

Is the 2016 election making us sick, uncivil?

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



We have all heard about second-hand smoke. Most commonly, it involves someone smoking a cigarette, with a non-smoker downwind inhaling the smoke. It is long considered a cause of fatal or debilitating diseases, such as lung cancer and emphysema.

But there is also something called “second-hand incivility.” It is the long-term effects on a person who is exposed to rude behavior or speech, whether or not they are the offender or victim. Basically just observing rude behavior can, like a virus, sicken “innocent bystanders” and make them uncivil.

University of Florida researchers recently tested this “second-hand” theory, by tracking graduate students as they witnessed rude scenarios. They concluded that just like those who experience rudeness firsthand, people who witness it were more likely to be rude to others.

That’s pretty scary, particularly as we are in the throes of one of the nastiest presidential races that I can remember. (True, I probably say that about many elections, but this one certainly does seem to take the prize.)

On any given afternoon or evening, you can spend three, four or more hours flipping through cable news channels and being exposed to incivility. They usually involve “news panels” that include reporters, political “analysts” and an assortment of surrogates from the various campaigns. These surrogates are representatives of candidates that generally adhere to the campaign’s talking points.

Often within just minutes, these panels erupt into loud arguments and name-calling, somewhat like the campaigns, themselves. The only things missing are the fist-fights and protests sometimes seen on the campaign trail. While it may be good for ratings, what is it doing to the people watching these shows, or even watching just news reporting about the campaigns?

“When study participants watched a video of a rude workplace interaction, then answered a fictitious customer email that was neutral in tone, they were more likely to be hostile in their responses, than those who viewed a polite interaction before responding,” reported Trevor Foulk, the lead author of the Florida study.

Writing in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Foulk noted that just watching rude behavior will flavor the way a person reacts, prompting negative or hostile responses.

The stack is tall of recent reports that support the idea that allowing incivility to continue unchecked in the workplace can spread like wildfire, eroding employee productivity and creativity, and hurting a company's bottom line.

But just what is incivility? It's harder to identify than "harassment," which is generally against the law and taken more seriously by organizations. Incivility can be a curt response in an email, a cutting remark in a business meeting, or even failing to make coffee after draining the pot in the break room. It grinds and grinds on a workplace until people are at each other's throats.

And now that we are seeing there is a "second-hand" factor – that rude behavior can be triggered by just witnessing incivility – it cannot be ignored. It is also a problem that can be addressed by individuals and by the creation of "civility cultures" in workplaces, homes, neighborhoods, communities, etc. The solution begins with each of us evaluating our own behavior.

I recently heard about a clever strategy used by a woman who is in a high-powered, stressful job. Not long ago, she reportedly reached the "no more!" point. She could not handle another task or interruption. And she found herself habitually saying "no." She dragged herself out of this negative spiral by simply forcing herself to say "yes." She searched for creative, responsible ways to positively respond.

Whether we are a boss, employee, coworker, mother, father, sibling, student or teacher, we must evaluate how we are responding to others. Think about the way we talk, write and act. Do as our mothers advised: Just be polite.

And it also may help to limit our viewing of the cable news stations a bit until Nov. 8.

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