



BONDS
ELIZABETH
BERNSTEIN

Carla Madrigal says she disliked her co-worker Ben from the minute she met him—bristling at his “close-minded” views and habit of swiping her newspaper. For months, they bickered. Ms. Madrigal would take walks outside the office just to calm down.

Then one day, Ben asked her about a favorite book she kept on her desk. Ms. Madrigal lent it to him, and when he returned it he told her he’d loved it.

“Oh my gosh, I can’t believe we have something in common,” Ms. Madrigal, who lives in Seattle, re-

Look for one thing you like about a person and focus on that, one psychologist suggests.

members thinking at the time.

You can learn to like someone you loathe. Really.

Many of us are bumping up against people we don’t like as we spend more time in offices and gathering with family and friends.

Yet even super-annoying people usually have redeeming qualities. You just have to work to uncover them.

And at a time when it can feel that polarization is rampant, it’s important to try.

“The world needs us to get along,” says Elizabeth Pinel, a professor in the psychological-science department at the University of Vermont who studies isolation and connection.

We often think shared similarities bond us—matched hobbies or interests, living in the same neighborhood, or having children the same age.

But we can have lots in common and still dislike someone.

Research shows that what really makes us like a person, and helps us bond, is sharing an experience and feeling we’re having the same response to it.

Psychologists call this I-sharing. (“I” as in “I get you.”)

Think of cheering on your favorite team with co-workers, singing along to a favorite song with your sister in the car, and laughing (or cringing) at the same jokes with friends at a comedy show.

The experience of relating in the moment is powerful, Dr. Pinel says. “You feel like you’re in sync or on the same wavelength,” she says.

Research by Dr. Pinel and others—conducted with people who differ from each other politically and socially—has found that I-sharing helps people like each other more.



How to Like Annoying People

Even irritating folks usually have redeeming qualities. Here are some tips for uncovering them.



Carla Madrigal and Ben LeFebvre bickered for months after first meeting at work.

It also makes us more likely to help each other out, to compromise and to be more generous.

One study, published in March, showed that having such experiences where we feel we have a shared response made Biden and Trump supporters like each other more.

You don’t need to like everyone. Some people are best avoided, especially if they make you feel unsafe emotionally or physically.

Here are some science-backed strategies for learning to like someone who annoys you.

Give them a second chance

Make it a goal to get to know the person better.

Look for one thing you like and focus on that, suggests Kelly Rabenstein, a licensed psychologist in Charleston, S.C., and author of “Psychological Secrets for Emotional Success.” Is the person kind or a good parent or eager to help others? Start there. Every time you feel yourself getting annoyed, focus on your goal of connecting and remind yourself of the thing you like.

“When you start to see someone as human, that softens you,” Dr. Rabenstein says. “And you’ll start to find more things you like.”

Watch how you act

Start with empathy. Maybe the person’s behavior reflects stress or disappointment about which you know nothing. We feel more connected to others when we’re compassionate, says Beverley Fehr, a professor of psychology at the University of Winnipeg, who studies close relationships. We also feel less resentment and anger.

Dr. Fehr recommends paying attention to how you treat the other person. Show your openness. Speak kindly, and watch your body language. (Uncross your arms!)

Don’t gossip—that enforces the negative. If you find something to sincerely compliment, do so.

“Treating people with dignity is likely to elicit a positive response in return,” Dr. Fehr says. And that should also help you warm up.

Spend real time together

Occasional small talk won’t cut it, psychologists say. You need to spend enough time together to get to know the person.

Move beyond the forced time together, say at work, and invite the person to hang out. People love an invite because it makes them feel appreciated, Dr. Rabenstein says. This makes them like the person who did the inviting more. (The psychological term is “reciprocal liking.”) And if they like you more, you might reciprocate.

Choose bonding activities

Start with an activity you both enjoy. Attend a concert or game, or share a pizza.

To get to an I-sharing moment, pick something that makes you work for a common goal. Play on the same team at trivia night. Or plan a volunteer activity together.

Awe-provoking activities—a nature hike or attending the symphony—are great. It’s hard not to bond if you’re both feeling your heart expand.

And if all else fails, try some-

thing that makes you both laugh. Who doesn’t like someone with whom they’ve shared a good laugh? And laughter produces oxytocin, a feel-good hormone.

After Ms. Madrigal’s colleague returned her book, the two began talking more—about favorite authors, their mutual love of cats, and their gripes about the engineering firm where they worked. (All bonding topics!)

They also spent time together outside work. Ms. Madrigal invited Ben LeFebvre to a book reading. They took picnics to the Presidio, near their office in San Francisco. Ms. Madrigal got up her nerve and showed Mr. LeFebvre some writing she was doing. He shared with her some personal problems he was having.

Mr. LeFebvre, a 75-year-old geologist, says he always liked Ms. Madrigal—“she was so cute!”—and that he remembers asking permission to take her newspaper. He also says that getting to know her helped broaden his world. “I had lost a sense of myself for a few years, and she reminded me who I really am.”

And Ms. Madrigal, a 78-year-old artist, says she came around to Mr. LeFebvre when she got to know and understand him better.

Now, the two have been married 28 years.

“I’m glad we discovered our common ground,” she says.

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