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# THE SOURCE

BE YOU IN THE WORKPLACE

How to Handle  
Toxic Behaviour &  
Micro-Aggressions  
in the Workplace

BY JANE FRANKLAND

# Tips & tricks

## HANDLE TOXIC BEHAVIOUR & MICRO-AGGRESSIONS AT WORK

### **Unpacking the Underlying Motivations of Toxic Behaviour**

There are always underlying motivations behind someone's toxic behaviour. Perhaps it could be a result of past experiences, insecurity, or beliefs that have been ingrained in them over time. Or it maybe it's a form of self-protection or a way for them to cope with difficulties. Whatever the case, their toxic behaviour isn't justifiable, and you are not responsible for their actions. You are only responsible for yours and how you choose to respond to them.

### **How to Spot the Signs of a Toxic Personality or Micro-Aggression**

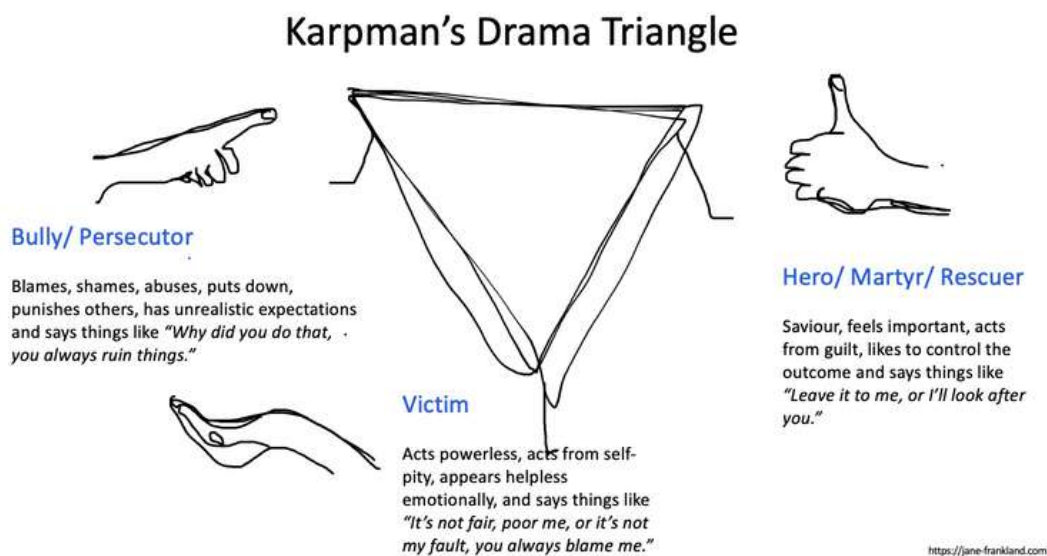
Have you ever felt like someone in your life was just draining all your energy and making you feel terrible about yourself? If you answered yes, then chances are you're dealing with a toxic personality. Toxic people can be incredibly frustrating to deal with since they tend to bring negativity wherever they go.

In my experience, the best way to spot the signs of a toxic person is by looking for patterns in their behaviour. For example, playing the victim, constantly criticising others, controlling behaviour, or wanting to act as the hero. They live in the Drama Triangle - a social model of human interaction proposed by Stephen B. Karpman. The triangle maps a type of destructive interaction that can occur among people in conflict. It is a tool used in psychotherapy, specifically transactional analysis. To stay out of the drama triangle you need the skillsets of assertiveness, compassion, empathy and self-awareness.

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## The Drama Triangle



And let's not forget about micro-aggressions - subtle, often unintentional actions or words that can be hurtful and marginalising to individuals or groups and add up over time. Here are some examples:

- Making assumptions about someone's identity based on their appearance or perceived nationality. For example, asking a British/ European/ American Asian where they're "really" from.
- Dismissing someone's experience or viewpoint because of their gender or race. For example, telling a woman she's "too emotional" or dismissing a person of colour's perspective as "divisive".
- Using language that's exclusionary or that reinforces stereotypes. For example, using "crazy" to describe someone with a mental health condition.

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- Interrupting or talking over someone in a conversation or meeting because of their gender, race, or other characteristic.
- Questioning someone's qualifications or accomplishments based on their race, gender, or other characteristic. For example, assuming a woman in tech isn't as skilled as her male colleagues.
- Assuming that everyone has access to the same resources and opportunities. For example, assuming that all students have equal access to technology and Internet connectivity for remote learning.
- Making comments about someone's physical appearance that perpetuate harmful stereotypes or expectations. For example, commenting on a black woman's hair or a person's weight.
- Using humour or sarcasm in a way that demeans or belittles someone based on their identity. For example, making jokes about someone's accent or cultural traditions.
- Assuming that someone is straight or cisgender (identifying with the gender assigned at birth) and making heteronormative or cis-normative comments. For example, assuming that a person of a certain gender is attracted to people of the opposite gender or asking a transgender person about their "real" name.
- Treating someone differently based on their identity, even if it's in a seemingly positive way. For example, assuming someone is good at mathematics because of their race.

FOR VICTIMS

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### **Educate yourself**

The first step to handling micro-aggressions and toxic behaviour is to educate yourself on the topic. Understand what they are, where they come from, and how they can negatively affect both the person affected as well as those around them. Read up on various approaches you can take such as setting boundaries, communicating clearly and assertively, expressing empathy, and using de-escalation techniques.

### **Take time to reflect**

Take a step back and look at the situation objectively. Consider the person's words and actions. Ask yourself what's really going on here, and without judgement, why someone might be behaving in this way. What's triggering them? What's making them feel insecure or inadequate? What's their privilege? Remember to keep your emotions in check so you can see the situation for what it is rather than getting caught up in the heat of the moment. Move from a reactive to proactive mindset, freeing yourself, exercising your power, taking back control and responsibility for yourself and your reactions.

Look around your workplace and ask yourself... Is this where you want to be? Do you feel valued? Are you in alignment with culture? Are you thriving or surviving? Do you need to speak up? Do you need to move on? Check where you are allowing someone to use you, manipulate you, and treat you poorly. Look inwards, compassionately, to find if the relationship is reflecting something in your relationship with yourself.

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### **Establish boundaries**

Once you understand the dynamics of micro-aggressions and toxic behaviour, it's time to establish boundaries. Boundaries are about protecting yourself from too much of someone else's energy as well as not allowing someone else's behaviour to bring you down. They are also about understanding yourself better, and asking yourself what are you allowing to happen, and what are you tolerating. So, consider carefully. Then, state your boundaries to yourself and to others clearly and stick to them. It may take some time for you or another person to adjust, and you may not succeed every time it happens, but if you continue, it will eventually create more respectful communication and interactions.

### **Communicate assertively**

When confronted with micro-aggressions or toxic behaviour, assert yourself in your communication. Speak up and express yourself clearly and directly, while still using a respectful tone. Don't be afraid to set boundaries or call out inappropriate behaviour if needed.

### **Document incidents that occur, including times, dates, and people involved**

It's important to document any incidents that occur when dealing with micro-aggressions or toxic behaviour in the workplace. This includes noting down times, dates and people involved in the incident.

Documenting these details helps to create an accurate record of events which can be helpful if you need to take further action such as involving HR - who are there to protect the company (not you) or escalating the issue with a lawyer.

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### **Seek support at work**

If you're struggling to handle micro-aggressions or toxic behaviour on your own, don't hesitate to seek support from colleagues, a manager, or HR if necessary. It helps to have someone listening and understanding the situation as well as offering advice. Having an objective third party who can challenge inappropriate behaviour in a constructive manner can also be beneficial, in addition to having someone who can provide emotional support. Seeking support from the right people is a great way to ensure that any micro-aggressions or toxic behaviour doesn't get out of hand.

### **Take good self-care throughout the process**

Don't forget to take care of yourself during this process. Taking ownership of your mental health and wellbeing is key to responding appropriately in challenging situations.

### **Seek outside help**

If the situation becomes dangerous or there's no resolution in sight, consider seeking outside help. This can come in the form of a professional mediator, lawyer, counsellor, therapist or even a trusted friend or family member. Having someone else involved can help keep emotions in check and provide an objective perspective and legal perspective on the situation.



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### **Forgive and move on**

Forgiveness is essential, and part of the process. Don't hold onto negative emotions or grudges, as this will only further fuel the cycle of toxicity. Let go of any resentment or anger so you can focus on creating a healthier environment for yourself and those around you. Journaling, mindfulness, tapping, and moving your body (so you move the energy out of your body) all help. If you need to resign from a company, this doesn't illustrate weakness. Rather, it demonstrates strength. It's you using your power.

FOR LEADERS

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## HANDLING TOXIC BEHAVIOUR & MICRO-AGGRESSIONS AT WORK

### **Know the signs of toxic behaviour and micro-aggressions**

Leaders can help by acknowledging the signs, making sure everyone is aware of them, and creating a safe environment where victims can speak up and receive proper support. Additionally, they can challenge these biases by setting an example through inclusive language and actions.

### **Speak up**

When employees experience micro-aggressions or toxic behaviour, they should feel empowered to speak up. Speaking up can be challenging, and many people are afraid of the potential repercussions. But, keeping quiet only allows these situations to persist. Leaders can create a culture that encourages open communication by actively seeking the victim's opinions, providing a safe space to voice their concerns and promoting empathy among the team. When a micro-aggression or toxic behaviour is reported, take it seriously and address it appropriately. Check out the *'What to Say When'* resource for ideas if you're stuck.

### **Create a plan**

Creating a plan for dealing with micro-aggressions and toxic behaviour is essential for managing these situations effectively. Leaders should set clear policies and guidelines outlining what constitutes micro-aggressions and toxic behaviour, how to recognise them, and how to report them. Employees should not only know what is expected of them, but they should also understand the consequences of their actions. Leaders should also provide training to educate employees on what constitutes a micro-aggression and equip them with the tools to address it in a healthy and respectful manner.

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### **Learn from mistakes**

Inclusivity doesn't mean that mistakes won't be made. Leaders and employees should take responsibility for their actions and learn from them. This process involves acknowledging that they may have made a mistake, apologising if required, and then taking the necessary steps to make amends. Leaders set the tone for this by being transparent and accountable and giving the same grace to others. Being transparent and accountable fosters a sense of trust among teammates.

### **Skill up, rethinking your workplace culture**

Toxic environments are often rooted in poor leadership. Often, it's because leaders don't know what good leadership looks like or because their practices have slipped, bad habits have formed, and no one is there to hold them accountable. Leaders should therefore evaluate their leadership skills, those of their team, along with their organisation's values and their own to ensure they align with inclusive and collaborative values. They should review their current policies, procedures and strategies and address the ones that might be promoting toxic workplace practices.

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### Final Thoughts

The bottom line is that employees should not be made to feel invalidated or unsafe in the workplace. Leaders must acknowledge the significance of creating an inclusive and collaborative environment free of toxic behaviour or micro-aggressions. As one member of a team, victims and leaders should recognise the importance of speaking up in a respectful and empathetic manner.

Everyone makes mistakes, but it takes acknowledgment, responsibility and taking the necessary action to be able to learn from them. Being inclusive and supportive means taking serious measures in rethinking work practices, policies, and strategies that foster a toxic workplace culture. By implementing these suggestions, leaders, and employees alike, can help their workplaces become safer, more inclusive, and fruitful for all.

*Good luck!*

# Worksheet

## HANDLING TOXIC BEHAVIUR OR MICRO-AGGRESSIONS AT WORK

### GET CLEAR

Where are you tolerating toxic behaviour or micro-aggressions?

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### WHAT IS THE IMPACT?

What impact is this having on you or your team at work? What damage is it causing?

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### WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF YOU DON'T DO SOMETHING ABOUT THIS?

Think about your time, energy, feelings, and the cost of not taking any action.

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### WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF YOU RESOLVE THIS?

Think about the benefits? How will your life change? How will you feel?

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### WHAT MIGHT PREVENT YOU FROM ACTING?

What excuses are you telling yourself for tolerating or not having clear boundaries?

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### WHAT ACTION ARE YOU GOING TO TAKE TO RESOLVE THIS?

What is one effective action step could you take?

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