

## Seven Ways to Handle Your Dysfunctional Office

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Workplace dysfunction may be funny when you're watching "The Office," but it's serious business when you're trying to cope with it every day.

The good news is that it doesn't have to bring you down. Nobody says dealing with dysfunction is easy, but if you follow this advice, chances are you can at least stay above the fray:

- **Step Away from the Action:** Start looking at your office as though it were any dysfunctional organization from movies or TV. "Sit back as an observer and watch," suggests Donna Flagg, principal of learning and productivity specialist The Krysalis Group. "Do not participate...because the thing that makes dysfunctional behavior thrive is the participation of dysfunctional people. If you separate yourself, you remain on the 'functional' side of the line."
- **Remain in Control:** One way to stay functional is to avoid returning fire -- no matter under siege you feel. This allows you to control the people trying to control you, says Joel Epstein, author of [The Little Book on Big Ego](#) and CEO of Friction Factor. "Most 'ego monsters' want you to fight with them," adds Epstein. "It makes them happy."

The solution? Throw the game and lose on purpose. "Let the ego monster think they've won," he advises.

- **Stay Focused:** Concentrating on your job performance while others are engaged in less-productive activities can be an effective way of coping and advancing, says Heather Millen, a Boston-based marketing administrator. "Act how you think a professional should act, no matter how enticing it is to come to their level," she says. "I once had a boss who thought things could only be done his way. But by sticking by what I thought was right rather than giving into his every whim, the working relationship grew stronger, and we each had greater respect for the other."
- **Tune Out:** If you're in a position to close yourself off from the insanity and negativity, do it, advises Erik Myers, a database administrator. "I wear headphones all day every day so that I don't have to listen to the insipid ramblings of my coworkers and how much they

‘love their fat-free salad dressing’ and ‘have you heard about this new diet where if you eat really spicy foods you can eat all you want, because it goes through your system faster and the heat actually burns calories anyway?’” he says.

- **Enlist Allies:** Sometimes it helps to find what career coach Marty Nemko calls “an island of sanity amid the maelstrom.”

“Find one or two people in the workplace whom you like and can commiserate with, or even laugh at the others' antics,” Nemko says. “Decide among you whether you want it to simply be a steam-letting-off group or want to look for smart ways to improve things, if only in pockets. And keep your group under the radar -- no need for everyone to see you as a clearly identified cabal.”

- **Look for Patterns:** Studying -- but not obsessing over -- colleagues' dysfunctional tendencies can give you an edge, Flagg says. Common patterns are discrepancies between what people say and do and inconsistencies in behavior.

Sure, this familiarity may breed contempt, but it also yields a competitive advantage for you as well as a coping mechanism. “You can not only anticipate problems headed your way, but you can also use the insight to navigate the terrain in a positive and effective way,” Flagg explains.

- **Leave:** In the end, the best outcome may be to move on. “It's really the only thing that actually works,” notes workplace expert Billie Blair, author of [All the Moving Parts](#) and president/CEO of Leading and Learning. “Our research of these situations has shown that it's always the good and talented people that the organization loses when there is dysfunction, because they can go other places. Those who can't simply stay and manage to endure.”