

Setting Boundaries...Guarding Against Nasty Behavior

(by Claire Knowles)

Setting boundaries has been a topic that I've been contemplating and researching for some time. Indeed, *setting boundaries* was the topic I'd advertised as the intended focus for this issue of Lights On! Yet it took a situation with a colleague (within a professional setting) to bring this to the forefront (for me). I knew, in dealing with this specific situation, that somehow, I was a victim; I had allowed myself to be the victim and found myself feeling bad without knowing precisely why—without being able to articulate it. I just knew that I was definitely feeling small, feeling inferior and very confused as to how and why the victimization unfolded.

I found the book [Nasty People...How to Stop Being Hurt by Them Without Stooping To Their Level](#) (by Jay Carter, Ph.D. ©2003) to be most insightful. I highly recommend this book to you—for helping to make the interactions you engage in along your life's journey better. This column is wholly based on Dr. Carter's important perspectives. I underscore that this is about behavior—manipulative behavior—by people whose behavior is labeled "nasty"; as differentiated from the person.

Have you been hurt, betrayed, degraded, demeaned, diminished by a person whose behavior has been nasty? Perhaps its your boss, your parent, your spouse, a sibling, a colleague, a team-mate, or even someone you consider a friend. Whoever it is, he or she is an "*invalidator*"—one who feeds on your self-esteem, your self-confidence, your personal worth; one who causes confusion and uncertainty that is difficult to define; one who can cause mental anguish; one who can cause a gnawing unhappiness. You can stop being the brunt of this abuse (yes, abuse) and put an end to sneak attacks on your soul—while remaining a class act and without resorting to nasty tactics.ⁱ

The theme of the book ([Nasty People](#)) is "*invalidation*"—a term the author uses to describe "one person injuring or trying to injure another" (consciously or subconsciously). As Carter shares, an *invalidation* can range anywhere from a shot in the back to a "tsk, tsk" to a deep cutting remark. A rolling of the eyeballs can be invalidation and so can a punch in the nose. Yet it is usually the *sneaky invalidators* that cause the most damage. Destroying a person's capability to be whole is probably worse than any physical damage any person can do to another.ⁱⁱ

Dr. Carter's perspective is that "the major reason invalidation occurs so often is that it works (in the short run)."

What if the process of invalidation was exposed?

Dr. Carter goes on to say that "the big part of the cure for invalidation is achieved when we simply spot it. Remaining undetected and unchallenged is what gives invalidation its power."

*If invalidation didn't work, nobody would do it!*ⁱⁱⁱ

Dr. Carter describes the various methods that "invalidators" have in their arsenal including:

- * Keeping the victim in a constant state of uncertainty
- * Projections – taking one's own feelings and projecting them on to another in a negative way.
- * Generalizations – exaggerating small truths.
- * Judgment – some negative attribute the invalidator attaches to you.
- * Manipulation – bad control.
- * Sneak Attack – "I don't want to upset you, but...."
- * Double messages – where the intent doesn't match the words.
- * Cutting Communication – Cut-off before you finish answering; when your thoughts aren't deemed worth hearing.
- * Building You Up/Then Cutting You Down
- * The Double Bind – Damned if you do; damned if you don't; (the lose-lose game).^{iv}

As I looked at my personal situation involving the colleague, I realized that I was dealing with...

- * An invalidator who needs to be right;
- * An invalidator who is compelled to control.
- * An invalidator skilled in "cutting communication" – so effective that my voice was silenced.
- * An invalidator who uses suppressive mechanisms to chop away at my self-esteem; that is, to persistently deny and discount my input to an important discussion.

And, I allowed this to happen! So, what can I/ other victims do?

Dr. Carter provided a host of coping mechanisms:

- * Not taking things personally – a secret of anger management;
- * Awareness of the bigger picture—maintaining the larger view;
- * Not losing one's situational awareness—staying calm—seeing

things for what they are.

But most important, Dr. Carter provides a roadmap to “confront” the person who invalidated you in such a way that you show you know exactly what he/she is doing. From the long, look-‘em-in-the-eye pause, to asking the invalidator to repeat the invalidation they just did (which exposes their tactic), to telling the truth about what one is feeling, to mirroring the projection.^v

Dr. Carter notes that you can always “tell the truth” by looking at your feelings:

- *I feel embarrassed.

- *I feel angry that you said it that way.

- *I feel put on the spot.

- *I feel like I’m being cut off and that my input has no value.

No one can argue with the way you feel, because right or wrong, it is the way you feel. Telling the truth exposes what is happening and can stop the invalidation in its tracks.^{vi}

Dr. Carter, in Nasty People, also asks the reader to realize that...

- *The invalidator is a personality—not a person.

(Most invalidators are not in their nasty behavior mode all the time!)

- *As victims, we have to examine our own experiences, our own reactions, our own insecurities. We each make our own set of keys to life; we make each notch in each key from those experiences; and experience-based, imbedded defensiveness can surface at odd moments; we can make ourselves vulnerable—allowing the invalidation to happen. (I have to be aware of and responsible for my own insecurities and not play the blame game).

- *Invalidators usually look big but feel small. Paradoxically, they have low self-esteem but large egos.

- *Invalidators invalidate when they feel inferior or out of control—whenever their addiction says “feed me more control—more power—more rightness”.^{vii}

The bottom line is that one doesn’t have to be a victim of invalidation—it can be unmasked for the manipulation that it is. It is every person’s duty to learn to recognize and divert or defuse the behavioral attack that devalues.^{viii} Lights On!

ⁱ Nasty People, Cover page
ⁱⁱ Page xx - Overview
ⁱⁱⁱ Page xx-xx1 – Overview
^{iv} Pages 7 – 20
^v Pages 89 - 93
^{vi} Page 92
^{vii} Pages 95-96
^{viii} Page xx1 - Overview