

URL: <https://ecorner-stag.tcg.stanford.edu/quick-dips/techniques-to-avoid-toxic-people-explicit/>

Stanford Professor Bob Sutton goes over various ways to distance yourself from awful people in the workplace, from obvious tactics like sitting further away or finding a safe hideout, to subtler strategies like reducing the frequency of interaction to give them time to cool off. The renowned management expert also says supervisors should help: "A great boss is somebody who protects you from idiocy from on high."



## Transcript

but essentially, assholes are sort of like kryptonite that the more exposure you have to them, the longer, the closer you are under it, the worse it's gonna be for you, and we can show this in lab and field studies.. And so finding ways to limit your exposure is important.. Some of the most interesting studies, which have been around for a long time, going back to research by Tom Allen in the '70s at MIT, shows that essentially, as you sit further away from somebody, further and further away, you have less communication with them and they have less influence on you.. These studies have been going on for a long time.. Essentially, his research that shows that if you can get 150 feet away from someone, it's almost like they're in another country.. Now we've got some newer studies of open office environments, and essentially what this group of researchers did, out of Harvard at the time is where they were, was they looked to see the effect of a toxic person in an open office environment.. And what they found was if somebody, so it could be you, is within 25 feet of a toxic person, number one, the odds they will become toxic themselves go up.. Remember how it's contagious? And number two, the odds they are gonna get fired also go up.. And by the way, the more positive stuff just came out.. They've got newer stuff that shows that if you sit next to a collaborative superstar, it's good for your career..

So who you sit next to in an open office is very important.. Another thing.. So another thing that comes out of partly research and partly experience is that if you're in a situation where you have somebody who's abusive, especially somebody who has what I would call or the researchers would call Machiavellian personality, these are people, often childhood bullies, who when they're nasty to you and you look like you're in pain or suffering, literally, they can show these brain scanning studies that their brains light up.. If you are dealing with an asshole like that, doing what you can to slow the frequency and rhythm of encounters is really important.. And I'll give you an example.. So this comes from a doctoral student I know.. She's now a prestigious professor at a prestigious university.. She's tenured.. So she had what she called a bat shit crazy advisor.. Early in her career with him, he would call her up at three o'clock in the morning and yell at her..

He'd send strings of nasty emails and they'd have these in person meetings where he would also be nasty.. So what she did was she slowed the rhythm.. For example, she said, "I'd wait to get seven, eight, 10, 15 emails, "and then I'd do a short, polite response.. "I would respond to them all at once." With meetings, she slowed things down where she would meet with him every two or three weeks and as much as once a month as opposed to the weekly meetings he wanted.. So anything you can do to slow the rhythm helps.. Find a safety zone.. Sometimes you can hide from them.. I saw this, the reason we have this picture.. When I was in graduate school, we did an ethnography, my friend Dan Dennis and I did an ethnography of a hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan.. And literally, we were standing there talking to a nurse, and she's telling us about a doctor that they call Dr..

Gooser.. And he was somebody who was famous for sexual harassment.. As we were having the conversation, literally, the doctor runs by, grabbing the buns of a nurse while she was screaming, and they would go into the nurses' lounge to hide from him, as an example.. Another thing you can do, find a boss who will protect you.. All sorts of evidence that this is the hallmark of what a great boss is.. A great boss is somebody who protects you from idiocy from on high, abusive customers.. So that's another thing you can do.. Here's somebody who talks about, "My job is to hold the umbrella "so the shit above doesn't hit you." That's the kind of boss you want...