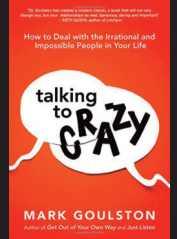


Talking to Crazy

How to Deal with the Irrational and Impossible People in Your Life



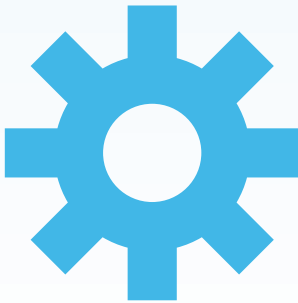
Book by Mark Goulston

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Synopsis

So you think you're surrounded by a bunch of crazies? Read on for a set of DIY tools from a man who used to train FBI hostage negotiators, and you'll discover there's a solution for pretty much whatever irrationality you can think of—even yourself.

Talking to Crazy (AMACOM, © 2015) offers readers a set of powerful tips about how to defuse run-ins with the irrational people in their lives, whether personal or professional. Split into five well-defined sections, and filled with real-world success stories, Goulston acknowledges there's no reasoning with the unreasonable. But he shows that while it may not be easy, it's almost always possible to get some sort of breakthrough. Readers can expect to readily identify with the variety of challenges to which he applies his tried-and-tested methods, illustrating they're not strategies confined to the psychiatrist's office.



The key concepts of *Talking to Crazy* can be distilled into the following practices:

Realizing that Forearmed is Forewarned

It won't help to battle irrational people with logic or common sense. The only real chance of a meaningful breakthrough is to first examine the why, then arm yourself with proven techniques.

Facing your own Demons

Admit that you also need to own your own crazy. If you skip this vital step, you'll always be starting from a skewed viewpoint.

Learning from the Professionals

No one has all the answers, but there are professionals who deal with irrational people for a living. So if they suggest a tried-and-tested approach as your best chance of securing a positive outcome, follow their advice.

Understanding that Success is Never a Given

Some situations are simply beyond your skill set, and it's important to recognize when you could in fact be doing more harm than good. That's when you need to call time, and get a professional involved.

“I've used these techniques to do everything from settling office feuds to rescuing marriages, and you can use them just as effectively to handle the irrational people in your life.”

Based on *Talking to Crazy* by Mark Goulston, we discuss the value of swapping the arguments with the crazies in our lives for Goulston's considered, step-by-step approach to secure better outcomes for everyone involved. We share our interpretations of his tips, tools, and drills in the following pages.

“Crazy” is Everyone’s Problem

Irrationality, in ourselves and others, often scares us to the point of paralysis. It ends marriages, breaks down family relationships, and threatens workplace peace. So are there really some accessible solutions out there?

The Three-part Brain

Suggesting an irrational person “calm down” will definitely elicit the exact opposite response. It’s all to do with the three-part brain, and how our life experiences determine whether these are in sync. If not, that primitive, or reptilian brain just continues fighting for survival the only way it knows how, with less than acceptable results. Goulston suggests “leaning in” to the crazy is the only hope for a breakthrough, but warns this takes resilience and courage.

The “crazy” of the title is not about people with an actual mental illness, but rather those who are irrational—they have no clear view of the world, they don’t generally make sense, their behavior and decision-making doesn’t do them any good, and there’s just no talking sense to them. This “leaning in” strategy, which basically means starting with an empathetic rather than a confrontational response, works in a variety of circumstances, whether it’s a screaming or silent spouse or partner, a child giving you the “I hate you” treatment, an aging parent giving a guilt trip, an impossible staffer, or a superior who won’t give you the time of day.

Responses, good or bad, can be linked directly to the brain. It was way back in the 1960s when the so-called triune, or three-part brain, was first described. But what exactly does that mean, and how is it relevant? Our survival instinct lies in the primitive or reptilian brain, which focuses only on food, sex, escape, or attack. Our emotions (joy, hate, protectiveness, sadness) lie in the paleo-mammalian middle brain, while the most evolved part is the neo-mammalian upper brain. This is responsible for planning, impulse control, and strategizing.

If all three align in a healthy way, you’ve generally got little to worry about. But too often that’s not the case—thanks to less than perfect early years—and the flashbacks that occur in times of stress keep the irrational person treading water, applying the same approach without any hope of securing a different outcome.

It becomes clear, then, that people trapped in self-preservation have little or no capacity to engage the upper brain. So it’ll be essential to start from the inside out, or to “lean in” for any hope of resolution.

What it Says in the Mirror

No matter how great our childhood, we all struggle with negative messages that threaten to derail us later in life, sparking our own “crazy.” And these are significant hurdles when we’re trying to “lean in” to the irrational people in our lives. The great news is that getting to grips with our own negativity and stressors will help with not only the difficult, but all our relationships. It can only be a win-win, even if it’s uncomfortable.

Among the common negative messages are the following: I'll never be good enough; I always need someone to help me; everyone's out to hurt me; and it's too risky, it's just not for me. These creep into our everyday thinking and actions all the time, so it becomes clear why it's important to recognize these thoughts, and adjust our behavior accordingly if we are going to successfully tackle the crazy in someone else.

There are a several exercises in the book to help you identify your personal stressors, and various tools to help turn these negatives into positives. Here are some examples of how to change your world view.

- Instead of seeing those around you as impatient or selfish, picture them as patient and generous. Work hard to remember the good things they've done for you.
- Instead of seeing those around you as unreliable, tell yourself they're in fact reliable.
- Instead of seeing the absence of love in those around you, see them as loving.

Why, you may ask? Because you'll change your own perceptions of others, and theirs of you, and you may just find out you've been the problem all along. It's worth a try because—since you've already done some of the hard work on yourself—you start from a far stronger base when you deal with irrational people than you would've before.

Being able to stay sane in the face of irrationality, or any life crisis, is a powerful life skill, especially when all you want to do is give in to your fight-or-flight response. It'll take plenty of commitment however, and Goulston offers three tools he promises are game-changers. But he warns you'll need to practice them every day, and especially before you face up to an irrational person. His five steps from crisis to clarity start with the "Oh @#\$&!" reaction to the "OK," or re-engagement phase. It's not instinctive for our brain, Goulston warns, but with plenty of effort he promises you'll be able to get control of your emotions more and more quickly.

The "Power Tools"

Goulston shares a range of his proven interventions to provide you with brilliant strategies you can use throughout your life. Hit up those difficult people with the Time Travel, the Belly Roll, or the Fish-Bowl. These are techniques that can, for example, get irrational people focused on the future rather than the past, defuse a tense stand-off by surrendering control to them, or stare at one another for so long you both end up smiling.

There are 14 strategies, each fully explained and accompanied by real-world examples, and tips on what to do when things go wrong. Here are just a few:

- **The Belly Roll:** Never try to take charge of the conversation with an irrational person. Rather take the assertive-submissive approach, because while your instinct may tell you this makes you seem weak, it can in fact allow you to win by surrendering.
- **The A-E-U (Apologize, Empathize, Uncover) Technique:** This one's for those drastic situations, and while it's risky, it definitely does the job. Even the most irrational of the irrationals will soften in the face of an apology, a dose of empathy, and a shot at releasing all those nasty, horrible things he or she was thinking about you.

- **The Split Second:** This technique is the classic manipulation of playing one person off against another. It's typically used by those who are afraid to hear the word "no." Goulston offers several steps to help avoid a total breakdown between you and the other person in the split—including considering your previous experience of him or her and even formally conferring on those experiences—to ensure you don't end up never speaking to one another again. In addition, you also play the splitter at his or her own game, but with kindness and empathy—ultimately showing that "no" is definitely not the end of the world.
- **The Fish Bowl:** This starts off very awkwardly, but at its crux is the brain's mirror neurons, sparked by your actions, and the actions of others. Look left as you stare into the other's eyes, focusing on the left eye because it's connected to the right, emotional brain. Once you feel the connection, start the conversation and you'll be surprised how someone who previously didn't want to say what was bothering them, happily begins to vent.

When Things Get Personal

Negative personality traits in any relationship start with the unforgiving, progress to the retaliatory, then finally manifest in estrangement. It takes two to make the deal, so why not refocus from getting your own way to achieving joint success—and becoming one another's cheerleaders. Recognizing you're both responsible, and being genuinely contrite, is the starting point to a life in which you handle upsets, frustrations, and disappointments better, with no danger of getting to the point of antagonism. Your children will thank you for it.

To illustrate this concept, Goulston includes an exercise that'll stop you in your tracks and hopefully change your mind about the screaming matches in your home as you fight for dominance with your kids. The exercise is called Child A or Child B, and the question is which child you want yours to grow up to be, and how you can help achieve that result.

Child A is focused, resilient, and persistently goal-oriented. He or she can handle disappointments maturely, doesn't take him or herself too seriously, and is willing to listen and learn from others. Child B, on the other hand, is scattered, fragile, gives up when things get tough, doesn't have goals, gets upset easily, is hypersensitive, and can't take advice without losing composure.

It's typically a no-brainer that everyone wants their child to be Child A, but this won't be possible if you don't respect and cooperate with your spouse or partner and make decisions with the Child A end-goal in mind. Sticking to the rules is far from easy, especially if you find yourself in the middle of a messy divorce, for example. But if you keep your eye on the prize, and practice some humility, raising Child A is certainly possible.

Interestingly, Goulston says he's learned during 30 years as a therapist that the child usually sides with the "crazier" parent, who is usually not above playing dirty and using bribes to stake his or her claim. Most children will however see through the game as they grow older, so it'll be important to stand your ground, grit your teeth, and make peace with not being the flavor of the month with your child if necessary. Remember this is not a short-term, but a long-term goal. You and your child will both be winners in the long run, and if you can get your partner on board too, all three will be winners.

When “Crazy” is Something Far More Serious

Don't try and go the DIY route when you're dealing with a severe emotional disorder or mental illness. This is best left to the professionals. Help comes in many forms, including psychiatry, psychotherapy, psycho-social rehabilitation, counseling, or mentoring. Do some research to find the right fit, but if we're talking about someone who is suicidal or may pose a danger, call a doctor immediately for a referral to a psychiatrist.

Goulston uses his training of FBI hostage negotiators to outline a five-step process to break through and persuade someone they need professional help.

- 1 **Listen.** It's time to stop talking and gently encourage the person to open up. Ask questions but don't ever offer solutions.
- 2 **Empathize.** Now you know what they're feeling, empathy will help get them to a place where they're less defensive and more open to listening.
- 3 **Agree.** Saying “yes” in agreement can set off a positive chain reaction. Also, finding common ground can make the person less suspicious of you, and maybe even help him or her to consider you an ally.
- 4 **Understand.** In this step you carefully introduce the possibility of treatment, finding out as much as possible about what didn't work for him or her in the past.
- 5 **Act.** Finally, it's time to work together towards a solution. Take note of the “together” because you don't suddenly get to be in charge. There's no place here for unilateral decisions, and the other person must always be most in charge.

On the more serious issues such as potential suicide or violence, remember that while the subject may be difficult, painful, or even seem impossible to broach, you never want to be someone who wishes you'd done something before it was too late. The time for action is “now,” definitely not next week or at some later stage. The rules are clear—ask, listen, and then listen some more. And don't become one of those “woulda, coulda, shoulda” people who were too afraid to intervene in a timely manner in the lives of a troubled person, instead sitting frozen while watching a tragedy unfold.

Insights—You Can't Just Argue It Away

First, Change the Dynamic

Trying to reason with or fight against an irrational person is always counterproductive. The “I’m sane and you’re mad” approach will never work. “Lean in” to the crazy, or empathize, and suddenly you no longer pose a threat.

Watch Your Own Emotional Response

Irrational people’s greatest fear is losing control, so they retaliate by trying to get you to lose control. Don’t give in, or you’ll have no chance of getting through to the person.

Fight the Fear

Simply trying to allay an irrational person’s fears is not the answer. He or she can’t hear you. Rather use this strategy: Empathize (lean in), ask questions to establish the reality of the situation, and offer alternative scenarios. Then move on to an action plan.

It’s Worth the Trouble

It may be easier to ignore or walk away, but the effort needed to address the toxic environment an irrational person creates—at work or at home—will benefit everyone, including you. So do the hard work.

Keep it Real

Don’t expect a quick-fix for those with real mental illness, and recognize when it’s time to get a professional involved. Getting someone with a real mental illness to accept their problem, and then to say yes to help, is a long road. It’ll take all your empathy and understanding.

Conclusion

It's easy to believe there's no way out when irrational people take over our personal or workspaces, sending us screaming for the door. The no-nonsense solutions in *Talking To Crazy* offer a set of tools, complete with exercises, insights and actions, for better outcomes—all with a good dose of humor. The author is a psychiatrist who knows that communication can be magic, and uses his own real-life accounts to prove it.

“I've done my best to select approaches that are powerful and doable, not just in a psychiatrist's office but in the real world. Based on decades of experience, I know that these tools work for my patients, my business clients, and me.”

If you've enjoyed our insights on Mark Goulston's *Talking to Crazy: How to Deal with the Irrational and Impossible People in Your Life*, we encourage you to access the other *Talking to Crazy* assets in the Skillsoft library, or purchase the hardcopy.

About the Author



MARK GOULSTON, a crisis psychiatrist for 30 years and UCLA professor of psychiatry for 25 years, was named four times on an annual list of America's Top Psychiatrists. Dr Goulston is a best-selling author, consultant, coach, and business adviser with a syndicated career advice column. He is a respected expert resource to television, radio, and print, blogging for top-notch publications including *Harvard Business Review*, *Business Insider* and *Psychology Today*. It's been said that his success lies in an approach that is direct without being threatening, but in his own words, he says simply that “failure is not an option.”

Also by Mark Goulston

- 1 *Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone*, AMACOM, © 2009, ISBN 978-0814414033.
- 2 *Real Influence: Persuade without Pushing and Gain Without Giving In*, (with John Ullmen), AMACOM, © 2013, ISBN 978-0814420157.