

# RUDENESS REHAB

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Reclaiming Civility  
In The Workplace  
And Your Home Space



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# **RUDENESS REHAB**

Reclaiming Civility In The Workplace And Your Home Space

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## chapter one

# Rude!

## Why Should I Care About Incivility?

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“**W**hat a loser. Why are we even interviewing this guy?”  
“I know. What a waste of time.”  
A third chimed in, “Do we even bother continuing?”

My jaw dropped as I overheard this exchange—they were talking about me. Me. *I was a waste of time?*

That day, many years ago, I was interviewing for a teaching job at a local university. During a short break, I walked into the men’s room. Upon seeing that the three male faculty members of the interviewing committee were all at the urinals, I had gone into the stall. They had not seen me.

*Rude!* The words “waste of time” rang in my ears, and my blood started to boil. Should I walk out of the stall, confront them, and stop the interview process right there?

I uttered a few expletives in my head and felt a combination of shame and anger. *Who did they think they were?* One of these faculty members had lost his license to practice therapy for unethical behavior. The other smelled like a distillery, clearly indicating that he had an issue with alcohol. My judgmental thinking kicked in and I wanted to tell them *exactly* what I thought of each of them. Would I bail?

I decided that I still had the chance to change their minds and I would show them that I was the right choice for the position in my concluding talk.

Back in front of the interviewing committee, which included other faculty members and students, I began to give my presentation—but I could not get through most of the material. The faculty member, smelling like the distillery, peppered me with questions, challenging everything that I said and disagreeing vehemently with me. After the talk, he came up to inform me that I had “poor classroom management skills” in not setting better limits with him. I was stunned, and now I felt like I was in Alice in Wonderland interacting with the Mad Hatter.

I managed to get through the rest of the day and drove home, dazed and confused. Despite all of this, I still decided that I would take the position if it was offered to me. I could then form better relationships with these professors. I figured the dysfunction was over.

I was wrong.

After the final round of interviews, I got a call. The voice on the other end told me something I’ll never forget: “You don’t have what it takes to teach, John. You should rethink your career.” He continued in that vein until he finally paused and asked, “I don’t know if you have any questions or if you want to hear more?”

I replied with the following: “Dr. Smith (not his real name), I am very grateful for your time. The purpose of this phone call was to learn if I was being considered for the position and that has been accomplished. I also have a very different experience of my ability as an instructor, but I have no need to hear anything else from you. Thank you for your time.”

Meanwhile, I was thinking something along the lines of, “You can take a long walk off a short pier,”—but, fortunately, I held my tongue.

After the call, I sat perplexed and had to reach out to my support system. When I told them all what had occurred, they were stunned and angry. “Better that you did not get hired to work there.”

Phew—and that was the first and last time I experienced incivility in my life.

End of story.

*Not.*

Whether I like it or not, incivility is a part of my everyday life. And yours, too. Rudeness, offensive behaviors, bullying—these are inescapable. Thankfully, I've learned a great deal since I walked out of that bathroom stall.

I've spent my career working with people (individually and in groups) who have experienced the negative effects of other people's behavior, whether it is more egregious behavior, like overtly abusive or bullying behavior, or uncivil behavior on the part of a boss, family member, or spouse.

While our culture in the United States has become much more aware of the concept of bullying and has put consequences in place for those who engage in this type of aggressive behavior, most of us are less aware of the more subtle but nonetheless toxic behavior that is incivility. We know incivility when others are being uncivil to us.

But do we know when we're being uncivil to others? And what can we do about it?

My job as a therapist, teacher, and consultant has been to raise people's awareness levels about these behaviors and to help them determine ways to be more effective in responding to the rude behavior of others or their own. That said, I've long felt my impact was limited in my work with individuals. Wanting to take this message outside my therapy office, I wrote this book.



### What Is Incivility?

Incivility is engaging in an often unintentional but nonetheless offensive behavior that is stress-inducing in other people. For example, Porath and Pearson (2013) describe workplace incivility as “the exchange of seemingly inconsequential and inconsiderate words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct.”<sup>4</sup>

Some authors define incivility as a softer version of bullying. With bullying, the perpetrator is much more intentional about the behavior and there is a specific individual who is the target of the intimidation.

Incivility, meanwhile, is more likely to be inconsiderate behavior that may be directed at others but not with the intention of intimidating or silencing the other. Incivility is more likely to be about “blowing off steam” or “expressing frustration.”

Incivility may simply be based on a person’s low frustration tolerance. When someone is frustrated by the response (or lack thereof) of another person, they may act out of frustration in their reply. Acting out of frustration is much more likely when there is not a direct personal contact in the moment between the individuals. When there is greater social distance between ourselves and other people—such as between two anonymous people on social media—we are more likely to express our frustration without thinking about the impact on others.

I was first exposed to the concept of incivility in a presentation by Dr. Christine Porath in 2017. I resonated with a great deal of what she reviewed, and I began to see what was going on in our culture in an entirely new way.

Incivility is not limited to any one group or any one political party, but has infiltrated our interactions in person and in electronic communications (especially in social media). I’ve witnessed an increasing vitriol happening at the national level that has contributed



to a significant divide in our country, one that I saw reflected in the individuals I saw in therapy. I wrote this book so that we may better understand ourselves and one another—and not just because it’s what we “should” do.

“No mud can soil us but the mud we throw,” said James Russell Lowell many years ago. When you engage in uncivil behavior or even react to this behavior in others, you experience direct consequences to your health. Incivility is one of the reasons that stress levels in our society are skyrocketing, as are rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. I am passionate about helping people change their lives and reducing their health risks. Incivility and its management present us with a challenge to reduce its impact on our own health and the health of our loved ones.

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## **Stress, AKA How Incivility Is Killing You**

Incivility affects you, whether it is your own incivility toward other people or others’ behavior toward you. The general category of that impact can be defined as “stress.” Stress is our natural reaction to any change in our lives.

Stress in the moment results in a “fight or flight response” that is rooted in helping us survive. Stress hormones, including adrenaline and noradrenaline, get released into the body to help us fight off the threat or outrun it. Our physiological reactions to dangers developed much earlier when our very existence as humans was under threat from potential predators, such as wild animals or other humans

who were prone to violence. While these reactions helped humans survive the moment, we are now learning how the biological impact of chronic stress can shorten our lifespan.

We no longer need such levels of threat protection. Even though most of us no longer exist in environments that threaten our existence daily, our bodies still react with high degrees of intensity.

Conflicts with your spouse or being treated poorly by your boss can make stress levels surge, leading to a release of these same chemicals. Over time—if we don't manage our stress effectively or remain in environments that overwhelm our coping abilities—these reactions can wear down the body. (Even the most self-aware individuals who regularly practice effective self-care techniques can eventually be worn down if the environment is stressful enough.)

Stress can have broad-reaching impacts in the short term. Our individual reactions to stress and what may indicate that we are stressed will vary widely. However, most people will be affected on a variety of levels, including emotionally, physically, cognitively, or behaviorally. Our reaction to incivility is like a warning sign of stress.

We all experience some elements of life that will be chronic stressors, such as the challenges of every day—family, traffic, financial concerns, work pressures, and more. In other words, chronic stressors are inevitable in our lives. We don't have a choice about the presence of stressors.

We do have a choice, however, in how we manage our reactions to these stressors. And we must learn to manage them.

Poorly managed long-term stress can have a variety of negative impacts on our health, including high blood pressure, arteriosclerosis, and brain changes that can activate genetic predispositions to diseases such as depression, anxiety, or addiction. Some research also suggests that chronic stress is contributing to problems with obesity in our country, either causing us to overeat or hampering our efforts to sleep and exercise, which may have an impact on people's calorie

consumption and weight. Chronic stress can increase our likelihood of cancer and cardiac problems, which shorten our lifespan and contribute to a decrease in quality of life.

## **The Two Ways We Experience Rudeness Today**

Incivility can be divided into two separate categories: intrapersonal, which is within yourself, and interpersonal, which is between you and others. Most of us experience both on a near-daily basis.

### **Intrapersonal Incivility**

It has often been said that we are our own worst critics. Except for people who are very bold narcissists who don't seem to have a self-critical neuron in their body, we all carry around internal "self-talk" that is a way that we think about and "talk to" ourselves.

Often our internal dialogue can be quite negative and critical of who we are or what we are doing. People sometimes think that this critical voice is necessary as a source of motivation. However, this type of internal dialogue does the exact opposite and eventually results in people being demotivated, demoralized, or depressed.

I have worked with many clients who are afraid to let go of self-judgment as a source of motivation. They struggle to believe that this type of thought process could be damaging. When I am faced with someone who remains unconvinced of this idea, I tell them the following story.

Back in the day, when my legs still tolerated the idea of running, I took on the challenge of long-distance road races. Participating in the Portland Half Marathon, we headed out of the city along scenic roadways. As we returned toward the end of this grueling challenge, we ran along a picturesque cove and could hear the roaring crowd across the water awaiting our arrival at the finish line. The trouble was, it was still a good two miles away, even though the cheers made it sound oh so close.

Now, at this point in a race, when you're pushing your limits, exhaustion is your copilot. To keep myself entertained, I had a peculiar habit of selecting a runner ahead of me and making it my mission to catch up with them. Meanwhile, I knew others were eyeing me, planning their pass.

So, there I was, scanning the field for my next prey, and I spotted this guy who seemed to be in as much agony as I was. I thought to myself, "I can definitely catch him." Slowly but surely, I closed the gap with about a mile and a quarter left to go.

Here's where the plot thickens. Out of nowhere, this guy on a bike shows up right next to Bob (or whatever his real name was; let's call him Bob). He starts cheering, "Hey, Bob! You're looking good, Bob!" I couldn't help but chuckle inside as I thought, "Buddy, none of us out here are looking remotely good. Bob and I both know it."

The bike guy kept chatting with Bob and then glanced over his shoulder at me, saying, "Well, Bob, you've got someone gaining on you. You can't let him pass you, Bob, you can't!" Now, I could hear every word, and I couldn't help but shake my head. Poor Bob tried to pick up the pace, but he was clearly struggling.

I kept my focus on the race and steadily closed in on Bob, all while the bike guy intensified his relentless commentary. "He's gaining on you, Bob. You can't let him pass you!"

My internal therapist thought, "John, maybe cut the poor guy some slack and let him finish ahead," but then my competitive side chimed in, "No, we're here to race!"

At this point, I was practically running shoulder-to-shoulder with Bob. Bob's "coach" screamed, "You can't let him pass you, Bob. *What are you? A girl?*"

At this point, I wanted to push the guy off the bike and tell him to leave Bob alone. However, I needed all my energy to finish the task at hand.

I pressed on, overtaking Bob, and eventually crossed the finish line. Now, here's the kicker: after you finish, you can look back along the course and see runners still coming toward the finish line about a third of a mile back. So, I turned around to check on Bob, and what did I see?

*No Bob.*

He was nowhere in sight. That relentless bike guy had managed to demoralize Bob to the point where he'd burned out and struggled to even finish.

And this is something that we can do to ourselves. This, my friends, is a prime example of what I call the notorious "judgment on a bike." We all have that internal running coach, some inner critic, that can scream at us, urging us to push harder. But often, it ends up sabotaging our performance.

As I finish telling the story, clients are usually wide-eyed with attention (like you hopefully are now). They often say something like, "Wow. I feel terrible for Bob."

I then look them directly in the eye and say, "Now think about how you are Bob and that you have a 'running coach' inside you too. *You* get to decide what you want that coach to be saying." This helps them understand the concept of internal incivility. We will explore strategies to manage our internal urges toward incivility such as "grounding" and "acceptance." Stay tuned.

### **Interpersonal Incivility**

This type of incivility is more likely to manifest in families, work environments, and out in public. In this category, one person is directly uncivil to another. However, the level of *intensity* can vary quite significantly. It could be that a person directly insults someone else without the intention of doing so.

Family members (however you define them) can be uncivil to each other with or without intention. The more emotionally vulnerable

we are due to stress, mental health issues, or physical illness, the less able we are to be skillful in our responses and interactions with others. Those with whom we live and interact are, therefore, the most likely to see us “at our worst.”

The dinner table can be a time of conflict and communication breakdown. This is especially true on holidays. We often gather with family members whom we have not seen in a long time and with whom we may not have the best of relationships. This can lead to many hurt feelings and arguments, the effect of which can be felt for months or even years beyond the event.

In recent years, I have worked with people who were headed to family gatherings where others of different political persuasions or interpersonal styles would be attending. I have often successfully coached many of my clients on how to navigate holiday gatherings with Uncle Louie or Cousin Sue, who “drives them wild.”

When it comes to social media and cyber incivility, there are varying levels of intention and rudeness. Some individuals take great pleasure in “calling out” others who have a different opinion and shaming them in public. Schadenfreude is a term that is defined as the feeling of taking pleasure in the misfortune or discomfort of others (from the German *schaden* for damage or harm and *freude* for joy). Our culture is increasingly driven by the “one-upmanship” or “put-downs” that are an integral part of online culture. What people fail to realize is that these behaviors affect not only the target but also the perpetrator.

When people get “fired up” to “put someone in their place,” they can become more activated physiologically, which creates unnecessary stress for everyone involved. I often hear people say that they are “taking a break from social media” or “giving up social media.” They may not fully realize the reason for the break, but they are making choices that often improve their stress level and overall health.

## **We Can Be Civil And Minimize Incivility—But How?**

You might be thinking, “Yikes, incivility is all around me, even *in* me. I can’t escape it and its negative impact. It is hopeless.”

To that, I say, “Please, don’t panic.” There is, in fact, hope for you and for all of us. We can be more civil with each other, leading to better attitudes, relationships, workplaces, and family environments, and, ultimately, better health. The rest of the book, from here forward, is about the solution, a “how-to” of ways to get to greater levels of civility in your own world and strategies to limit the impact of incivility in your environment.

When I talk with clients about the ideas contained in this book, they often begin to think that I am asking them to be passive. “Oh, sure, John. You want me to just sit back and let my boss (spouse, friend, cat) walk all over me. You want me to be passive.” Some think that psychologists just want everyone to join hands and sing “Kumbaya.”

I want you to know something right up front. Being civil is not about being a doormat, and it is not about giving up on your needs or your beliefs. It does not mean that you never seek to improve yourself or motivate yourself toward goals. Being civil is not about swallowing your anger or never communicating your dissatisfaction with situations. It is not about “giving in” or giving up on advocating for yourself or others when in competitive situations, which is a reality of life. Dan Harris refers to this as “hiding the Zen,” meaning that you can balance your mindfulness practice (and civility) with striving to achieve. He describes this to be especially applicable when you are in situations where others might take advantage of you and your “Zen” (think organizational hierarchy and people jockeying for position).<sup>5</sup>

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Being civil is not about being a doormat.

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Rather, being civil is about treating others (and yourself) with respect. It means that you respond (not react) to others with awareness. Being civil means avoiding a great deal of misunderstandings in communications with others and making it easier to clarify them when they do occur. It is about really listening to what others are saying and working to understand their perspective, even if you don't agree. Being civil means communicating your anger without *being* your anger.

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Being civil is about treating others (and yourself) with respect.

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### **The Health Benefits Of Civility**

On an individual level, happiness and kindness create good feelings in us in the moment. These feelings can grow and feed upon themselves with many positive impacts, including lower stress levels, lower blood pressure, and better overall immune system function.<sup>6</sup> In the longer term, this leads to reductions in cardiac disease, better responses to treatment of various illnesses (including cancer), and increased life expectancy. The choices that we make individually can then have benefits not just for us but for those around us. We can reverse the disturbing public health trends noted earlier, but it begins with us individually.

So, what would it mean if we were more civil to each other? What might be some of the benefits? Let's dream big for a moment. If we were truly able to practice the art of civility with each other, we might see the following:

- lower rates of depression and anxiety
- lower rates of addiction
- lower rates of diabetes



- better overall health outcomes in general and better responses to treatments
- reduced health disparities in minority populations
- better home lives with fewer divorces
- healthier work environments with better employee retention
- increased life expectancy

I do realize that these are lofty goals and likely ones that we are not going to accomplish quickly or easily. However, they are attainable. They start with each of us individually and how we choose to be in our lives with others. Remember, it is not just good for others in your life or the greater humanity. These concepts are good for you and will create a life in which you can live longer and healthier.<sup>7</sup>

## **What You Will Get From This Book**

Hopefully, you now have a better understanding of what incivility means, and you are convinced that it is important to reduce the impact of rudeness on your life. But you have a very busy life and are very aware of how precious time is. Why should you bother with a “rudeness rehab”? As a result of taking time to read the chapters ahead, you will be able to do the following:

- Identify how incivility affects you emotionally, with an emphasis on anger.
- Describe how chronic anger held over the long term becomes hostility and the impact of this on your health.
- Define numerous terms related to stress.
- Discuss how stress, especially chronic stress, can create risks for negative health outcomes for you.

- Separate the internal experience of a feeling from the external behavior that you express related to the feeling.
- Implement skills to manage your internal reactions to your own behavior and that of others.
- Employ strategies to respond skillfully to directly experiencing or witnessing incivility on the part of others.
- Create a self-care plan to maximize your resilience.
- Consider the next steps that you can take to learn more about incivility or to become increasingly more skillful in managing incivility rooted in yourself or others.

### The Least You Need To Know

- Our culture is aware of the destructive effects of overt bullying but less conscious of the negative impact of rudeness and incivility.
- Incivility is behavior that is often unintentional but nonetheless offensive and induces stress in other people. It is about “blowing off steam” at other people (or oneself) as an expression of frustration.
- Stress associated with uncivil behavior can create health risks and illness in both the short and long term.
- Incivility can be expressed *intrapersonally* (internal) or *interpersonally* (with others).
- If individuals reclaim a greater focus on awareness and civility, they will experience greater health and wellness for themselves and those with whom they interact.