

The Seven Deadly Habits of Truly Miserable People

Punishing. Complaining. Blaming. Threatening. Nagging. Criticizing. Bribing.

Do all these things, and we guarantee that you and everyone around you will be nuts. Better yet, wise up.

By Ellen Michaud

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Unless you have a couple of crossed wires or a genetic glitch in your brain cells, most of the emotional turmoil you experience is directly traceable to the fact that you've learned to try to control those around you through these seven deadly habits, says psychiatrist William Glasser, MD, president of the William Glasser Institute in Chatsworth, CA, and author of *Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom* (HarperCollins, 1999).

Unfortunately, a lot of us use the seven deadlies, as Dr. Glasser calls them, without even realizing it.

- ✂ Your younger sister spends an hour making the salad for dinner, and you criticize her choice of ingredients as unhealthy. You say that you just want her to live long and prosper, but is that really your objective? Or are you trying to control her?
- ✂ Your husband rarely mops up the bathroom sink after he shaves. So just about every morning you complain, "Bill, this sink is a mess!" and blame, "I'm never on time for work, because I have to clean it up!" Oh really? Or are you trying to force him to clean up the sink?
- ✂ Your offspring rarely straighten their rooms. So you nag ("Did you make your bed?") and nag ("Did you pick up your clothes?") and nag ("Did you put the towels in the hamper?").

Nasty, nasty, nasty. The way you tell everybody what to do and how it should be done all the time, it's a miracle that you have any relationships at all. And where on earth did you pick up these deadly habits anyway?

Unfortunately, explains Dr. Glasser, "We learn these habits from teachers, parents, grandparents, and others as a child." Your mom finds newspapers and books all over the living room floor, blames you for the mess, complains that you're turning the house into a pigpen, and tells you to clean it up. She may punish you ("No television tonight, my girl") or bribe you by offering something in return for a quick and speedy cleanup. ("Those cookies I baked are for when the living room is neat and tidy.") And she may nag you until the job gets done. ("Amy! Have you cleaned up the living room yet?")

After years of hearing this manipulative patter, you eventually begin to use it yourself, says Dr. Glasser. And it may seem to work, at least in the short term. Amy may indeed pick up the living room. But after being blamed, punished, bribed, and nagged, she's not going to be the type of girl who will give her mother an affectionate hug as she waltzes in the door.

The result? A neat living room and a messy relationship that makes both of them miserable.

How to Make People Nuts

Aside from the moral issue about whether or not trying to control someone else's behavior is right or wrong, the practical problem with trying to control others is that whenever you blame, bribe, complain, criticize, punish, or threaten anyone, they'll resist, says Dr. Glasser. They'll argue. They'll fight. In fact, they'll cajole, ignore, cheat, sneak around behind your back, or do any one of a zillion things they can think of to get you to back off.

It's simply human nature. You're genetically wired to resist being coerced into doing something you don't want to do, Dr. Glasser points out. It may be more pronounced in one person than another, but unless you recognize what

you're doing and learn how to get what you need in a relationship without trying to control other people, every relationship you have will disintegrate into a power struggle that will make everyone just plain miserable.

Turning It All Around

Using the seven deadlies was in part responsible for the failure of 39-year-old Sam Brown's* first marriage.

"It was a rough time," Sam recalls. "It wasn't until the relationship was over and both I and my partner were heartbroken that I came to realize that I might well have been able to make other and better choices."

With this awareness, Sam understood that he needed to put some effort into changing his way of "doing business." So he started to work with Barnes Boffey, a therapist trained in Dr. Glasser's approach.

"With my therapist's help, I began to understand that I had to do three things," Sam says. "One, recognize that my current behavior wasn't working. Two, have a vision of what I wanted to be like. And, three, begin practicing behaviors of how I wanted to be."

"It was already clear that my current behavior wasn't working," he admits. "So I took a look at who I was, then chose to be the best part of who I really am," Sam says. "And that best part is someone who is loving and supportive. I spent a lot of time in my previous relationship trying to change my partner," he adds with a wry grin. "Now, I'm changing me."

The Seven Caring Habits of Truly Happy People

The best way to ditch the seven deadlies is to replace them with what Dr. Glasser calls the seven caring habits: supporting, encouraging, listening, accepting, trusting, respecting, and negotiating differences.

They sound simple, right? All you have to do is accept people for who they are, listen to them, respect them, trust them, encourage and support them, and negotiate any differences you may have. But, like most of what's worthwhile in life, the caring habits are a little harder to put into place than you might think, especially if they represent an about-face for you.

Here are a few tricks to give you a hand:

- ☞ *Run a reality check.* Do you use the seven deadlies? How did you talk with the people you live with this morning? Did you listen to what they were saying? Or did you let their words run in one ear and out the other? Did you encourage them to move ahead with what they've planned for the day? Did you support them in their choices? Or did you put them down or just nod your head as you drank your coffee?
- ☞ *Really listen.* "Treat people like they're your best friends," says Suzy Hallock-Bannigan, a trainer with the Glasser Institute who is based in South Pomfret, VT. Hang on their every word. Find time to sit down with them and really pay attention—without being distracted by cell phones, passing traffic, or the demands of other people. Then give them time to get out what they have to say. "I also try to check in with people all the time to make sure I've correctly heard what they're saying," she says.
- ☞ *Envision the new you.* Draw a mental picture of yourself as a person who practices the seven caring habits. Keep it in the back of your mind, then pull it forward when you're talking with those close to you to see if you're acting like a caring person. Sam does this all the time. When he and his fiancée, Maggie, were considering a move, for example, Sam was not happy. The two had had an understanding that they

would live in the Northeast for the rest of their days. Then Maggie got a great job offer in Florida, and she wanted to go.

“My immediate reaction was, ‘How could she do this to me?’” says Sam. “It seemed so unfair. I felt resentful, I felt frightened. I felt angry. I felt betrayed. And, at that moment, I realized that I could choose to react from those feelings—or not.

“I took a deep breath, then thought, ‘How do I want to be in the world?’ The answer is, I want to be gentle and loving and strong. Okay, so if I were a gentle and loving and strong person, how would I act? What would I be saying to myself right now? And to Maggie?”

By framing the issue in terms of who he wanted to be rather than what he wanted the outcome of their discussion to be, Sam was able to maintain a loving and supportive relationship with Maggie and work out a compromise. Since Maggie’s a teacher, they decided to rent a home in Florida for the school year and return to Vermont every summer. (To show that she understood his passion for the Vermont mountains, Maggie even encouraged Sam to buy 10 acres and a cabin for them.)

- ✍ Ask the right question. In that split second after which the urge to blame, complain, criticize, nag, threaten, punish, or bribe arises, but before the words actually leave your mouth, stop, and ask yourself, “Is this really important?” Hallock-Bannigan doesn’t like unmade beds. When her husband, who knows this, left the bed unmade one morning, Hallock-Bannigan felt the heat of generations of righteous bed makers rise up within her. “If he really loved me,” she caught herself thinking, “he would have made the bed.” When her husband came into the room, she was about to complain but instead asked herself, “Just how important is an unmade bed?” The answer was obvious even to a bed maker such as Hallock-Bannigan.
- ✍ Accept reality. “You have to understand that the only person you can change is yourself,” says Hallock-Bannigan. If your husband is a tightwad who hates it when you spend a dime, you can’t do a thing about his attitude. But you can control yours. Instead of slugging it out with him over whether or not a \$15 pair of Liz Claiborne socks is “necessary,” hold your irritation in check and apply as many of the seven caring habits as you can. Look for a compromise, such as holding the line at one pair of socks, or promising to check store knockoffs that are as pretty but cheaper.

“When you have a difference with someone who’s important to you, you negotiate,” says Dr. Glasser. But what happens if your partner digs in his heels? To deal with that, Dr. Glasser developed something called the “solving circle”—a piece of string that forms a circle outline on the floor. You and your partner face each other and, as each of you feels ready, you step into the circle, and say, “The most important thing in my life is our relationship. We have a problem with _____ (name the problem). We know that arguing and blaming will do no good. And in order to avoid wounding our relationship, I am willing to _____ (say what you’re willing to do that will help your relationship).” It may take a few days to get this accomplished, and some people may find that a third party—a therapist or marriage counselor—may be a necessary ingredient.

- ✍ Pick a model. When Hallock-Bannigan was training Sisters in Ireland to use the caring habits, one good Sister was having trouble figuring out how to respond to someone who was criticizing her. So Hallock-Bannigan asked her, “Who’s the woman you most look up to?” The answer was Mary Robinson, president of Ireland and a champion of human rights. “Well, what do you think she would be thinking and

feeling in this situation?” asked Hallock-Bannigan. “What would you see her doing?” Ten seconds later, the Sister was off to do what Mary would’ve done.

✍ *Write about it.* Keep a daily journal to help think your way through the transition and keep track of your progress, says Hallock-Bannigan. Sam does, and looking back over nearly a decade, he can honestly say, “I’m a very different person than I was 10 years ago. It doesn’t mean I’m perfect,” he adds with an endearing grin. “But I try.”

The Seven Deadly Habits versus the Seven Caring Habits

<u>Turn This</u>	<u>Into This</u>
<i>Blaming</i>	<i>Accepting</i>
<i>Bribing</i>	<i>Encouraging</i>
<i>Complaining</i>	<i>Listening</i>
<i>Criticizing</i>	<i>Respecting</i>
<i>Nagging</i>	<i>Negotiating differences</i>
<i>Punishing</i>	<i>Supporting</i>
<i>Threatening</i>	<i>Trusting</i>

BIO:

Vermont-based freelance writer Ellen Michaud is Prevention’s award-winning editor-at-large.

CAPTIONS:

If the tears don’t work, I’m gonna have to get mean.

I would have this headache if there weren’t so much clutter around here!

Sure. I’ll bring pizza. But only if your room is clean.

Trying to control others is futile. The only person you can change is yourself.

What would Mother Teresa say?

Whom do you most admire? Ask yourself what they would do before you react with one of the seven deadlies.