee can tackle once the disorder is under control. When troubled employees have something to look forward to, they're more likely to follow through on getting necessary treatment.

**If you're working for a really difficult supervisor**, you may need to consider all your options, up to and including transferring, changing positions, or leaving the organization entirely.

**If you're currently sane but working in a crazy environment, it may only be a matter of time** before you yourself become mentally ill or, quite possibly, become a jerk! It's better to face the problem head on than expect it to go away on its own because, without help, mental illness gets progressively worse over time. And of course, left unchecked, jerk-like behavior will continue to serve as an energy vacuum in your workplace. 

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## Handling Jerks & Other Workplace Issues

It's a rare organization that encounters no personality clashes. Use these articles (NonprofitWorld.org) to manage problems:

**Can We Call a Truce? Tips for Avoiding Workplace Conflicts** (Vol. 27, No. 6)

**How to Conduct Discipline Interviews** (Vol. 24, No. 6)

**Beware of These Three Personality Pitfalls** (Vol. 31, No. 4)

**How to Accommodate Disabilities under ADA** (Vol. 18, No. 5)

**Your Duty to Investigate Workplace Complaints** (Vol. 19, No. 3)

**When It's Time to Say Good-by: How to Discharge Workers without Legal Hassles** (Vol. 23, No. 2)