



By Linda Abbott Trapp, Ph.D

# BEWARE THE UNDERMINER

HANDLING THOSE WHO CASUALLY  
TRY TO RUIN YOUR LIFE

It doesn't sound like a put-down when your old friend teases you about your new haircut, but later that night, you're still thinking about how she said you had to be really brave to pull off a haircut like that at your weight.

You've always thought your co-worker was really nice, but now that you're both up for the same promotion, he seems determined to criticize every single one of your ideas as loudly and as often as he can.

You may not realize it, but you're dealing with an underminer, a person who seems both helpful and harmless but who really thrives on making you feel bad about yourself. Underminers are particularly dangerous because their insults are so sneaky that it's often hard to realize that you've actually been criticized. You're just left feeling bad about yourself without really understanding why.

The underminer mounts a subtle, but continuous attack. The specific target might be an inborn characteristic, like gender or ethnicity – "She's pretty good, for a woman" – or an acquired trait or choice – "I wouldn't let my child do such a risky thing." It's pretty difficult for many people to defend themselves against this powerful form of prejudicial attack, which is like a sniper attack designed to weaken your individual confidence, position, or accomplishments.

Fortunately, just recognizing the underminers in your life can help to undercut their efforts.

## How to Recognize an Underminer

It seems as though it would be easy to recognize someone who's constantly chiseling away at your self-esteem, but the truth is that it's often difficult to recognize an underminer for that very reason. Every criticism is treated as an intimacy; put-downs are disguised as friendly banter between pals. Ask yourself these questions to determine whether someone is really an underminer.

✓ *Are her comments, whether they're intended to be humorous or not, mostly supportive or mostly cruel?* If they're mostly cruel, the cumulative effect is destructive even if each individual comment doesn't seem to be.

✓ *After a conversation with him, do I feel more confident about my goals, or less confident?* An underminer will constantly call attention to problems with your plans, leaving you feeling helpless and unmotivated.

✓ *Do I spend as much time talking as I do listening in our conversations?* Underminers are usually narcissistic, and they'll often cut off conversations when the topic moves away from them.

✓ *When something bad happens to me, does she dwell on the details?*

Underminers will often mine negative experiences for details that ultimately make you feel even worse about yourself.

## The Flattening Five (and How to Deal with Them)

The key to dealing successfully with an underminer is addressing the underlying concern that causes him to undermine. In other words, once you understand what's motivating an underminer, you have the power to diffuse his undermining efforts. There are five basic types of underminers:

### 1. The Insecure Underminer

He seems arrogant and condescending, but the truth is, this underminer has a serious case of insecurity. He's constantly afraid that he's going to look stupid, and he thinks that by pointing out other people's errors and mistakes, he makes himself look better.

**How to cope:** Instead of going on the defensive, try to get inside his head. Ask questions and seek information. At best, you'll learn something new and have the opportunity to broaden your perspective; at worst, you can smile and nod and go right ahead with your original idea.

### 2. The Jealous Underminer

The underminer who operates from

jealousy really believes that there is something valuable and scarce at risk, and that she might have a chance at obtaining that valuable thing if only you don't get in the way. She undermines you, hoping you will fall from grace and leave the desired object or position for her.

**How to cope:** She's going to snipe as long as she feels threatened, so look for ways to shake up her notion of either/or. If she's angling for the same promotion you want, talk to her about her dream responsibilities – it's possible that there's room at the top for more than one person.

### 3. The Greedy Underminer

The greedy underminer wants all of life's goodies for himself – and he's not afraid to undermine anyone who might get in his way.

**How to cope:** Greed is usually motivated by financial fear – an easy enough worry to understand in today's tough economic times. Instead of dwelling on the negatives, focus on your own sense of abundance: What are your financial needs? Your wants? What is "enough" to you? Spending time with these big picture questions will make you confident when the greedy underminer strikes.

### 4. The Controlling Underminer

Like an overprotective mother, she thinks everything is her business. In your personal life, this translates to constant criticism about your love life, child-rearing, and travel plans. At the office, it usually means micromanaging and unreasonable expectations.

**How to cope:** In both your personal and professional life, the controlling underminer can create intense frustration, but the appropriate response depends on the situation. At the office, keep it professional: Ask lots of direct questions and be sure to get instructions in writing. (Follow-up email is often a good thing.) In your personal life, you can be a little more direct – don't be afraid to address the underminer, explain how her behavior makes you feel and to ask for change.

### 5. The Self-Projecting Underminer

Because he can't envision his own

success, the self-projecting underminer finds it impossible to believe that anyone else could be successful.

**How to cope:** His negativity is more about his own fear of failure than about your particular actions. The best response is to express appreciation for his frankness in letting you know his views, and then ask a few questions to learn more about his experience. He will feel reassured, you might learn something and the relationship is preserved.

## Avoiding the Underminer Within

Now that you know the different forms undermining can take, it's important to examine your own behavior to make sure that you aren't an unaware underminer. It's easy to let strong motivations like fear and jealousy lead to destructive behaviors, but now that you understand the nature of undermining, you know that there are better ways to cope with these feelings. It's far better to abstain from the behavior, examine any urge you feel to undermine, and counter that urge with more wholesome, supportive, behaviors.

Also, resist the urge to be an underminer's accomplice, even inadvertently. The

underminer seeks you out, pretends friendship, and engages in an attack on someone you both know, confidently believing you'll go along, and even takes pleasure in the demolition. It's awkward at best to disengage, but disengage you must or you'll become a willing participant. Too often, by the time you realize what's happening, others nearby may already perceive you as a full partner in the destruction.

Awareness is the best solution to dealing with underminers. Recognizing that their behavior is negative and destructive will help you to tune it out, and the coping mechanisms we've outlined here will help you reassume control of your life. GB

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## HOW TO GET PEOPLE TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH

Fear works overtime to protect us from harm. It influences our responses, especially our deceptive behavior. When a lie is told, fear is often lurking in the background.

Realizing that deception is driven by fear is the key to getting others to be more truthful with you. Overall, people are more likely to be truthful with you when you do things to alleviate their fears. Here are a few tips:

- ✓ Limit the use of questions
- ✓ React calmly to unwelcome information
- ✓ Use empathy
- ✓ Find ways to balance power
- ✓ Forgive