

Handling a Demanding Reader, Audience, or Class Member **by Jennifer Degler, Ph.D.**

As a psychologist, author, speaker, and teacher, here are my thoughts on handling readers/audience/class members who are in distress and become demanding.

You may be dealing with someone who has a personality disorder. This means someone has trouble perceiving and relating to situations and people. In every situation, they use the same rigid and unhealthy patterns of thinking and behaving which leads to significant problems and limitations in relationships, social encounters, work, and school. Often, they don't realize they have a personality disorder because their way of thinking and behaving seems natural to them, and they blame others for the challenges they face.

While there are specific personality disorders with their own particular symptoms, general symptoms of a personality disorder include:

- frequent mood swings
- stormy relationships
- social isolation
- angry outbursts
- suspicion and mistrust of others
- difficulty making friends
- a need for instant gratification
- poor impulse control
- alcohol or substance abuse.

This list sounds like distressed, demanding readers/audience/class members, doesn't it? They wait in line to talk/email us and describe tumultuous relationships, display fluctuating emotions, want immediate answers, want our help while also discounting our advice, give in to their impulses to email/call frequently, etc.

We don't know for sure what causes personality disorders, but these factors are associated with personality disorders:

- family history of personality disorders or other mental illness
- low socioeconomic status
- childhood experiences of verbal, physical or sexual abuse, neglect
- an unstable or chaotic family life
- loss of parents through death or traumatic divorce.

If you write or speak on those factors, then you can expect to attract some personality-disordered people in your audience. If you have experienced those factors in your own life, you may have been "groomed" to be more easily "hooked" into trying to help people who are energy-drainers. As Christian speakers/authors who have big hearts, we must learn to distinguish someone else's serious emotional problems. (I speak as a water-logged, bedraggled survivor of some unpleasant undertow experiences I didn't avoid early in my career!)

People with Borderline Personality Disorder may be especially prone to latching on to a speaker/writer and seeing us as “the answer”. They have significant difficulty regulating their emotions and have serious abandonment issues. A typical interaction with a speaker/author might be: She lives in emotional distress and relationship upheaval. She believes no one really understands her pain and that everyone will leave her. She reads your book or hears you speak. You seem like a caring person who may understand her pain. She feels an overwhelming urge to not just connect with you, but to **fuse** with you. She’s finally found “the answer,” and it’s **you**.

She’s not really interested in your wise counsel, nor does she have the emotional fortitude or coping skills to follow through on your advice. Instead, she expect you to listen to her describe her pain over and over and over again, with no limits on your time or energy. On a deep level, she doesn’t see you as a real person, a separate human being with your own life, needs, family, job, etc. When you do set limits, she may display extreme anger and try to “slash and burn” her way through your professional reputation like General Sherman through the South. The bottom line: **you cannot help her**. Personality disorders tend to be chronic and need long-term treatment (which isn’t always effective.)

At speaking event, I try to spend a few moments with everyone who wants to speak to me, but if I get the sense that this is a desperate person who needs far more than I have to offer, I kindly but firmly end our conversation by thanking her for sharing with me. Sometimes I recommend she seek counseling, and if she says “I’ve tried several counselors and nobody can help me,” this is a red flag for trouble. I never suggest that she contact me.

If she asks if she can email or call me with more questions, I say, “I see that you are in pain and overwhelmed, but I am not the answer. You need to connect with someone locally who can walk with you on your journey.” If she were to call anyway, I would not return her call. If I happened to answer the phone, and there she is on the line, I would kindly but firmly state that I am not the answer, suggest she connect with someone locally, and then end the phone call, in under two minutes. Interrupt her story if necessary with your kind but firm statement. She is not respecting your boundaries and limits, so it’s your job to remind her of them. Failure to confront is permission to continue.

I send the following response email to 99% of people who email describing their problem situation (feel free to copy it):

“Thanks for contacting me with your concerns. I wish that I could respond individually to every email, but between the demands of work and family, I don’t have the time needed. It sounds like you are feeling overwhelmed and could benefit from talking things over with a local counselor. You took the time to reach out to me, so please take a few more minutes to find a Christian counselor in your area. You and your life are worth the effort. Here are suggestions for finding a Christian counselor:

- 1) Ask trusted friends for recommendations. Friends who have been through a divorce or other significant loss may have seen a counselor to help them, so start with those friends.
- 2) Call the five largest churches in your area and ask for the names of recommended counselors. Pastors refer many people to counselors so they often know who does good work with Christians.
- 3) Search for Christian counselors in your area by going to the website of the American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC) and clicking on the “Find a Counselor” button. <http://www.aacc.net/resources/find-a-counselor/>
- 4) Search for Christian counselors in your area by going to the Focus on the Family website and using their “Find a Counselor” page. <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/counseling/find-a-counselor.aspx>
- 5) Do an internet search for your state’s psychological association website (e.g. “Kentucky Psychological Association”) and then use their “find a psychologist” feature to search for a psychologist. On some websites, you can narrow your search to psychologists who work with religion/spiritual issues. There will probably be some non-Christian psychologists on that list, but it is a starting place.
- 6) If you have insurance, you can go to the company’s website or call and ask for network providers who work with religious/spiritual issues. Many insurance companies do not track this type of information, but it’s worth a try. At a minimum, your insurance company can provide you with the names and contact information of network providers who live near you. You can then do an internet search on the name and contact information to see if s/he has a website with additional information. It is appropriate to ask politely on the phone or by email if the counselor is a Christian.”

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