Everyone is normal. However, some people are more 'normal' than others. For example, some people may always be enthusiastic and upbeat, while others may show behavior that approaches manic-bubbling over with endless excited chatter, unable to listen to others, filled with grandiose feelings of self-importance. Personality types and traits as well as pathologies often form a continuum. Throughout your life, you will be working with people on this continuum.

The different personalities you will encounter in team situations will also show a spectrum of traits. In general, you will find your fellow team members at the university are just as interested in learning the material and getting the job done as you are. Occasionally, however, you may run across someone who can create real difficulties for both you and the other members of your team. This handout is meant to give you some practical advice in dealing with the problems that this type of team member can create: from identifying typical behavior patterns, to understanding how your well-meaning but misguided efforts can encourage more of the same type of unproductive behavior, and finally, to concrete suggestions on how to cope effectively with the situation.

In this handout, I will discuss at least two superficially similar types of problematic people. The first type is the 'couch potato.' If you think of yourself as tired and bored and really more interested in watching TV than working on your homework (everyone has had times like these), you begin to get a picture of the couch potato. A second, far more difficult type of person to deal with, is the 'hitchhiker.' Hitchhikers are called hitchhikers because they can get through engineering school by hitchhiking with various groups while contributing little to nothing themselves. Learning how to handle yourself with couch potato or hitchhiker types can save you a lot of grief and aid in more productive relationships. In the long run, changing your reactions to these people can prove beneficial not only for you, but also for the person who is causing your problems.

To begin with, let's imagine that you have been assigned to a combined homework and lab group this semester with three others: Mary, Henry, and Jack. Mary is okay—she's not really that good at solving problems, but she tries as hard as she can, and she willingly does things such as taking the time to go in to see the professor or the grader to get questions answered when no one in group can figure them out. Henry is a little more irritating. He's a nice guy, but he just doesn't put in the time or effort needed to do a very good job. He'll sheepishly hand over partially worked homework problems and confess to spending the weekend riding his motorbike. Henry is so nice about it, though, that you can't help but like him and cut him a little slack, although sometimes you get irritated and grumble to Mary.

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Jack, on the other hand, has been nothing but a problem. In fact, Jack is such a problem that we will focus only on him for a while, because you will be able to use some of the same methods to deal with Jack (the hitchhiker) as you use with Henry (the couch potato).

Here are a few of the things Jack has done:
1. When you tried to set up meeting times at the beginning of the semester, Jack always seemed to have something scheduled, so that he couldn't muse with Henry (the couch potato).

Here are a few of the things Jack has done:
1. When you tried to set up meeting times at the beginning of the semester, Jack always seemed to have something scheduled, so that he couldn't meet with the rest of the group.

2. Jack infrequently turns in his homework. And when he does turn in homework, it is almost always wrong. In fact, he obviously spends less than two minutes on a problem-just enough to put some junk down on the paper that looks like work.

3. Jack has never answered a phone message. When you confronted him about it, he denied getting any messages. You e-mailed him, but he never answered those, either. When you finally confronted him about the e-mails, he said he was "too busy to answer."

4. Jack doesn’t show up for meetings-even after everyone in the group has asked him to do so. (Last time he promised he would “be there for sure.” But he wasn’t there.)

5. His writing skills are okay, but he just can’t seem to do anything right for the lab reports. He loses the drafts, or doesn’t reread his work, or leaves out the tables, or does something sloppy like write in the equations by pencil (“I don’t know how to use equation editor”). You’ve stopped assigning any work to him related to the lab report, because you don’t want to flub the strict deadlines your professor has imposed.

6. Jack continually complains about his many problems, such as the fifty-hour work weeks at his job, along with the heavy workload from the three other classes he’s signed up for, the bad textbooks, and the terrible teachers. At first you felt sorry for him-but recently it has begun to occur to you that Jack is using you. You’ve even begun to wonder if Jack has set up this inappropriate work/study schedule on purpose because he realizes he can get other people to do a lot of his work for him.

7. Jack speaks loudly and self-confidently when you try to discuss his problems-he seems to think the problems are all the fault of the others in the group. He is so certain of himself that your fellow group members and you yourself almost wonder if it really is your fault.

8. Your group finally was upset enough to discuss the situation with Professor Distracted. He in turn talked, along with the group, to Jack, who in very sincere and convincing fashion said that he just hadn’t really understood what everyone wanted him to do. Dr. Distracted stated that the problem must be that the group was not communicating effectively. He noticed that you, Mary, and Henry looked angry and agitated, while Jack simply looked bewildered, a little hurt, and not at all guilty. It was easy then for Dr. Distracted to conclude that this was a dysfunctional group, and that everyone was at fault-probably Jack least of all.

The bottom line is: You and your teammates are left holding the bag-Jack is getting the same good grades as everyone else in the group without doing a lick of work Oh yes-and he managed to make you all look bad while he was at it.

**What this group did wrong: Absorbing**

This group was an ‘absorber’ group. Whenever Jack did something wrong, right from the very beginning, they ‘absorbed’ the problem. In fact, at least initially, the group took some pride in covering for a team-member with some obvious problems, and in getting the job done. Hitchhikers count on you to act in a self sacrificing manner. In fact, the nicer you are (or at least, the nicer you think
you are being), the more the hitchhiker will be able to hitchhike. By not reflecting the consequences of the hitchhiker’s unacceptable behavior back to their rightful owner, you are rewarding the hitchhiker for using this type of behavior and making it more likely that the hitchhiker will continue to use this behavior in the future.

**What this group should have done:**

**Mirroring**

It’s important to reflect the dysfunctional behavior of the hitchhiker back on him or herself, so that the hitchhiker pays the price - not you. Don’t get caught up in the hitchhiker’s accusations, blaming, and criticism. Maintain your own sense of reality despite what the hitchhiker says (often easier said than done). Show by your actions that you have a bottom line: that there are limits to the type of behavior you will and will not accept. Clearly communicate these limits and act on them consistently. For example, here is what the group could have done in the above situation to forestall problems:

When Jack couldn’t seem to find time in his busy schedule to meet with the group, even when you suggested several reasonable alternative times, you needed to give Jack a quick once-over to decide whether he was in actuality a hard worker with little time, or whether he was simply a hitchhiker. Was Jack also suggesting that everyone do a couple separate homework problems and just staple them together at the end (contrary to what the professor has said the homework team should be doing)? Was Jack brusque and self-important, and seemingly in a hurry to get away? These are all signs that Jack is a hitchhiker. In this case, it would be acceptable for you (or anyone in the group) to suggest to Jack that he either find time to meet with the group, or that he talk to the professor about his problems-otherwise you won’t be able to put his name on the homework. Once this is said, it becomes a non-negotiable issue.

If Jack turns in junk for homework or lab reports, you must tell him that he has not contributed in any meaningful fashion, so his name will not go on the submitted work. No matter what Jack says, stick to your guns! If Jack gets abusive, take his work to show to the professor. Do this the first time that the junk is submitted, before Jack has taken much advantage of you, not after a month or two, when you are really beginning to get frustrated. Submitting two or three (or even five or six) poorly worked homework problems, for example, should not be considered to be a contribution to the team effort! Set your limits early and high, because hitchhikers have an uncanny ability to detect just how much they can get away with.

Clearly if Jack turns in shoddy results, or nothing at all, for homework or a lab report, his name does not go on the finished work. (Note: if you have gotten to know your team member, and he or she is clearly a contributor, it is appropriate to fill in for them temporarily if they have to take a trip, or if something unexpected arises.)

If Jack doesn't respond to e-mails, answer phone messages, or show up for meetings, don't waste too much time continuing to try to contact him. Just don’t put his name on the finished work-and stick to your guns!

Keep in mind that the only one who can handle Jack’s problems is Jack. You can’t change him you can only change your own attitude so that he no longer takes advantage of you. Only Jack can change Jack-and he will have no incentive to change if you do all his work for him. People like Jack can be master
manipulators. By the time you find out that his problems are never ending, and that he himself is their cause, the semester has ended and he is off to repeat his manipulations on a new, unsuspecting group. Stop allowing these dysfunctional patterns early in the game—before the hitchhiker is able to take advantage of you and the rest of your team!

Henry, the Couch Potato

But we haven’t discussed Henry yet (remember Henry?). Although Henry stood up with the rest of the group to try to battle against Jack’s irrational behavior, he hasn’t really been pulling his full weight. Actually, Jack was so bad to work with that you didn’t even think about Henry’s occasional couch potato antics. But in reality, dealing with a couch potato is a piece of cake in comparison with handling a hitchhiker. In fact, couch potatoes generally have completely different motivations, methods, and styles than hitchhikers (although occasionally you can find a person with both characteristics in one). Couch potatoes aren’t often vindictive, manipulative, or overly emotional. They are simply more interested in doing other things than what the team is supposed to be doing. (Other things may include working really hard in a class involving a subject they find interesting.)

The best way to deal with a couch potato is very similar to the way that you deal with a hitchhiker: set firm, explicit expectations—and then stick to your guns. Although couch potatoes are not as insidiously manipulative as hitchhikers, they will definitely test your limits. If your limits are flimsy, you then share the blame if you have Henry’s work to do as well as your own.

But I’ve Never Liked Telling People What to Do!

If you are a nice person who has never had to take charge and be firm with anyone, working with a couch potato or a hitchhiker can help you grow as a person and learn the important character trait of firmness. Just be patient with yourself as you learn. The first few times you try to be firm, you may find yourself thinking—’but now he/she won’t like me—it’s not worth the pain!’ But many people just like you have had exactly the same troubled reaction the first few (or even many!) times they tried to be firm. Just keep trying—and stick to your guns! Someday it will seem more natural, and you won’t feel so guilty about having reasonable expectations for others to meet. In the meantime, you will find that you have more time to spend with your family, friends, or schoolwork, because you aren’t doing someone else’s job along with your own.

Common Characteristics that Allow a Hitchhiker or Couch Potato to Take Advantage

1. Your inability to allow the hitchhiker or couch potato to fail or suffer—and as a consequence, learn from his or her mistakes.
2. Your devotion to the ideal of ‘the good of the team’—without commonsense realization of how this can allow others to take advantage of you. Sometimes you show (and are secretly proud of) an irrational loyalty to others.
3. You like to make others happy even at your own expense (codependency).
4. You always feel that you have to do better, and your best is never enough (perfectionism).
5. Your willingness to interpret the slightest contribution by a hitchhiker or
couch potato as 'progress.'
6. You are willing to make personal sacrifices so as to not 'abandon' a hitchhiking team member without realizing that you are devaluing yourself in this process.
7. Poor self-image—nothing you do is good enough.
8. Long-suffering martyrdom—nobody else could stand this, but you do.
9. The ability to cooperate but not delegate. Excessive conscientiousness.
10. The tendency to feel responsible for others at the expense of being responsible for yourself.

What to do when everyone in the group leaves the work to you. Or there are two real workers and two hitchhikers on the team. Although it is statistically less likely that you will have two or more hitchhikers or couch potatoes in your group, it is actually the situation that the professor sees most often. This is because teams can often cover for one problem person, but when half the group or more is shirking the work, the work becomes more difficult to complete, and the load becomes so unbearable that the professor's help is sought.

The tendency of most reasonable people (which includes professors some of the time), is to think that it takes 'two to tango'—that is, two people to make a problem. This is true—but the point missing here is that if there is a hitchhiker in your group, there will inevitably be problems. And hitchhikers are unbelievably good at deflecting blame.

As soon as you become aware that everyone is leaving the work to you—or doing such substandard work that defacto, the work is left to you, you need to take action. In my class, I allow you the leeway to come to me and request to be moved to another group. (You cannot simply move to another group on your own.) I will probably ask some questions and compare what you say about your performance with what I have observed so far in class and in materials you've turned in. Then I will take appropriate action.

Later on—out on the job and in your personal life
You will meet couch potatoes and hitchhikers throughout the course of your professional career. Couch potatoes are relatively benign, can often be firmly guided to do reasonably good work, and can even become your friends. However, hitchhikers are completely different types of people ones who can work their way into your confidence and then wreak havoc. Unfortunately, not only your colleagues, subordinates and friends (including boy- or girl- friend), but also high achievers you are in contact with may be hitchhikers. Your doctor, your lawyer—even your supervisor at work could show some or many of these traits. If this is the case, and your personal or professional life is being affected, it will help if you keep some of the techniques suggested here in mind.

In closing, bear in mind:
Couch potatoes often simply need firm motivation for them to decide to buckle down and do good work. Give them that motivation—and stick to your guns! Whether couch potato or hitchhiker, remember that it is not the person, but rather the dysfunctional behavior that is causing the trouble.
Don't take flack from a hitchhiker personally. If it weren't you, they'd be doing the same thing to someone else—someone less aware than you. Realize that, no matter how irrationally confidant, condescending, spiteful, or irritating a hitchhiker may be, this person's troubles are far more than you can ever really
understand have compassion even as you draw firm bounds.