



Susanne Gaddis, PhD



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"Prescriptions for Effective Communication"

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Diagnosing Chaos Addiction

Dear Communications Doctor,

No matter how hard I try to maintain a calm working environment for my staff it seems that there are one or two individuals who consistently seem to be working against me rather than with me. I'm tired of all the drama-queens and kings who live their life in a perpetual state of crisis. Is there any hope for this kingdom of chaos?

Allie—Houston, TX

Dear Allie,

Adrenaline junkies, or as I like to call them—*chaos addicts*—can be found in every walk of life. Similar to long distance runners who are often addicted to the adrenaline rush they receive when running, chaos addicts are addicted to the rush they feel when chaos is happening around them. As sad as it seems, there are people who will intentionally do things to create chaos during times of relative calm.

My personal theory on this condition is that each and every one of us has an internal barometer, an internal gauge that is set at the amount of stress that feels comfortable to us. Some people are naturally low stressors and some are high. During times of low stress, those naturally predisposed to high stress will feel an unconscious need to act in ways that create stress.

A good example of one of the many symptoms of chaos addiction occurs in high-stress individuals that continually lose things. Keys, charts, pens, items of clothing—no matter how hard high-stressors try to get organized, they just can't seem to get it together. This is because losing things somehow secretly serves them. Why? Not only can the act of losing something increase the amount of tension and stress one feels, it also tests the ability of others to come to the rescue since a person who has lost an item will enlist the help of others nearby to find it. "Have you seen my keys? I know they were around here somewhere?" Sound familiar?

Another tell-tale sign of a high-stressor is that they are frequently late. Much of the time their tardiness is caused by the fact that they always feel compelled to do one more thing before they leave for their intended destination. A high-stressor, for instance, will frequently start another load of laundry just before leaving the house. My friend Ashley, claims that one of her favorite ways to create stress was to overbook herself. "If I had an appointment at 7 p.m., it never occurred to me to leave before 7 p.m... Somehow being there at 7 p.m. and leaving at 7 p.m. were the same thing," she said. Having been through counseling to work on this stress-producing behavior, Ashley learned that this behavior was self-sabotaging, and as a result now leaves 30 minutes before any scheduled appointment. "Somehow even if the appointment is just 5 minutes away, and I leave with 30 minutes to spare, I still arrive there just on time."

Another favorite stress-inducing habit of high-stressors is to use the last of something and not replace it: Paper towels, toilet paper, copy machine paper, order forms, water cooler jugs – you name it. High-stressors rarely refill or restock items – it just seems like too much trouble; after all when they return and the item isn't there, they get the much needed adrenaline jolt they so desperately seek.

So how does one effectively deal with a high stressor? Good luck. Offering advice or suggestions to a high-stressor on how he or she might be better organized is often ignored or taken as criticism. Unable or unwilling to recognize the negative effect this behavior has on themselves and others, chaos-addicts employ a steady stream of defense mechanisms such as blame and rationalization to justify their actions.

Perhaps the best way that I have found to deal with individuals addicted to turmoil and tension, is to simply recognize their behavior for what it is – a quality of life that gives them that indefinable something that they so desperately need. By realizing too, that the only person whose thoughts and behaviors you can control are your own, you can then make a conscious decision to prevent a chaos addict's behavior from influencing or infecting your life. Perhaps one of the best lessons we can learn from watching others do things that we don't like, is that we can choose for ourselves different behaviors that will produce different results.

Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. Gaddis' workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations are packed with tips and techniques that can be immediately applied for successful results. Gaddis also provides quality training and executive coaching for organizations, corporations, and associations across the United States. For more information, call 919-933-3237 or visit www.CommunicationsDoctor.com.