

Office Space

by Joseph Guinto

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What do you do when your coworkers are making you sick? Stan Kapuchinski will tell you.

I ONCE WORKED in a cramped office with three men some might refer to as toxic coworkers. I didn't call them that. I called them Huey, Dewey, and Louie.

Huey was the highest ranking of all of us, and he had the only private space in our tiny quarters. Dewey, Louie, and I shared a small space without walls. Huey was a reporter, but his undiagnosed carpal tunnel syndrome prevented him from typing. So, mostly, he spent his time wandering around our desks, occasionally doing an elaborate set of finger stretches up against the wall. Dewey, meanwhile, would sit at his desk, remove his socks, and roll golf balls around underneath his bare feet. He also would regularly speak to his wife on the phone using a

singsong voice. (He once treated her — and us — to a rendition of “Hey, Good Lookin’.”) When Dewey wasn't working, he was lying on the floor, with his feet — his bare feet — propped up against the same wall that Huey used for finger stretches.

Louie at least kept his socks on. But Louie, a man of significant girth, had gone on a health kick and would drop to the floor in random bouts of fitness throughout the day, doing exactly 35 push-ups each time.

I found it arduous to be around these men, and, in part to escape them, I began overextending the company's allowance of the occasional work-at-home day. Apparently, “occasional” does not mean four days a week. Who knew?

[Stan Kapuchinski, MD](#), probably did. Based in Punta Gorda, Florida, this psychiatrist and neurologist has written a book that addresses dealing with “toxic” people in personal and business situations. The book, *Say Goodbye to Your PDI (Personality Disordered Individual)*, has a subtitle that is almost too long to type, no matter how many finger stretches you've performed: *Recognize People Who Make You Miserable and Eliminate Them from Your Life for Good!* To hear him tell it, my coworkers were a problem, and I needed to address, adapt to, and either learn to live with them or move on — fast. Assuming, of course, that their annoying habits were signs of a deeper dysfunction and not just dorkitude.

Kapuchinski advises that in the workplace, “You should approach somebody with your gripe and see how they respond. Because how they respond defines something. If you get a sense of reasonableness — a sense that they're listening to you — then you know that this is just a person who picked up a bad habit. They're not a toxic coworker. They're just kind of bothersome. They're like a bad blind date with a guy who is blowing his nose all the time. He's not bad; he's just annoying.”

And really, that's probably all my coworkers were — bothersome. I'll never know for sure, though, since I never asked Dewey to put his socks back on. Kapuchinski says the truly toxic coworkers are after “attention, power, and control,” none of which, I think, could be gained 35 push-ups at a time. Still, had I presented my coworkers with my gripes, I might have found out what was really motivating them. “The coworkers who get indignant, who turn the problem back on you, are the ones who are truly toxic,” Kapuchinski says.

So, suppose Huey, Dewey, and Louie really were toxic, or suppose people you work with are, how do you best deal with them? Well, for one thing, you don't kid yourself that you really can deal with them. "The illusion that normal people have is that you can just go to someone, sit down, talk things out, and things will get better. But with toxic people, there is no reasoning with them," Kapuchinski says. "They do not change, and whatever you do that you think will help the situation — have a talk, send them to a management course, have other people talk to them — whatever it is, it will not work."

That's not to say that your only option is to work at home until you get fired (or quit). There are ways to cope with toxic coworkers, Kapuchinski says. Four ways, to be exact.

ONE: Don't Be Baited.

Most toxic coworkers are manipulators. Kapuchinski says they may "appeal to your vanity, promise you potential advancement, play on your sympathies, or tell you anything you want to hear" to get you to do what they want. But it's just to entrap you. Take, for example, the toxic vice president who tells you that you're in line for something bigger but then never delivers. "You start doubting yourself, then wondering if you've done something wrong," Kapuchinski says. "And that's when they've got you. Don't get into the idea of 'If I try harder, I'm going to win them over.' It ain't gonna happen. You have to step back and realize what's going on. These people are appealing to your emotions and then using them against you."

TWO: Keep Notes.

"Document like crazy," Kapuchinski says. Send memos to follow up on the promises that deadline-breaking toxic workers made and then failed to meet. Or keep notes on manipulative and antisocial interactions in the workplace. "That way, if you have to go to other people — your boss, maybe — for help, you can show that the toxic person has a certain pattern of behavior," Kapuchinski says. And if the toxic person is a higher-up who likes to take credit for your work, use documentation to prove what you've done for them. "Make sure you've got what you need to get rewarded," he says.

THREE: Don't Go the Extra Mile.

"These people have an agenda," Kapuchinski advises. "So you have to set limits with them. Don't work extra hours. Don't extend yourself to help [toxic coworkers] change their ways." In other words, know what toxic people are trying to get out of you, and give them only as much as the job requires you to — no more. Because, from them, he says, "there is no gratitude, no sense of appreciation."

FOUR: Never Play Their Game.

Toxic people are good at being bad. You are not. "To say you're going to beat them at their own game is foolish," Kapuchinski says. "These people have been behaving this way all their lives. To do what they do, you're going to have to become uncaring and duplicitous, and you don't want to go there. You'd be compromising who you are as a person."

Read more about Dr. Kapuchinski and how to get his book at his website: www.StopYourMisery.com

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