

Stanford Prof on How to Recognize and Deal With A**holes

Sooner or later, we all have to deal with them. At times, most of us even act like one. But few believe that being one is a good thing.

So *how* do we deal with assholes and avoid being one?

Apparently, that is now the topic of serious academic study. Robert Sutton, a psychology professor at Stanford University, supplies some answers in his new book: [*The Asshole Survival Guide: How to Deal with People Who Treat You Like Dirt*](#).

It's a follow-up to his popular 2010 book [*The No-Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*](#). According to Sean Illing of *Vox*, who has [interviewed](#) Sutton on the occasion of the new book's publication, the old one "focused on dealing with assholes at an organizational level," whereas the new "offers a blueprint for managing assholes at the interpersonal level." The interview is really about both.

Although Illing doesn't ask the question at the start, the first thing we need to know is what Sutton means by "asshole". Used too loosely, it can be just a term of abuse for somebody one dislikes, just as "bullshit" is sometimes used too loosely for falsehoods. But even as "bullshit" has been given [a technical philosophical meaning](#), so now "asshole" has been given a technical *psychological* meaning.

Sutton says: "There are a lot of academic definitions, but here's how I define it: An asshole is someone who leaves us feeling demeaned, de-energized, disrespected, and/or oppressed. In other words, someone who makes you feel like

dirt.”

That seems rather subjective. After all, might it not sometimes be that a supposed victim of an asshole has something to do with how the asshole “makes” them feel? Maybe it’s not always or entirely the asshole’s fault.

But Sutton has an answer to that:

The reason I have this definition of assholes as somebody who makes you feel demeaned, de-energized, and so on is that you’ve got to take responsibility for the assholes in your life. Some people really are so thin-skinned that they think everyone is offending them when it’s nothing personal. Then the other problem...is because assholiness is so contagious, that if you’re the kind of person where everywhere you go, the people objectively treat you like dirt and treat you worse than others, odds are you’re doing something to prompt that punishment.

So in order to recognize that you’re dealing with an asshole, you need to be self-aware enough to know that you’re not just too thin-skinned, and that you’re not doing something to deserve being treated like dirt—such as being an asshole yourself. I think that’s the most important insight Sutton offers.

With that understood, what do you do about the asshole(s) in your life?

Unsurprisingly, the answer is that it depends on the context, and on how much you have invested in being or working with the asshole. Most of Sutton’s discussion centers on the workplace. In some situations, for example, it can be easy to ignore or marginalize an asshole. But sometimes that’s not so easy. Sutton gets usefully concrete about different strategies for different situations.

As to the assholes in one’s personal life, Sutton’s offers a

bit of game-theory advice about the workplace that often applies to friendship and marriage too:

We have plenty of research that shows that people who are givers rather than takers tend to do better in the long term. If you're playing a short-term game, then yeah, being an asshole might pay dividends – but I'm fairly convinced that doesn't work in most situations.

But if all you ever do is give and not take, it might be best to move on.