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**DEBORAH GRUENFELD**



**ACTING  
WITH  
POWER**

**WHY WE ARE MORE POWERFUL  
THAN WE BELIEVE**

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# Acting with Power

*Why We Are More Powerful  
Than We Believe*

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## How to Wrangle a Bully

### *Alternatives to Playing the Victim*

Most of us have to deal with a bully in one shape or form at one time or another. Sometimes a bully seems to come out of nowhere—this happens online, where certain kinds of people seem to be lying in wait, just looking for opportunities to land a punch. And often a bully will kind of sneak up on you. First he'll win your trust, and you will give him power by offering rights, respect, and a big part in your story. And eventually he will turn that power against you in ways you did not see coming. It could be a boss, a mentor or coach, a beloved parent or sibling, a friend to whom you feel indebted and have pledged loyalty, or a partner you promised to love, honor, and cherish whatever the cost.

If you have been bullied, you know how it feels to be terrorized and disempowered by someone else's surprisingly aggressive attempts to control you. A bully makes you feel like a powerless victim. But being victimized by a bully does not mean you have to play the victim role. Playing the victim is accepting a bully's version of reality, behaving as though he has the right to hurt you, and believing your only option is to try to get back on his good side.

So far, the message of acting with power has been to take responsibility for making others feel secure. But this assumes a cooperative world in which we want our relationships to work. When it comes to dealing with someone who abuses their power at your expense or takes advantage of your deference and generosity, you may need to change tactics. You want to do no harm, but take no crap. Sometimes, when a person hands you more than your share of it, you can learn to say, "No thanks. I think this belongs to you," and hand it back.

When we are in the thick of things, it is hard to see the alternatives. But as anyone who has survived bullying knows, it is possible to take back your life. It is possible to act in ways that shift the balance of power.

In large part, wrangling a bully is an exercise in reclaiming your story and control of the plot, reimaging your role, and finding the courage and discipline to try a new way of acting. There are things you can do to stop the abuse, disarm the bully, detach from the megalomaniac, or escape any other kind of psychological predator, no matter how helpless you feel. The key is to approach the drama in a way that deprives the flames of oxygen, instead of inadvertently feeding them.

The first step is realizing that although you feel trapped, you always have choices. No one has the right to control you—we choose to give others that right, and we can choose to take it away. No one has the right to define who you are, to force you into an undesirable role, or to dictate how you must behave to avoid further aggression. No one has the right to drive all of the plot twists, to create incessant drama, to insist that your story is wrong, or to hurt you while insisting they are acting out of love and caring. Your story belongs to you. And although it doesn't always feel that way, we all have the power to reclaim authorship of our own story lines, to trust our own instincts, and to choose how we use the power we have to respond to the bad actors who enter our realm.

Tom was in his midforties, a talented professional mediator working for a private financial services consulting firm. Tom was highly skilled, with twenty years of experience, and he was known for being diplomatic, easygoing, and polite. His clients took to him easily.

His boss, on the other hand, was all over Tom's case. Everything about Tom seemed to bother him. To start, there was his accent. Though it was barely perceptible to most people, before he got on the phone with clients his boss would sometimes ask, "Could you not use that accent you use?"

Then there was the way he dressed. The company had a "business casual" dress code, which explicitly stated that employees need not wear suits unless otherwise directed. One day, as Tom headed into a meeting wearing dress pants, a French cuff shirt, and a brand-new sports coat, his boss cornered him: "Why aren't you wearing a suit?" Another time, Tom was scolded for wearing his sunglasses—not in a meeting, but in the lobby of the building. And on yet another occasion, his boss dressed him down for checking his luggage on a business trip they

took together because it meant the boss would have to wait while Tom collected his bags. Tom tried to be accommodating. Each time his boss berated him he would apologize and promise to do better next time. But after eighteen months he had reached his limit. Tom walked out the door and never came back.

Exit, stage left. This is one way to stop abuse, by taking control of the ending. Tom had power too, and he did not need to stick it out or make it work. Of course, not everyone in these kinds of situations can just quit or walk out the door. But most of us do have power in a relationship with a bully, even when that person makes us feel as if we don't. In most cases, we have more control over what others are able to do to us than we think.

One of the reasons that cycles of abuse tend to feel inescapable is that victims of abuse learn to behave as though they are helpless even when they are not. The first studies of learned helplessness showed that animals who received shocks but did not learn to control them eventually gave up and stopped trying to avoid the pain. But animals who learned that pressing a lever would stop the shock continued to fight to protect themselves and to avoid repeating painful experiences. More recent research on post-traumatic stress disorder supports the same conclusion: when a victim is able to take action in the midst of a crisis—to crawl out of the car in an accident or to rescue someone else—the impact of the trauma is less devastating, less disempowering, psychologically. The way out is to focus on acting, on doing something, to save yourself. You have to press the lever. Like so many of the other challenges we have addressed in this book, when it comes to stepping out of the victim role, the first step is to act differently.

## Fatal Attractions

A great irony in all of this is that people who abuse power are often extremely seductive. Why are we drawn to these people? Why do we fall in love with them? Idolize and want to work for them? Or vote for political candidates who spew hate (even toward us)? We are drawn to these kinds of people, especially when we feel powerless, because their strength, fortitude, and success at controlling others makes us feel secure in their presence, whether they have any intention of protecting us or not.

Let's start with the reality that—as Henry Kissinger opined—power is the ultimate aphrodisiac. According to evolutionary models, we are attracted to high-power mates because as partners, they increase our own odds of successful procreation and survival. And we see this reflected in our culture: power of all kinds predicts sexual attractiveness, and vice versa. Having power makes potential partners more attractive, and physical attractiveness is a source of power. In a recent study of online dating profiles, for example, UC Berkeley psychologist Dana Carney and her colleagues analyzed dating profile photos and found that (regardless of gender) the more dominant (i.e., physically expansive) a person appears, the more potential dates expressed interest by swiping right.

Evolutionary forces aside, power is also seductive simply because a powerful partner is like a trophy—it's a sign of your own status and value to the rest of the world. And knowing that someone who could have anyone has chosen you isn't hard on the ego either. For most of us, it's thrilling—and a little bit scary—to be in the presence of a powerful person. This is one reason why women are drawn to aggressive men, and underlings are sometimes eager to accept invitations to drinks, or dinner, or travel, for example, for reasons that have nothing to do with interest in sex per se and everything to do with proximity to power.

People often joke about women with “daddy issues,” but the truth is often quite sobering. In some pockets of the political science community, it is believed that voters (of both sexes) relate to political figures as parental surrogates and often prefer the “strong father” type. This type of leader is especially appealing to those who feel they need protection and who feel safer with a “tough parent” in charge. This dynamic could explain the high numbers of women voters who have historically supported President Trump, for example, despite his antifeminist positions.

This might also shed light on why the most vulnerable groups and individuals are often the first to flock to such a leader, and why it is so easy for leaders to exploit those groups' fears, insecurities, and feelings of powerlessness (as Trump did in courting the struggling white working class). It may also explain why a number of Trump's most high-profile followers—like Cesar Sayoc, the socially reclusive ex-stripper turned pizza deliveryman who sent pipe bombs through the mail to a long list of the president's political enemies—have referred to the president explicitly as the father they never had.

This is also why, tragically, victims of abuse who were deprived of love, attention, and kindness as children sometimes end up leaving one type of abusive relationship for another. Growing up with a bully makes people feel unlovable, and at the same time it teaches the lesson that abuse is an expression of love. For example, women who have been mistreated or neglected by their fathers, in particular, can be especially prone to falling in love with abusive men, whose form of showing love feels familiar. Familiar dramas make it easy to play the parts we know best. Daughters may be drawn to romantic partners who bully them because of how their fathers treated them, but they also learn to play the victim role from watching their mothers—if mothers put up with mistreatment, if they excuse it or try to share the blame, this defines for daughters what is acceptable, and what it means to be a good woman. And this is how old, unhealthy patterns get perpetuated. But according to experts, it is not how the story has to end. By stepping outside ourselves and looking at the whole picture—as a playwright might—we can start to identify opportunities for changing the plot, rewriting old scripts, “killing off” tired characters, and reimagining the ending.

## Stay Out of the Crosshairs

The experts will tell you that the best way to avoid being bullied is to avoid getting involved with a bully. Well, duh. But it is not always easy to recognize a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Perhaps the most important thing any of us can do is to learn to know a powermonger when we see one. Maya Angelou famously warned, “When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.” The ability to recognize the signs that someone is looking for a victim is a critical skill.

**Know the red flags.** For starters, watch out for someone who doesn’t take no for an answer. Often, this starts sweetly, and it can be flattering to be pursued, for a while, even against our will. But someone who acts as though your preferences don’t matter is telling you he does not care about what you want. Framed another way, this kind of aggressive pursuit can be a veiled sign of disrespect. If someone comes on too strong and does not seem to take your preferences seriously, embrace the fear; trust your first instincts and keep your distance.

Powerful actors can make us feel as though we are under a spell. But feeling incapable of acting with volition in someone else’s presence is never a good sign either. People who abuse power tend to have an extreme need for control and, as such, are often charismatic (as well as scary)—they have a finely honed ability to draw others in, to charm, seduce, and manipulate. At the same time, they are also hypercritical, and have an extreme need to be the most important person in every room. Watch out for people who treat you as though you are very special while at the same time showing disrespect or contempt for almost everyone else. They are trying to solidify their control over you. Sooner or later, when you can’t fulfill their insatiable needs for power, control, and obedience, they will demote and demean you, too.

Sheryl Sandberg is known for her advice that women avoid the “cool” guys when seeking a romantic partner and, instead, learn to value the nerd. This is a power story in and of itself. It can feel empowering to “win” the attention of that person—whether it’s a romantic partner, a friend, or a boss—who can choose anyone in the world and who makes you feel as though you are the only person worthy of their affections. But choosing this type of partner minimizes your power, your rights, and your ability to get what you need and deserve from your relationships. Learn to recognize who makes you feel safe, not just spellbound.

**Don’t take the bait.** If you can’t create physical distance between yourself and a bully, you can maintain psychological distance by refusing to engage with bad behavior. People who abuse power crave evidence that they are powerful, that what they do has an effect. They will do everything possible to keep you on your toes. If you take the bait by showing that you are fearful, angry, or even apologetic, you are making it fun for them.

Kids often receive this advice for dealing with a schoolyard bully, and it works with adults the same way. A person with an elevated need to dominate needs not only to play the dominant role but also to have that position validated again and again by others who play the helpless, compliant victim. Status contests are fun for some people, and they will do whatever they can to first lift you up and then tear you down. Any suggestion that you are hurt or angered by this will make the game exciting. So the goal (this may be the only time you ever receive this

advice) is to be *as boring as possible*. It is not the same as pretending whatever happens is okay by smiling or playing along. It is more like simply missing your cue, showing disinterest, or even just appearing bored, acting like nothing happened. As we have already seen, acting inattentive or disinterested is unfriendly, and this part is important. It indicates that you do not want to play, and that if pushed, you will not make it fun. More often than not, the bully will eventually look for a more satisfying target.

**Know, but don't blame, yourself.** Victims of abuse often blame themselves for the pain they endure. In part, this is by design; accusing a victim of causing the abuse is one of many ways that a bully maintains control. Often, it feels too dangerous to blame the people who hurt us because we feel dependent on them. For example, victims of child abuse are often unable to confront their abusers because of how much they need their parents. Employees who are victims of harassment at work often tolerate abuse because they fear retaliation and losing their jobs. When you can't assign blame to the person causing harm, you assume you did something to deserve the abuse, and you punish yourself with shame, self-loathing, and all kinds of self-destructive behaviors. You can't always blame or punish your aggressor, but when you blame yourself for others' transgressions against you, they win.

Women who are bullied by their romantic partners commonly come to believe there is something wrong with them, that if only they were prettier, sexier, more attentive, and so on, they might be treated with the care they deserve. They side with their tormentors, beat up on themselves, and continue to carry out their abusers' dirty work for them. In order for abuse victims to move past the psychological effects of the trauma, they must learn to see abuse for what it is and accept that they are not at fault for what has happened to them. And of course, they must learn safe ways to fight back.

**Don't act like a victim.** As we've learned, if you have been abused by someone with power, you have, unfortunately, been in training. You know how to have a relationship with someone who abuses their power, and it probably feels familiar. So you may be drawn in again. But not only that: people who have been exploited before often appear exploitable. They wave green flags without knowing it—"Look over here! I can tolerate anything!"—by advertising how humble and accepting they are, how hard it is for them to say no, how readily they blame themselves for everything, and how eager they are to please. Bullies are drawn to those who send these kinds of signals. One of the most important things any of us can do is to become aware of factors that make us a target. Again, this is not about changing who you are, it is about developing ways to protect yourself by choosing which sides of yourself to advertise, to whom, and which to conceal.

When it comes to explaining who becomes a target of abuse and why, many myths abound. For example, in contrast to the convenient fiction that women who are sexually abused were "asking for it" by acting flirtatious, appearing attractive, or dressing provocatively, some studies show that the opposite is more often true. Rape and sexual assault are so common in our society that it is hard to even identify target trends, and for sure, whenever anyone is raped the perpetrator is to blame. But some studies of stranger rape find that victims are more often dressed in conservative clothing with arms and legs covered than in provocative attention-grabbing attire. Research finds that the victims of stranger rape are also no more attractive on average than women who are not targets.

Studies of criminal behavior reveal what an attacker looks for in a victim: a person who looks easy to take down. Victims of street crimes are not necessarily smaller or physically weaker than others. They just act differently: more submissively, without clear direction or purpose, and without paying much attention to their surroundings. This, not their size or stature, is what makes them seem easy to overpower.

Luckily, as we have seen already, it's not that hard to adjust the ways we carry ourselves, and many of us learn this naturally as we adjust to living in environments in which crime is common. When I moved to Manhattan after spending most of my life in a small college town, for example, I vividly recall learning that no matter how lost I was in the city, I had to move like I knew where I was going. I would come up out of an unfamiliar subway, and instead of standing on the corner, looking up at street signs, and trying to get oriented, I would charge forward, keeping pace with the flow of foot traffic as though I knew where I was headed. If I learned I was walking the wrong way, I would stride confidently to the next corner, cross the street, and double back on the other side.

When it comes to verbal or emotional attacks, carrying yourself with direction and purpose will also, in most situations, make you a less appealing target. It helps to have clear boundaries, clear priorities, and determination. Or, at least, to act as though you have these things.

**Choose contexts carefully.** As we have seen already, what gives someone power is not just who they are and what resources they control but also the contexts in which they operate. When I lived in New York I was never victimized on the street. But when I lived in Chicago I was once robbed at gunpoint. I was with two friends—one a tall, strapping man—and it had just turned dark. Later, as we talked with police, they pointed out that although the block was well lit, there was one streetlight out, directly over the spot where we were accosted. This was not a coincidence. Criminal behavior is most likely to occur in places where no one else can see it happening.

I am very careful about this now, and I advise many of the young women I work with to stay out of the shadows, not just on the street, but at work. No meetings in private places outside the office, at night, or in someone's car. And avoid the walk-and-talk. Dinners outside of the office can also be hazardous, I've learned, depending on where you sit. It is not uncommon, apparently, for female PhD students, job candidates, and assistant professors to be groped at a work dinner under the table while sitting next to a senior male colleague.

The norms that define what is professional or acceptable after work hours, outside of the office, are much looser, so what counts as out-of-bounds is much more equivocal. Anytime you are meeting outside a work space, you are no longer really in public because no one knows you or the nature of your relationship, and the line between acceptable and inappropriate behavior becomes less clear. When someone looks you up and down and comments on how attractive you are in a meeting room, for example, it feels out of line right away. But when you show up at a work party after hours, or at a bar, commenting on your appearance can seem more "normal," or at least within the bounds of acceptable behavior, making it harder for you to trust your internal signals about what is appropriate or not.

Similarly, I have heard more than once about bosses who flat-out refuse to meet in an office, and then use a walk-and-talk to deliver emotional abuse. Walking around not only lowers the chances that anyone will overhear or witness what is happening, it also makes social boundaries unclear. It is one thing to stand and excuse yourself from a meeting; it is another to suddenly veer off in a different direction while your boss is supposedly leading the way. And a harsh or inappropriate remark is much easier for the boss to pass off or dismiss as a meaningless comment made casually on the fly than one that is made in a formal setting, like a meeting or in someone's office. Context matters in all of these ways. So a good strategy to protect yourself from bullying is to stay out of a context that is too private, or one in which the norms and roles that define appropriate behavior are murky.

**Police the border.** In addition to being diligent about physical contexts, it is also important to police your emotional boundaries. In today's workplace, where many employees are expected to be "on call" at all hours, violation of work-life boundaries is a common offense. Many of the victims I talk with are terrified of pushing back on those who seek to exploit them with unreasonable requests. I advise them to say no firmly, and with a big smile. Everyone needs a nice way to say no—"Sorry! Can't help you. Good luck!" Or, as my teenagers have been known to say, with a laugh, "That sounds like a 'you' problem." You might not want to say this aloud to your boss, but you can certainly think it, and it might help you appear less compliant and avoid saying "yes" when you shouldn't.

A friendly but firm *no* is like advertising that your home has a security system. Most criminals—and most bullies—will keep looking for an easier target.

Research on prisoners' dilemma games finds that being unconditionally cooperative in a competitive situation invites exploitation, and studies of bullying reinforce this conclusion. In schools and workplaces, bullies target individuals who they think will not fight back: people who are nice to everyone all the time and who seem to tolerate things that others won't. Social isolation is also a risk factor, in part because bullies target individuals who are unlikely to appear with witnesses in tow or to have allies who are willing to protect them.

Whether you are alone or not, the key is to know where your boundaries are, to learn to recognize when they have been crossed, and to have simple go-to ways of reinforcing them. You can be friendly and cooperative as long as others are doing the same, but if someone crosses a line, you can react by simply noticing. It helps to do so immediately and to have a zero-tolerance policy.

**Check it out.** Inappropriate behavior of all kinds persists when it is tolerated. No one wants to make a federal case out of every transgression, and research on nonverbal behavior suggests that this is actually unnecessary and not even likely to be effective. Rather than becoming emotional or making a big speech, it can be more powerful to just notice by staring, without smiling. If someone puts their hand on your leg, just look at their hand for moment, then shift your eyes to their face and don't look away until you can see it is registering. If it doesn't, just carefully



move their hand off your body. If someone says something inappropriate, just stare a little longer than usual. Simply noticing puts a perpetrator “on notice” and begs a justification. It is a way of making it clear that what you witnessed is not normal and of silently insisting on an answer to the question, *Why did you just do that?*

I’m asked often how to deal with workplace bullies who ignore, interrupt, and talk over others; who demean others with insulting comments and jokes; who yell and throw tantrums. The most common responses to being interrupted while speaking are to either stop talking or raise one’s voice. Neither of these is particularly effective. Raising one’s voice, in particular, can sound shrill and communicate fear and defensiveness, which often only excites those who are trying to stir things up. Far better is to firmly raise a finger to signal *stop* or *wait*, or to say simply, “I’m almost done.” Raising a finger—pointing—as I’ve already observed, is surprisingly powerful. Just moving the arms away from the body seems to indicate a willingness to fight back, and that finger seems to work like a weapon. Nonverbal gestures are often more effective than verbal contests, particularly for women. In fact, one recent study by Emory University’s Melissa Williams and Scripps College president Larissa Tiedens found that while verbal assertiveness or dominance can provoke backlash for women, nonverbal assertiveness does not.

It takes tremendous discipline to resist being triggered emotionally by someone who appears angry or in a rage. Many people report responses such as shutting down, tearing up, shouting back, trying to defend themselves, and simply fleeing the scene. But generally, the better move is to calmly notice and refuse to engage. I have used this technique many times when I don’t like how things are going. I’ve said things like “You know what? I don’t like the turn this has taken, so I’m going to leave now,” or “I can see you are really upset about this, so let’s talk later.” No matter how much power the person has, it is perfectly appropriate to excuse yourself and end a meeting in which you feel unsafe. Exit, stage left.

One executive I know reports that instead of getting flustered or defensive when a particularly intimidating board member barks out insulting comments, he simply asks, “What do you mean by that?” I’ve also witnessed someone shut down a veiled threat by looking the perpetrator straight in the eye and asking, “Did you really just say that?” Phrasing your rebuke as a question is more effective than scolding, at least in part because it pushes the burden of explanation onto the perpetrator. Stormy Daniels, the adult film star who has famously managed to force President Trump to explain the payoffs she received to keep quiet about their affair, is a master of this technique. In an interview with *60 Minutes* she explained how she dealt with Trump’s tendency to drone on about himself and his accomplishments. Daniels would ask, “Does just talking about yourself normally work for you?” By calmly turning the spotlight onto the other person’s bad behavior, we can shift the balance of power.

**Grin and bare teeth.** In 2017, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau played his power up while meeting President Trump for the first time at the White House. Presumably, he had noticed (as many journalists had) that Trump used a special handshake when meeting other heads of state. As dignitaries approached him at a polite distance, he would lean in toward them with his arm outstretched, grab them by the hand, and then yank them forward so that they would lose their balance and stumble toward him. Presumably, he felt that taking control physically gave him the upper hand psychologically. But when Trudeau emerged from his car that day, he effectively neutralized Trump’s signature hand-yank by rushing in to meet him at close range, clutching Trump’s right hand in a firm shake, pawing Trump’s right shoulder with his left hand, and smiling widely, but with his jaw clenched. It showed zero polite hesitation and an absence of caution; it also showed that he was not afraid, that he was not going to let Trump set the tone, and that he would not be intimidated—that Trump had met his match.

When facing a dominant actor, it is natural to defer. It can be frightening to try to win a power contest with this kind of person, who makes it seem there is no line they won’t cross. But at least sometimes, when an actor plays power up, it’s good to play it up more. It helps to think about what exactly you are afraid of. Remember that bullies are often acting aggressively because they feel weak. And that means that sometimes it pays to call their bluff.

I recently coached two female executives about how to handle an abusive boss who was playing them off against each other—treating one as the favorite child and verbally demeaning the other. They had put their heads together and figured out what was going on. Now they wanted a way to stop it. Neither of them wanted a confrontation; they were scared of offending the boss and losing their jobs (or worse). So we devised an acting-with-power approach: when you meet, be friendly—business as usual—but look him in the eye and recite a simple, silent mantra to yourself as often as needed: “I know what you’re up to.” We practiced it on each other and were delighted by how subversive it felt and how scary we appeared while doing it. People like their boss need validation that they are fearsome; they need acquiescence, appeasement, and trepidation. This subtle approach was designed to offer none of these rewards and to put him on notice—*we know what you are up to and we are*

*devising a counterattack*—in hopes that he would turn his energies toward something more satisfying. It didn't take long, they tell me. When it stopped being fun for him, he stopped playing his game.

**Show empathy.** I know, this sounds strange. But sometimes it is possible to stop bullying by acting to convey understanding. Hostage negotiators describe *active listening*—a form of dialogue that involves recognizing the other person's perspective, asking open-ended questions, and demonstrating genuine interest, among other things—as the only way to disarm a desperate person with a gun or a bomb, and the same principle holds here. Showing empathy is not the same as siding with or excusing the perpetrator. It is showing deference strategically to protect yourself and others. Conflict resolution experts explain that the motivation to defend one's honor is at the root of many kinds of violence. So alleviating shame by showing compassion and understanding, even forgiveness, toward someone who is contemplating or has already taken violent action is widely practiced by experts and often touted as an effective approach for talking someone out of escalating and doing more damage.

No matter how much or how little power we might have, acting with human understanding and showing we care about our enemy's suffering is something any of us can offer, with no cost to ourselves.