

COMPILATION OF DEAR ETHY KETT COLUMNS

Elicit the best in others and, thereby, in yourself

Seek and encourage the finest characteristics and latent talents in others. Inspire hope and confidence by choosing to see potential for growth. Celebrate progress and the development of new capabilities. Give your full attention to the person you are with. Listen actively.

Dear Ethy Kett,

I'm having problems with my new office mate. Ted's politics are the opposite of mine, he has a speaking style in which he almost never acknowledges what anyone else has said but just starts again like he's doing a monologue, AND he's got some kind of tic or medical condition that makes him clear his throat constantly! On top of all that, he's now had the gall to complain to me that I spend too much time on the phone! Sure, I chat with my friends a bit to take a break, or make arrangements for a date, or whatever, but I get my work done and it's not like Ted's my boss.

I'm not hard to get along with; the last guy I shared the office with was great. But since Ted arrived a month ago, the idea of strangling him has become increasingly appealing--even BEFORE he got on his high horse about the phone. Any suggestions for how to get him off my back?

Dear Ethical Reader,

You have Ethy's sympathy; sharing work space is not easy! (Is that the theme song from "The Odd Couple" playing in the background?)

One way to forestall Ted's criticism, of course, would be for you to cut way down on the phone socializing you do in his presence. Whether that's the appropriate solution, Ethy has no idea--obviously, no one working an 8-hour day stays focused for all 480 minutes!--but it may be worth a second look. Criticism, especially by someone one doesn't like, often feels like an attack and triggers defensive "fight or flight" mechanisms. But as John Stuart Mill pointed out, people who challenge our own viewpoint do us a service--at the least by spurring us to a clearer and fuller understanding of why we believe what we do, and sometimes by providing a piece of the truth that we didn't have.

So Ethy encourages you to take a fresh look at the situation. One way to do so might be to ask yourself what your boss's reaction would be if he observed you throughout the day. Or you could imagine your own reaction if you observed some other person working and chatting as you do. Would you think, "That guy's slacking off too much," or "He's doing okay in his current job, but he's got potential he's not using," or "He's really got his act together--he's an asset to the company and still manages to balance work with social life"? If you pick door number 1 or 2, then you may decide to look for ways to reduce your office phone time. (Conceivably, you might decide that the ultimate solution is a different job--one where you don't feel as strong a need for breaks because the work itself is more satisfying, or where there's more human contact and conversation built into it.)

If, on the other hand, you conclude that your phone use isn't interfering with your work responsibilities, then the remaining issue would be its impact on Ted. You could, of course, just ignore his complaints, but that would probably tend to escalate the atmosphere of tension between you. Or, you could choose to stay off the phone just to be nice to him; Ethy suspects that wouldn't be satisfactory either. The middle road would be to talk with him, in order to find out what in particular about your phone use bothers him and to negotiate some solutions. Perhaps if you checked to see if he's in the middle of something

critical before calling, or avoided raucous laughing, he'd be fine. Or perhaps he'd agree to get some ear plugs or put on a Walkman. Or maybe you would agree to chatting less in return for a change in some behavior of his that you dislike.

Granted, that conversation would be easier to have if you were on better terms with each other. If you want to work on that, scale back your phone calls for a while to give yourself some time to try to get past his annoying qualities. One approach might be to make a list of any things you like about him, or any things you have in common. (Maybe you have some commonalities around the work that you both do?) Another might be to try imagining how the world looks from his perspective; perhaps there's an inner consistency to his (wrong-headed) politics that you can find admirable--or perhaps you can sympathize with what it's like to have that throat-clearing problem. And if you have any success with those kinds of steps, you could try to build on them by taking some time to get to know him better--maybe by going out to lunch together, if you haven't done that yet.

Ethy doesn't presume to say that you and Ted will (or even could) be friends, but the more you can respect and appreciate him for who he is, the easier your time together will be. Even if the ultimate solution is for one of you to request a different desk assignment, hopefully you'll be able to present it jointly as an amicable, "no-fault divorce" necessitated only by a difference in work styles.

Good luck to you both.

Dear Ethy Kett,

I have noticed that friends of mine (a couple) do not have an egalitarian relationship—not even close. One partner does almost all of the parenting, cooking, cleaning. The other spends a lot of time on the computer, shopping and pursuing hobbies. The one who does everything clearly has a growing resentment about it and occasionally talks to me it. The one who does less also sometimes talks to me about problems in the relationship. I'm a good listener and supporter, but I'm finding that I'm beginning to lose patience with both the unassertive partner and the self-centered one. I know they love each other and they belong together, and I love them both for who they are, but it's getting frustrating to hear these concerns go unaddressed and to watch the imbalance persist. What's a friend to do?

In the Middle

Dear "In the Middle,"

Ask yourself who owns which problem here. When friends complain, they are usually not asking for help. The problems in their relationship belong to them, and when they are truly ready to make changes, they will. You cannot solve their problems! That you feel uncomfortable listening to two of your good friends each vent about the other, however, is a problem that belongs to you. You need to address this to take care of yourself.

First, since you have the motivation and can probably change your response more easily than you can change your friends' behavior, try actively listening to your friends instead of appearing to condone their complaints. Reflect back what you hear your friend say. Feeling heard is healing, and noticing what you just said allows self-reflection and self-editing. Then respond to complaints by asking what they want instead or what they plan to do about the situation. Power comes from knowing what you want, not from whining about what you have. If the discussion gets nowhere, change the subject to something you both enjoy talking about.

Don't allow yourself to be placed "in the middle." If your friends keep bringing their complaints to you, let each know how it pains you to hear complaints about the other repeatedly, because you care about both of

them. Your candor may help them realize that they are endangering their other relationships by failing to work out the problems on their own.

Treat personal issues as private

Respect an individual's dignity by keeping personal information about others confidential, unless you have permission to share it.

Dear Ethy Kett,

Not long ago a friend told me that she had lost her job. I responded by saying, "Oh, Roseanne [not her real name] has just been going through the same thing. You might want to talk to her about your situation." I thought my friend and Roseanne might benefit from each other's support and understanding. But my friend got upset. She doesn't want her situation known, and she told me that now she feels uncomfortable with me because I didn't hesitate to tell her about Roseanne's situation. She's afraid I'll tell others about her predicament. Gosh, I was just trying to be helpful. Do I have to set ground rules for every conversation?? Any suggestions?

Frustrated do-gooder

Dear Frustrated,

Any suggestions? Has Ethy ever been at a loss for suggestions?

Right off the bat, although you've already had a first conversation, you can still go back to your friend and tell her that you've been thinking about your talk and that you want to assure her that, now that you know how she feels, you will, of course, not tell anyone about her job loss without her permission. You could also tell her that you appreciate her telling you that something was bothering her, rather than just cutting back on your friendship.

We all know that to maintain trust it's best to keep personal information about others confidential, unless we have their permission to share it. The problem is, we don't all agree about what information is "personal." While many people might not regard a job loss as personal, some people would. Other information that could be in the category that some people could consider personal might be a relationship break-up (the details would always be confidential material), an illness (some types of illness more than others--for example, an STD would always be confidential material), a relationship beginning (again, details are off-limits). Many people want to be the tellers of their own news, whether they consider it "good" or "bad." It is difficult to get it right because people's boundaries are different, and we can't always use our own as a guide. For example, you, dear Frustrated, might have been comfortable if the roles had been reversed in your conversation, and it may be that Roseanne would not have minded at all your suggestion that she discuss the job loss issue with your friend.

We all need to be alert to the fact that others may feel differently about the privacy of certain issues than we ourselves feel. The important thing is that they tell us when we bump up against one of their differences, and that we respond caringly to what they tell us. It's all part of living in a world made up of unique and wonderful human beings.

Dear Ethy,

I recently became aware that a married friend of mine may be having an affair. What should I do about it? Should I confront him, tell his wife about my concerns, or just ignore the behavior and hope it will go away?

Baffled

Dear Baffled,

The first thing you should do is realize how likely it is that you are not in full possession of all the facts. So be very careful about making judgments.

It would be hard to imagine how any good could come from going to your friend's wife and reporting what you think you might know.

Ask yourself whether this is a real friend or only an acquaintance. If he is a good friend, you might be able to do him a service by letting him know that you have heard a rumor or are concerned about the way his behavior appears. This should be done very carefully, however, in order to avoid doing irreparable harm and undermining the possibility of offering encouragement and support later, if and when he's ready to ask for it.

In general, unless their action poses a problem to you, it is really their problem and not yours to solve. All of us learn from making mistakes. We do this best if we are able to work through our problems at our own pace. It is difficult to watch friends make mistakes and hurt each other and themselves in doing so, but it is a necessary part of life that we all share. Friends and supportive community members stand ready to support and encourage each other when mistakes are made, so that lasting growth can occur.

I hope this helps.

Honor agreements and honor the right to say "no"

Make agreements carefully and with concrete expectations, exercising your absolute right to say "no" when you choose not to do something. Maintain trust and integrity by keeping agreements, and by asking others to be accountable for their agreements. Recognize that others also have the absolute right to say "no." Renegotiate an agreement if you find you can't keep it.

Dear Ethy Kett:

I'm really disappointed and angry. I offered to prepare a delicious exotic dinner as a fun(d)raiser for WES. I was really excited, because 12 people signed up even though I only had room for eight, so I had a waiting list! Such a popular event! I cleaned the house, bought flowers and a ton of food, and spent several hours cooking. I was really looking forward to a wonderful time.

Then the evening arrived, but three of my "guests" didn't. Two called at the last minute to say they couldn't come, and one simply didn't show up. What a bummer! I was counting on their being there. At least if they'd told me several days ahead of time, I could have called some folks from the waiting list. Instead, I had a lot of food left over, and I was so irritated, it was hard to enjoy the terrific people who did come.

Ethy Kett, how can I tell these people that they let me down when they didn't keep or maybe even remember their commitment to come to my dinner?

Dear Ethical Reader:

I would be annoyed and upset, too, if I had prepared such a lovely event and had almost half of the guests not show up. After all, a WES fun(d)raiser isn't just about contributing money to WES. That's

the bonus we get when we create fun experiences for each other, which is an equally important purpose of those occasions. Imagine if you had decided not to show up!

What might explain this phenomenon? Some people may think that it doesn't matter if they don't attend, as long as they have paid. They couldn't be more wrong! Your letter certainly shows our readers that their presence at any gathering they've said they will attend is important, and that they will leave a hole if they don't go. Another reason may be that people just forget. We all lead such busy lives—it's easy to forget things. My solution is to carry a monthly calendar and write my commitments down so I don't have to remember. All I have to do is look, and I can see at a glance where I have openings and where I don't, and I don't create conflicting appointments for myself.

Of course, we don't have to go to a fun(d)raiser we have signed up for if we later decide we don't want to. But we are obligated to let the host know enough in advance to invite the next person on the waiting list. Why? Because it makes a difference to the host, who is putting forth extra effort for the event; to the people on the waiting list; and to the other guests, who are expecting to get to know a certain number of WES members and friends.

As for the people who didn't come or who called you at the last minute, it's important for them to know that what they do or don't do matters. So, you might ask them what happened and then say to them: "I was really sorry that you didn't make it to my dinner. I was looking forward to seeing you, and I felt bad for the other guests that the turnout was smaller than advertised. In the future, I'd appreciate it if you would let me know as far ahead as possible if you have a change of plans. That way I'll have time to invite someone in your place." I hope you'll tell them. Good luck, and let me know the next time you're fixing one of those exotic dinners! I'll definitely be there!

Dear Ethy,

I am in a task group that meets regularly. We have made agreements as to how decisions will be made, but when it comes down to it, something else happens and no one says anything to hold people accountable. It makes me feel dizzy, like I must be crazy!

Dizzy

Dear Dizzy,

Are you "no one"? What stops you from calling the group's attention to this yourself?

Are these agreements written down? Agreements have a way of sliding around in people's minds, especially if they concern an issue around which there has been struggle and disagreement, or where the motivation to do differently is strong. Whenever an agreement has been made--and especially after controversy, Ethy recommends that you write down the conclusion and get everyone to initial it. In formal meetings, this is accomplished through the taking and approving of minutes. If the agreements you mentioned have not been written down, you can initiate a discussion about them and about writing them down in the future. The result may be recommitment to the old agreements or a new one, but whichever it is, get it in writing!

Ethy finds that written agreements are helpful even in families, within a couple, or between parents and children.

Incidents—Resolve them

Choose to resolve personal and public disagreements that hurt you and your relationship. Address the person with whom you are having a conflict. Strive for understanding and a fair resolution. When appropriate,

express sorrow and regret for damage done, make amends, and find a better way. Be open to the other person's attempts to apologize. Encourage others who are in conflict to find a fair resolution.

Dear Ethy Kett,

I am terribly upset. Some people are saying nasty things about me behind my back. I know about it because other people tell me. I want it to stop, but no one will support me to have a meeting to resolve it.

Frustrated, angry, and disappointed.

Dear Frustrated,

It is no wonder that you are upset. In your place Ethy would feel like punching someone out. Perhaps several people. However, given a lack of training in the martial arts and an unwillingness to serve time in jail, she would probably opt for running around the block or taking out her wrath on some pillows. Passing on hurtful comments is nothing short of gossip. Gossip damages everyone involved. Please accept Ethy's condolences that you were treated in this disrespectful fashion.

You want to know how to take appropriate action, so here is Ethy's recommendation. If you know who the alleged source of the nasty remark is, consider approaching the person—let's say "him"—directly. What have you got to lose? Tell him what you heard and from whom, and ask whether he actually said it. Bear in mind that, just like that party game we have all played, real gossip changes from one transmitter to the next, and the person may not have said what was reported to you! Or you may find out that the person has an issue to work out with you.

Whatever his answer, this is an opening to a conversation about the harmfulness of gossip and the importance of speaking to the person with whom you are vexed. You will have the satisfaction of having taken a stand against gossip and of inhibiting a repetition. This can be quite exhilarating!

You might also speak to the person who passed the gossip on to you. If "she" was one in a chain of people, you might also ask her to speak to the person who told her and ask her to say that passing on remarks like that is gossip and that gossip is hurtful, and please don't pass it on. That would be a chain reaction in a positive direction. You would be helping yourself, each person that you spoke to, and the whole community.

Dear Ethy,

I work in a generally close-knit group. A coworker and I planned a going-away luncheon for a colleague. Then my coworker didn't show up for the event we had planned together! He also didn't call to tell me he wouldn't be there. At the first opportunity I told him I was disappointed and hurt. What I got back was an excuse. It felt like a brush-off! Now I am MORE disappointed and hurt. I wish I hadn't opened my mouth! What went wrong, and what should I do?

Two-hurts-for-the-price-of-one

Dear Two-hurts,

When people let us down, the most important thing we need from them is to have them CARE that they let us down! But we can't automatically get this just because we speak. It is HARD to listen to someone tell you that you hurt him (or her), so unless we prepare the other person for it, his or her first reaction will probably be defensive, leaving both parties even worse off, as happened in your case.

This is why it is important to begin such a conversation by asking permission. Asking permission goes like this: "I have something to talk about with you, and I would like you to listen to my experience. Is this a good time? (And if not, can we set a time? It would only take a few minutes.)" In this way the person (let's say "he," as in your case) learns that it is not his job to make it all better--or to justify himself as a good person (common first reactions)--but JUST to listen to your experience. Most people are willing to listen if they are asked, provided they have just a moment to prepare.

If this is a good time, tell your tale, sticking to the facts of your own experience in the form of "I statements." "When you did this (e.g., did not show up or call to tell me), I felt disappointed and hurt. I want you to know this happened and how I felt."

Then ask the person to say back what he heard. If he starts to say something else, to deny, excuse, or defend, say something like, "Wait a minute. First just let me know what you heard me saying." When he says it back to you, you will feel some relief. You can then listen to him and learn what it was like from his point of view. Most often, you will learn that the other person did not intend to hurt your feelings. The problem may turn out to be that you misunderstood each other. In any case, end by saying what would feel good in the future: for example, "Your presence matters to me, and if you can't make it in the future, please call."

Even though you've already had a conversation about the original incident, you can use the same basic approach to start over. For example, you could say, "I made a mistake and jumped right into talking about the luncheon and my feelings. What I'd like to do is just tell you what it was like for me and have you just listen--and then to hear your experience. Is this a good time?"

It takes a strong and loving person to try to rebuild trust after being hurt, but to care for yourself while also caring for the other person is well worth the effort--and usually helps you both to be more aware in the future.

Dear Ethy Kett,

I use email a lot to keep in touch with friends, share information, and conduct both paid and volunteer business. Unfortunately, I seem to have greatly annoyed an acquaintance, who recently sent me a message demanding that she be removed from all my email lists and that I refrain from "spamming" her with junk email any more. She was upset about messages I had sent to various friends about upcoming events. I was dumbfounded at the angry tone of her reply. Although I am planning to contact her (in person) to work through this incident, I wonder if you could discuss email etiquette and how to prevent such hurts?

Smarting in Cyberspace

Dear Smarting,

Most email users have probably received messages from acquaintances that seem like junk mail. These messages are generally not sent with the intention of offending you. Ethy suggests that you exercise courtesy and kindness in email communication, just as you would in person. The solitude and immediacy of using email make it easy to "say" things that one would never say in person – things that may hurt the recipient, often unintentionally. A negative tone can come through nearly as clearly as it would in person, while subtle humor and irony may be lost without the expressions and gestures of the speaker to give it away.

Ethy hereby offers a few more specific suggestions about email etiquette.

- As a sender, think carefully about whether the intended recipient will appreciate the item. A policy of addressing messages name by name, rather than using group address lists, might help you to accomplish this goal.

- It is generally a good idea to send email to large groups by blind copy (bcc:), so recipients can't see every name or inadvertently or purposefully "reply to all."
- Check out the truth of questionable items before you decide to forward them. For example, two of Ethy's favorite sources for checking virus rumors and urban legends are: <http://hoaxbusters.ciac.org/> and <http://urbanlegends.miningco.com/science/urbanlegends/>.
- Remember that privacy is not guaranteed. What you write can easily be forwarded to many people – including anyone you might have mentioned in your message.
- Read your message again before you send it. If you were upset when you wrote it or if the tone makes you hesitate, wait until another time when you are feeling calm and clear-headed. Then rewrite it or don't send the message at all.
- For regular group mailings, add a note that you are willing to remove names from the address list if requested to do so. Then be sure to do it when requested.
- As a recipient, be patient about messages that annoy you. It is easy to make mistakes (especially since many email users are technical novices), such as accidentally replying to all or sending messages with lots of >>>s.
- Remember that the delete button is a powerful tool that can quickly ease your annoyance.
- If you repeatedly get messages that do not interest you, send a polite request to be removed from the address list. Ask again if messages continue to come a few weeks later.

As in every other sphere of communication, email etiquette comes down to being mindful of your words and actions and feeling compassion for those on the other end -- who are humans, after all, not computers.

Dear Ethy Kett,

I have a problem involving the teenage daughter of neighbors who are also friends. I asked her to take care of my cats while I was away for a week. After I got back, I found beer missing from my refrigerator and pizza boxes and beer bottles in the trash can. The cats' litter box was filthy, their food dish was empty, their water bowl nearly dry, and they were hungry. I had agreed to pay her, but the beer cost more than her wages. Should I pay her and forget it? Talk to her parents and risk offending them? Or refuse to pay her because she betrayed my trust?

Dear Ethical Reader,

Problems with friends and neighbors can be challenging enough, but when the children of friends are involved, it adds another level of complexity. In this case, there seem to be three considerations: whether it would be more caring to drop it or make an issue of it; who owns the problem; and how best to proceed.

Let's take the caring issue first. Ignoring the incident wouldn't be fair to you or the teenager. In an ethical community, we help each other achieve our potential by learning from each other how our actions affect others. If we aspire to embrace the world as one community, we have a responsibility to give compassionate guidance to all of the young people we encounter. If adults don't model saying "no" to children when appropriate, how can we expect children to say "no" to their friends?

Who owns this problem? The transaction was between the teen and yourself, and while her parents might like to know about it, or conversely resent your telling them about it, you should respect her enough to treat her as responsible for her own actions. Admittedly, with alcohol this gets tricky and will require judgment.

That brings us to the third question: how to approach the teenager. Ethy suggests that you tell the teen your observations and concerns and ask her to explain what happened, instead of relying on assumptions. Discuss with her whether she should be paid at all, since you found evidence that the cats had been poorly cared for. You should also expect her to replace what was taken, legally, preferably by telling her parents what happened herself so they can purchase the beer for her, or else by reimbursing you. Unless there is some extenuating problem in her relationship with her parents that might cause them to react inappropriately, if she is not willing or able to explain what happened, you should tell her that you will have to discuss it with them because of the potential seriousness of teen alcohol use and because you would likely want them to know why you will turn to them or to other neighbors rather than to her to keep an eye on your house the next time you are away.

If there are such extenuating circumstances, however, then the value of telling her parents could be outweighed by the potential for you to become a trusted adult in this teen's life. Setting up a mentoring relationship by handling this situation firmly but compassionately is one of the best things that could come out of the discussion, and it would be particularly important if her relationship with her parents is difficult.

In either case, even if she acts offended or overly embarrassed, you can be sure that if you have acted out of compassion and respect, she will know that you are someone who can be trusted and counted upon. At some point, as she matures, she may turn to you in a time of need for advice or friendship. At the very least, she will know that her actions are noticed and make a difference, and that is an encouraging thing.

Dear Ethy,

I have taken leadership of a project and I am finding that working with volunteers is very frustrating. For one thing, what do I do with a volunteer who doesn't come through with what she says she will do? I was let down several times the last time she took on a task, and, worse, that important task went undone. At my work I would just fire the person! Can you FIRE a volunteer? I can try to avoid her. But what if she comes to another meeting and says again that she will do something? I don't want to hurt her feelings. She's a nice person, and so am I! Confrontation is not easy for me. What should I do?

Fried Leader

Dear Fried,

If this person volunteers again, you need to be able to head her off without chopping off her head! Rather than avoiding her, you need to avoid a repetition!

As long as you just tell the truth about what has happened and about your own experience--your own thoughts, feelings, and wants--what you say will not be damaging to the other person. Make your move immediately after the meeting by saying, "_____, may I talk with you for a few minutes before you leave?" Remember to have some humility in this conversation because you may not have all the facts. When you are alone, say, "In the past when you said you would do (something specific), you did not do it. I waited week after week while you still said you would do it. You never said to me you could not do it but kept on promising until I gave up asking." (These are the facts; what actually happened.) Continue: "I think maybe you want to do more than you really can. You wind up promising more than you can deliver." (These are

your thoughts, your interpretations of her behavior.) Go on: "I didn't like feeling like a nag, reminding you to do it, and I felt frustrated, worrying about whether it would be done." (Your feelings.) All that time the job did not get done." (The factual consequences.) "Now someone needs to do this new job. I need to feel certain that it will be done on time without my having to worry about it."

Then you need to listen to the person's response. You might even learn that you contributed to the problem in some way! For example, did the agreement with this person lack a specified deadline? Did the person get stuck not knowing what to do at some point? If there is no new information to change your position, you could finish by saying, "I would feel better if you took on a smaller job. If you come through on that, I'd feel more confident that you will follow through on what you say in the future." (This is what you want.) Remember, I said this will not be damaging--to either of you. I did not say this will not feel a bit painful or uncomfortable. That's not so bad! This could very well be a major pattern in her life. If so, you are probably not the only one to feel its effects nor the only one to tell her about it.

Sometimes Ethy has not understood until the 9th (or the 39th!) person told her something. Goodness! There are probably messages people are trying to send that she hasn't really heard yet! But what chance do we have if people do not tell us their experience? We are all essential mirrors to each other--none of us totally accurate--but the truth as we know it is valuable nevertheless. It's a caring thing to do for the other person, even though it is uncomfortable. It's a caring thing to do for you, since it stops you from being the victim of the pattern yet again. The worst that can happen in an encounter like this is that we discover something useful about ourselves.

Dear Ethy Kett,

A friend of mine (I'll call him Cuthbert) has on several occasions--usually when we disagree about something-- misstated facts or spoken to me with hostility, calling me names or impugning my motives or yelling at me, and then apologized later, only to repeat that cycle of behavior--hostility-apology--as a habit. When we don't disagree, we have a great time together, so I'd really like to fix this. I believe in giving a person a second chance and in accepting apologies, but a third, fourth, fifth, and umpteenth chance? I'm losing patience! How can I keep this relationship and stop this from happening?

At the end of my rope

Dear Ropeless,

Well, Ethy is tempted to say that when you have friends like this, you don't need any enemies. But she will restrain herself. Obviously, Cuthbert is important to you, and everyone has the capacity to learn better skills for dealing with differences. So, here's what you can do.

Cuthbert has a very ingrained habit that is hard to change. But at least he can be acknowledged for being at the "Oops, I did it!" stage. He recognizes, albeit belatedly, that he has done you wrong. Underneath it all, he wants to do the right thing, and it will be helpful for you to keep that in mind.

The next stage for changing a habit is, "Yikes! I'm doing it now!" That's where you can help your friend (and yourself) by STOPPING the conversation right where it starts to go wrong. You have not done him any favor by letting him do this to you over and over. You are free to say STOP by any means necessary. You could hold up a hand up in a stop gesture (or the equivalent over the phone, like, "Whoa there, Cuthbert!") and ask, "Can you tell me your disagreement now without attacking me?" If this does not immediately elicit a kinder attitude, leave the room or hang up the phone, saying, "Goodbye for now. I'll talk with you another time." Do not allow yourself to be abused after the first moment. You will have taken care of yourself and avoided getting hurt, which is your responsibility, and you will find that you are much less resentful. You also will have given Cuthbert a chance to wake up on the spot.

You can't lose. You are rejecting the behavior without pushing the person out of your life. Ethy would like her friends to do that for her!

Dear Ethy,

A co-worker of mine, with whom I thought I was on friendly terms (we did socialize a little outside the office), has suddenly stopped talking to me. She doesn't respond when I greet her but looks straight ahead, as if I weren't there. Her behavior towards me borders on the bizarre. Obviously, she is angry with me, but I do not know why, though I have tried many approaches and have met only with rebuffs. I have told her that I have the impression she is angry with me and asked her for the reason. She denies it. I have apologized by saying that it appears that I have done something to hurt or anger her but I don't know what it is; nevertheless, I am sorry about it because I did not intend anything I have done or said to have this effect. Silence. I also told her that I see that she doesn't want to talk about it now, but that, if and when she decides she does want to talk about it, I would welcome that. I would like to resolve this matter, but I am out of ideas. What do you suggest?

Dear Idealess,

You have done a fine job so far; this may prove to be a case where you can lead a horse to water but can't make her drink. Sometimes horses just aren't thirsty—and sometimes they are but refuse to drink anyway! Since you have offered your co-worker several opportunities to tell you what is bothering her, it may be that the problem is with her not knowing what to do with her hurt or anger more than it is about what you said or did.

Ethy can think of one more approach you might try. Once, in a similar situation, Ethy had success saying something like the following: "We have to work together in this office whether we like each other or not. It could happen that I might have a question about work that you could answer better than anyone else. But the way things are now, I would feel uncomfortable asking you because of the way you've been acting towards me lately. And I suppose it's conceivable that you might have a question that I could answer best, but I doubt that you would ask me. At some point, someone may ask why we don't consult each other when it's obvious that we should. What would we say? This situation would not be good for the office or for either of us, and I would like us to be able to work together and talk to each other forthrightly to work through any misunderstandings we may have. I would like to address your concerns, but until I know what they are I just can't."

Ethy hopes this works for you, too.

Q*uestion to gain understanding, not to criticize*

Use questions to explore perspectives of others that you do not yet understand. Adopt an open attitude and reserve judgment while listening. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.

Dear Ethy Kett:

I'm caught between a rock and a hard place. A new friend of mine who belongs to two organizations that I belong to is holding a fundraiser for one in the facilities of the other, which has a rule prohibiting the use of its facilities for that purpose. I am really surprised that my friend is violating this rule, even for a worthy cause. I've been trying to overlook it because I don't want to be a busybody, but I find that, whenever I see this friend, I avoid the subject that's most on my mind. I am in a quandary about what to do or say about this. Help!

Dear Ethical Reader:

This is a tough one. Reading between the lines, I'm thinking that you like your new friend and want to admire her, too. She is doing something for an organization—let's call it Org. A—that you both belong to, and you'd like to be able support this worthy effort. You're having a tough time doing that, though, because it appears to you that she's breaking a rule of that other organization you both belong to—Org. B—and, if she is, you can't support her in that. You are looking for a way to talk about the matter with her that will bridge the distance between you that this incident has created.

The first and most important thing for you to do is to figure out what your intention is here. If it is to get your friend to change what she has planned, this could be really difficult. Being told that what they are doing is wrong and that they should not do it is pretty likely to make most people defensive and resentful. If not, then sad and dejected. You probably do not need to make sure that your friend changes.

On the other hand, if your intention is to narrow the distance that has crept into your relationship because you don't know how to talk about this, you need to begin with the assumption that your friend is a fine person who makes principled decisions on the basis of the information she has.

Before you begin the conversation, you should be sure to arrange a mutually agreeable time and place where you won't feel rushed or intruded upon. Then, keeping an open mind, you can check out with her the facts about what she is doing and find out whether she knows about the rule and whether, indeed, she is violating it. Your goal here should be to understand her, not to judge or criticize. You can show her that you have understood by restating what she has told you. If you do it well, she should feel that you said it as well as she did. She may feel strongly that what she is doing is good and important, or she may have mixed feelings about it. If you can, ask her about her feelings and show her, again without judgment, that you have heard her.

Of course, Ethy does not know what your friend might say. After she says it, though, you can take the opportunity to share your feelings and your beliefs about the consequences of her actions, doing it in a manner that respects her views and feelings. And what might the consequences be if your friend is indeed breaking Org. B's rule? It is like breaking an agreement, and that has consequences in who we know ourselves to be and how others know us. "I am a person whom you can trust to tell the truth and keep my agreements to the best of my ability." It feels good for a person to be able to say this about herself. If, over time, other people find this to be true of her and find her trustworthy, her relationships will be based on trust and will grow on trust. But if you saw her breaking an agreement with someone else, you would naturally wonder what she might do in relation to you sometime if she thought it was in her self-interest.

That is something for your friend to think about. She will have feelings and reactions about what you have said. You need to listen with humility and acceptance. She will decide what to do.

I hope, Ethical Reader, that your friend will appreciate your courage in telling her the truth with love. Whether or not it appears to succeed immediately in this instance, Ethy assures you that such efforts are exactly what is needed for us to weave the ethical manifold.

Good luck to you both.

Dear Ethy Kett,

I have never meant to hurt anyone. But I find people so thin-skinned that I can't disagree without then being pounced on for hurting someone's feelings. I am comfortable duking it out with words over ideas. In fact, I enjoy that process. Should I just withdraw and keep from rocking the boat? Should I seek others who are more like me?

Straight shooter

Dear Straight shooter,

You are not so different from these other people after all! Your own feelings have been hurt when you have been "pounced on"! Since you give the impression that this kind of incident keeps happening to you, I would guess that there is, in fact, something unkind in your style of expression that wounds the feelings of at least some others without your realizing.

I know this is asking a lot, but I wonder whether you could pick one of these people who have spoken to you and ask what it is specifically that was hurtful about what you said. Maybe it's an attitude or choice of words. Maybe you sound superior or mocking. If you ridicule a person's idea, that is overkill; it will reflect badly on the person who created the idea much more than respectfully disputing the facts.

While it is true that no one person can be an accurate mirror for anyone else, other people of good will can help us to see what we would never be able to see about our own actions. Once you have more information about how you come across, I trust that you can find a way to express yourself still truthfully and yet more kindly.

Uniqueness—Value the unique gifts of each individual as well as our common humanity

Reach out to discover the worth of every individual, especially those who seem different from you. Strive to treat everyone as having unique experiences, gifts, and perspectives to contribute to the common good.

Dear Ethy,

I am a single guy and I find I am in and out of relationships very quickly! First I am smitten and consumed with desire for the relationship. Then I find something wrong and break it off. I am not getting what I want, and I don't like the role I am playing in the lives of these women. What is wrong?

Signed, Fickle Lover

Dear Fickle,

We are creatures meant to be in close relationships with others, and we feel real pain sometimes when we don't have enough closeness. When you start to get close to a woman, you may be looking for a quick fix for the pain of loneliness. It is hard to be around an attractive person and not grab for relationship before really knowing the person. Getting sexual right away can give a false sense of intimacy. It takes time to really know a person well enough to conclude that you will be good for each other over time. There is no short cut.

Once we are in a relationship, we humans also have an opposite fear: that we will be stuck--trapped in a relationship that doesn't feel good! This fear represents a real concern also. After all, a great many marriages do not remain happy! Then again, loving someone--letting her become important to you--is scary, even if it works out wonderfully. A line from the movie, "Autumn in New York," says it clearly: "There are only two kinds of love stories: boy loses girl, or girl loses boy." This is true. Love and loss are indeed a package deal, just like life and death. But the good life requires having faith--affirming that love is worth the pain.

So far, though, you are getting all the pain of relationships with few of the benefits. The only remedy for your pattern and your very human fears is to slow yourself down and not to act on these desperate longings and fears! No matter how much you like someone at first, get to know her slowly, and let her get to know you. Leave several days between dates. Do not meet in suggestive circumstances. In short, hold off becoming lovers until you reach the point of being friends. Then, when you begin that new phase of your relationship, pick a length of time during which you will give your best, and see what happens. Do not exit at the first sign of negative feelings. Learn to tolerate your fear. To succeed at a relationship, a person needs to hold a course and not change direction with every wind that blows. Look for a positive response to the problems that appear. Discover what you want, and ask for it. Encourage her to do the same. Negotiate.

At the end of your trial commitment, make a choice to recommit or not. If you decide that the person is not right for you, you can separate at that point without denying whatever love you feel for her. In the meantime, you both will have learned a lot about what you want and need and will probably do even better the next time around.

I was glad to see Eileen Rubinstein plugging the importance of respecting diverse views in a recent column, because I feel really uncomfortable on Sunday morning when somebody makes a dismissive political remark as a joke in the response period (or even as part of a song lyric). I seem to remember one recently about the standards for arsenic in drinking water. I'm no expert on the issue, but I know enough to know that there are real questions about whether the money we'd spend getting the concentration down to 10 parts per billion instead of 20 ppb would yield much health benefit--or even any benefit at all! (Make water expensive enough, and some people will go back to using their own wells, while others may have less left in their budgets for fruits, vegetables, and doctor visits.) Yet many liberal Democrats are quick to assume that conservative Republicans are always wrong, and always in the pocket of some special interest group.

What can I do to help foster respect for diversity of opinion, as Eileen described?

One size does not fit all

Dear One-size,

You bring up an issue Ethy has always wondered about: even if people agree that it's wrong to discriminate against each other because of the more obvious physical differences, like race, sex, national origin, age, and sexual orientation, how do we deal with philosophical and personality differences like political views, religion, and Myers-Briggs types?!

If our spiritual ideal is an ethical manifold, where worth is attributed to every person, and each person is considered to be indispensable to the whole, there has to be room for everyone: Republicans,

Democrats, Libertarians, Greens, conservatives, and liberals. But it seems all too easy to reduce complex people to caricatures, rather than to address areas of disagreement straightforwardly. In the situation you describe, an effective approach is to model the kind of behavior you want to promote--to treat respectfully the person you disagree with and assume that "she" has good motives for her positions. For example, you could offer your own response-period comment beginning with something like, "I really appreciate the fact that previous speakers have shown their concern for public health and the environment. But here's another aspect that we should consider in thinking about all the health consequences of this issue:"

Now what can you do if the offending remark was just a throw-away--offered as an easy joke, or as part of a song lyric? You may feel offended whether or not you disagree with the opinion expressed. If you're up to it, you might ask to speak privately afterwards to the person who made the joke, ideally in a calm way that expresses your feelings without trying to make the other person wrong (which would tend to inflame matters). Once you've gotten the person's permission for a brief personal conversation, you could say something like, "I'm sure this wasn't your intent, but when you made that joke about [subject], I couldn't help imagining how someone who had a different opinion might feel after hearing that in our meeting hall. I imagine that, if I were such a person, I'd feel hurt. Worse, since a lot of people laughed, and no one seemed disturbed by the joke, I would feel that, in this place, everyone would thoughtlessly disparage me for disagreeing! I know that reasonable people with different experiences and information come to different conclusions. I think it's important that we be respectful of these different opinions, especially in our public forums."

Even those of us who don't always have the courage for those one-on-one dialogues can make an effort to avoid thinking in terms of "us" and "them" and, instead, to think of everyone as part of "us." One thing that may help is to recognize that no one has enough time to be a complete expert on all the issues affecting us as citizens. To one degree or another, we all have to depend on others to digest information for us. The goal is to adopt the attitude that those who use different sources than we do are doing their best to make sense out of the information they have, just as we are; to engage them in a fruitful exchange of information, ideas, and feelings, in which both of us listen well and have our say; and, if neither totally wins the other over, to disagree without being disagreeable. Even if we think the other person is seriously wrong, the challenge is to follow Daryl Davis' example. A black man, he has caused leaders of the Ku Klux Klan to give up their racism and turn over their robes! He reached out to them personally, one on one, with respect, and expressed curiosity about their lives and their opinions.

E*xpress appreciation*

When you like or appreciate what others do, tell them so. Look for what is good around you, and cultivate a sense of gratitude.

Dear Ethy Kett,

Is there an eliciting-the-best way to indicate to someone that you aren't interested in going beyond being acquaintances to being friends? Neighbors of ours are sweet people, and they've been very kind in helping with our household emergencies, loaning equipment, etc. But both of them talk one's ears off, and they're also know-it-alls, which particularly gets on our nerves.

Ideally, we would work through incidents with them and thereby build a closer relationship. But whether from our own weakness or other priorities, we're not interested in trying to build a closer relationship with them. (It's hard for me to imagine that they would change enough to make it enjoyable spending social time with them.) But at the same time, we want to continue to be good neighbors, in the sense of people who are happy to be helpful in times of need.

Surely the same kind of problem--where one person or couple is more interested in friendship than the other--occurs within a community like WES. So from your experience, Ethy, how can one communicate a "Thanks, but no thanks" in a way that's respectful and supportive?

Dear Ethical Reader,

Wow--just when Ethy thought it was safe to open the mailbox again! In a moment of weakness, she even considered forwarding this problem on to Carolyn Hax or Miss Manners...but then she pulled herself together, stole a glance at her copy of the ETHIQUETTE tips, and said, "I can do this!"

Which, in a way, is her advice to you as well. Yes, the message you want to communicate to your neighbors is a complex one... but if you remind yourself of your fundamentally loving intent toward them AND toward yourself, you'll probably find the communication flowing more clearly and easily than you expect.

Putting herself in your shoes, Ethy imagines that you have been approaching those talky neighbors with some mixture of guilt and fear: guilt that you don't want to become their friends, and fear that you'll let the guilt push you into socializing with them anyway. This is where the loving attitude toward yourself comes into play: remember that you, as much as anyone else, deserve the freedom to spend your precious social time with people you enjoy.

When you're confident of your right and ability to say "no" to their social invitations, you should find it easier to say "yes"--that is, to acknowledge with appreciation and to reciprocate--their neighborliness. Look for opportunities to say hello, to ask them how their day or week is going, and to express thanks for some recent help they gave you. And after thanking them, by all means add something like, "We'd love to help you out when the situation arises, so please don't hesitate to ask."

When they offer an invitation, though, don't waver. Keep your reply gentle and generic...like "That's kind of you, but we can't do that," or "Thank you, but we have another commitment" (even if it's only a commitment to stay home and protect your ears). Resist the temptation to say, "Perhaps another time," even if they raise the issue. Your response to "Well, when would be better for you?" could be something like, "It's hard to say...we're pretty busy," followed by a change in topic or a neighborly ending like, "Good to see you today," or "Glad to hear things are going well this week."

After a very few such exchanges, they should "get" both parts of your message: that you appreciate their neighborliness and want to reciprocate, but that you don't want to socialize. Most probably, that will be the end of it. If, however, they happen to be gluttons for punishment and ask directly WHY you don't want to be their friends ("since you seem to be such a nice person/couple!"), give them an answer that's honest but diplomatic...along the lines of, "Our social time is pretty well filled by our existing friends, and we tend to gravitate toward people who share our interests more than you do. But you're wonderful people, and it's great having you as neighbors."

Hope this is helpful--good luck!

Dear Ethy Kett,

What is the best way to deal with parents at children's sporting events who are shouting at the referees and/or players, taking over the role of the coaches, or being generally overbearing and obnoxious? It seems unethical to let them rant and verbally abuse anyone, but what do you suggest that will help elicit the best from such troublesome folks?

Had an Earful

Dear Earful,

Notwithstanding her faith in human worth, Ethy regrets to say there's probably nothing you can do on the spot to elicit the best from a sports abuser. Under his (or her, but let's assume it's a man) angry or arrogant ranting is a person gripped by fear and insecurity; typically, he will interpret the most good-hearted contact as criticism, adding fuel to his fight-or-flight fire.

If you happen to be a friend of his, you might suggest he go for a walk with you and ask him about his passionate feelings. Otherwise, the best that you can do in the moment is probably to try to minimize the ranting's damage by showing support for higher values. For example, you might respond with prosocial "heckling" of your own (Respect for referees! or Be kind to kids!). Or if you're sitting in the ranting's vicinity, you could move away, hoping that others will follow your lead and leave him visibly isolated. (Of course, the extreme cases present a different problem: if the ranting is threatening violence, he is legally committing "assault" and you may have to call the police.)

After the fact, you could focus on strengthening a culture of maturity and respect in your child's sports program. You could ask the league organizers for a meeting of players, coaches, and parents to discuss the rules of sportsmanship and how they can best be enforced. Appropriate measures might include establishing penalties for the referees to impose against the team of an abusive heckler, empowering coaches to warn such a person that his child will be temporarily suspended if the behavior continues, developing a flyer to be handed out to fans at the next game, or creating a pregame ritual—handshakes at midfield between each player and one of his or her opponents, or a PA announcement—to show respect to players, coaches, and/or referees.

Of course, we can't always be present when people do hurtful things to our children. The good news is that verbal abuse cannot damage a person who refuses to internalize it—so we can inoculate our children against it by helping them develop a strong sense of intrinsic worth. That's another reason why modeling higher values in the face of sports heckling is important: whenever you act to contradict abuse, you teach your child that such behavior is wrong and undeserved, no matter the imperfection or disagreement that occasioned it. This will help him or her to respond to abuse as someone else's jerky mistake and to take a positive stand on behalf of whoever is the target. Ethy wishes you well in trying to encourage good sportsmanship among all parties connected to your child's league.

Truthfully express your perspective with kindness and fairness

Take a stand about matters you care about, expressing yourself clearly and in a way that respects the views and feelings of others. Speak your own truth—don't quote unnamed sources or pass negativity on. Disagree without being disagreeable.

Dear Ethy,

I was in a meeting at WES. A new member, whom I'll call "Sally," was presenting something to the group. To my surprise and shock, "Jodie," who is part of the WES leadership, spoke to Sally in a way that implied she was incompetent and stupid and maybe even dishonest. I was outraged!! What happened to "elicit the best"? Shouldn't a person in LEADERSHIP in an ETHICAL SOCIETY do better?!!!

Signed, Outraged One

Dear Outraged,

First of all, it's great to shout out all that outrage—alone in the privacy of a soundproof room! We are all leaders at WES, and in this case Jodie may need some good and courageous leadership from you! Each

of us is blindest to our own mistakes and need other people's eyes and hearts if we are ever to see them. You need to start by assuming that Jodie wants to do the right thing and does not wish to harm others. It is your leadership responsibility to speak to Jodie and to do it in a kind way. What good could you do by speaking to her the way she spoke to Sally?

You could begin by asking for a time to tell her about "something that happened at the meeting." When the time comes, tell her what happened, just the facts. For example, "You said, ____." "Your tone of voice seemed ____ to me." Tell her the pain that you felt and what you saw and thought about Sally's reactions. Or say, "If I were Sally I would have felt...."

What did Jodie really need from Sally? Did she just need more information? Suggest other words she might have used that would not be hurtful. All you need from Jodie is that she hear your thoughts and feelings about this. You do not need for her to agree or to validate your point of view. Trust that if we all speak up when this kind of thing happens, we will be helping each other to do better.

You could also speak to Sally, saying you felt pain at that moment and asking her what she felt. Just knowing somebody noticed and cares and thought it was a "mistake" could help. If Sally was hurt by Jodie's treatment of her, encourage Sally to speak to Jodie about her feelings. You can bring out the best in both of them just by humbly sharing your perception of the truth!

Dear Ethy Kett,

I think WES is a wonderful organization, and I enjoy the vitality of this community. But sometimes I feel like a Martian in certain ways. Hugging and physically affectionate greetings seem to be part of the WES culture. Occasionally, when I walk into a WES event, somebody whom I barely know will hug me or give me a kiss on the cheek. This makes me feel uncomfortable, as I am a reserved person by nature and prefer to touch only people that I know well. Should I express my discomfort, or just go along with such customs despite my feelings?

Dear Ethical Reader,

Although you may feel like a Martian, this is really a universal issue--everybody must draw the line on touching somewhere. For many people, a hug is a warm and wonderful greeting, but for others it is a violation of their intimate space. Maybe you fall somewhere in between. In any case, you are certainly not alone in your feelings of discomfort, even at WES.

People have many different styles of expression. Some people automatically hug or kiss when they meet a friend or even an acquaintance, while others reserve their physical affection for only their dearest friends and family--and even then, maybe only on special occasions. (Personally, I've been flummoxed many times by the sort of double or triple cheek kisses that seem to require a level of physical coordination I never acquired.) There's no right or wrong on this. These are just differences due to growing up with different family and cultural traditions, experiences, and personalities.

Whether you should express your discomfort or go along with a physical greeting depends on how YOU feel about it. To fend off an unwanted hug or kiss, nonverbal communication is usually effective. Most huggers pick up nonverbal clues from the reactions of others. The challenge is to stop the hug while conveying a warm greeting. One classic and compelling approach is to extend your right arm out for a handshake before the other person gets within hugging range. Alternately, you can catch an approaching hand for a squeeze while turning to face the same direction as the hugger. Perhaps you could get a close friend to rehearse it with you, so that you are sure the chosen moves are both effective and positive.

However, if you inwardly enjoy these signs of affection, and want to try getting used to them but

don't feel able to reciprocate fully, you could try a small return gesture. A pat on the shoulder while you're being hugged or kissed can be enough to make the other person feel his or her gesture is accepted and may make you feel more comfortable, too.

Huggers and kissers also need to be aware that their mode of greeting is not comfortable for everyone. They should be alert to such signals and willing to modify their behavior. As a hugger, if you are ever in doubt about someone's receptivity, you can simply ask if that person would mind a hug (or a kiss) as a greeting. What more friendly way can there be to greet someone than to say: "I'm so happy to see you! May I give you a hug?"

Dear Ethy Kett,

I would like some advice about the best way to deal with a friend of mine who is fun to be around and very witty, but often achieves his laughs by making fun of others or ethnic groups. And when he's speaking about other people we both know, he often writes them off with a one-word put-down that makes me feel uncomfortable. How can I let him know that this offends me without losing his friendship? I think he generally means well and that this behavior has turned into such a habit that he is probably unaware of it.

Thanks, Fearful

Dear Fearful,

The problem of which you speak is a common one, and is encouraged by the popular media. Though he's unaware of it, your friend's put-down humor is distancing you, harming his relationships with others, and contributing to a negative, distrustful atmosphere that affects people he doesn't even know. Ethy appreciates and applauds your desire to resist such damaging behavior. It might even help him break his habit. And if not, at least you'll help your own self-esteem by knowing that you didn't let your fear of your friend's response control your behavior.

Giving feedback to the offender can be tricky business if it is not done with sensitivity and care. If you are having a private conversation, it may work to say something like: "I feel discouraged when I hear others being put down. I make mistakes too, and I hope that others realize that I mean well when I do." Or maybe: "I really appreciate your gift of humor. But jokes like that one leave me pained, because I know how much harm can be done to people through those kinds of put-downs." You need only state your feelings and thoughts, not engage in an argument or a discussion. That leaves it to your friend to think about what you've said and decide whether he wants to change his behavior.

Providing sensitive but clear feedback when such remarks are made in front of a group is probably harder (or at least scarier) but even more important. In such a situation it is particularly important to avoid making your friend "lose face" with the rest of the group but also important that you not condone the behavior. The goal is to give feedback in a neutral way. You might say: "Has that been your experience? I have a good friend who is (name that ethnic group). He/she is not like that at all and often feels hurt by that stereotype, so it's hard for me to find that comment funny." The goal of clear but non-confrontational response remains the same when the subject of the put-down is a person rather than a group. Something like: "Well, she's great at (name something she's good at)!" said with a smile that is clearly supportive of the speaker as well as the person referred to should get your point across without antagonizing the speaker. Or perhaps, "Hey, I sometimes do that (stupid thing)," or "That's a pretty strong reaction," with a look of exaggerated surprise.

Later, if the behavior is recurrent, it may be effective to merely smile with raised eyebrows and an expression of surprise to bring the speaker's attention to his behavior without stating it explicitly. This may

serve to reinforce your good will as well as your efforts to achieve a more positive linguistic climate. If that doesn't work, you might also try to bring up the subject in a private conversation when he is not joking.

Of course, you will have to prepare for the possibility that even the best response will not be well received. You may be countered with something like: "Boy are you sensitive. Can't a person have any fun around you?" To this, you might be prepared to respond, "Yes, a person can do whatever he wants." Even with the best of intentions and technique, you may distance your friend anyway. But you need to take the action, not just for altruistic reasons (to help your friend out of an error), but also because your silence makes you a participant in the harm.

Dear Ethy:

Thank you for your thoughtful guidance during this past year. I'd like to share a few thoughts about the February 2002 column, which dealt with a friend who has a habit of making jokes at the expense of other people or groups.

I agree wholeheartedly with much of what you said, particularly your suggestion that the letter-writer try to talk the friend in private. So often people make these put-down jokes as throw-away statements to fill the space or to get attention and (as you said) do not realize the impact. Such comments may be made from ignorance or may stem from an incident with someone in the group being referenced. Either way, it may be helpful to open a private conversation later with the friend by saying something like: "I have been thinking about what you said yesterday and wondered what your experience has been with (the person or group)." This would indicate an interest in the friend and show that you were listening.

I didn't agree so much with a few other ideas and suggestions in the column. Your reference to "efforts to achieve a more positive linguistic climate" may be at the heart of the differences. To me, this concept asks for an appearance of change that is really only on the surface. In contrast, having a private conversation with the person offers an opportunity for deeper understanding and, I think, real change.

Also, the "raised eyebrow" or "smile with raised eyebrow" approaches seem to me to create an ongoing climate of judging, of one person feeling superior to the other. It is true that it may encourage the person to resist the behavior in your presence, but he may continue it elsewhere. Without the image of himself as essentially (or potentially) good, loving, and lovable, and without greater understanding of the source of the comment, the anger or hurt from whatever precipitated the comment or the ignorance will remain. I recognize that it is often essential to make a quick and kind statement in the moment, but I believe it is even more important to be interested and concerned enough to make a closer connection with the offender/friend. In this case, the person in question is a valued friend, and the situation is recurrent. So I would think that the best way to react would be to use the incident as an opportunity to be a friend to a friend.

Thank you for listening.

A WES member

Dear WES member,

How good it is to have the opportunity to see things from a different perspective and engage in thoughtful dialogue! Ethy has to admit that when she wrote the February column, she was thinking about a situation in which the speaker was well aware of the inaccuracy of his comments but willing to make them to get attention and perhaps to enhance his own image. So she addressed the case in which he was insensitive but not ignorant. You raise the point that, even so, he may be under the influence of feelings he is perhaps not directly aware of.

You are so right that taking the time and interest to sensitively explore the meaning of his words with the approach you suggest may well help him to be motivated to change and to better understand the message he is getting across, which is likely not the one he intended. Ethy would like to emphasize, though, that we

must dare to find a loving and effective public response as well. When we are challenged to think of more respectful ways to express ourselves because of the possibility that others will be hurt, be they friends or the people being spoken of, we begin to actually think in more empathic terms as well.

Keep in touch. Ethy would like to hear more responses to her columns from WES members as we all work to elicit the best in each other.

Dear Ethy Kett,

Are you really doing the WES community any favors with your column? I think the last thing we need is more people acting as “ethics police,” but that seems to be what you’re promoting.

Just last Sunday, during the community hour after platform, I heard a WES member—let’s call him “Curt”—chastising a couple of children from the Sunday School for running around too much in the hall. Curt scolded them for not having more consideration for others and more respect for the atmosphere of the meeting hall. Ethy, these kids weren’t doing anything terrible; they were just being healthy kids, full of that wonderful innocent energy. Remembering how my own children used to run around when they were that age, at WES and else-where, I was angry that this busybody was butting into other parents’ business. But I was even angrier to hear him do it in the name of ethics! If this is etiquette in action, please count me out.

Dear Ethical Reader,

As tempted as Ethy is to accept your expansive view of her influence on the WES community, she must plead “not guilty” to the charge of commissioning any sort of Ethics Police. And from your description, that Sunday incident reflected a shortage of etiquette, not an excess of it.

Not having seen their behavior herself, Ethy can’t say whether the children were or were not acting in accord with the principles of etiquette and of ethics more broadly. She can’t decide simply on the basis that Curt believed himself to be operating from concern for ethics, or that he may have expressed himself in a rude or antagonistic way: “ethical” judgments aren’t necessarily right, and rude people aren’t always wrong. But from behavior she has observed on other Sundays, Ethy can imagine that Curt may have had a point.

Even if the behavior you saw raised no issues of etiquette—the subset of ethics that focuses on how we can elicit the best from each other in our personal relationships—it may have been problematic on broader ethical grounds, such as those involving the decorum and respect appropriate to the WES meeting hall. (Ethy has no special expertise in issues of the latter sort, though she does have her own opinions, of course.)

But the children’s behavior is beside the point here, since Curt didn’t write to Ethy—you did. One guiding principle of etiquette that your situation brings to mind is the one about resolving incidents: even though you weren’t the target of Curt’s remarks, since you heard them and had a strong reaction to them, they constituted an incident for you as well. Another relevant principle is to speak our truth with kindness and fairness—and that poses a challenge in this case, since it’s hard to speak with kindness when one is angry with someone.

Since you apparently did not confront Curt in the heat of the moment, you have the chance to reflect on your reactions before talking with him. When she’s in similar situations, Ethy often finds it productive to use the “awareness wheel” technique, in which one tries to identify the sensory data (what one saw, heard, etc.), feelings, interpretations, actions, and wants associated with a particular incident. Using the awareness wheel might help you unpack the anger you felt toward Curt; for instance, one possibility suggested by your letter is that you took his criticism of the children personally, as an attack on the way you raised your own children, and were feeling defensive.

Whatever approach you use, hopefully the result will be to clarify what, if anything, you want from Curt and to reconnect you to your faith in his intrinsic worth and your desire to elicit his best. If you decide you do want to talk with him about the incident, Ethy recommends that you ask him first to help you

understand what bothered him about the children's behavior. You might get some important new information—for example, maybe he had already spoken more gently to the children and was speaking out of frustration by the time you saw him. And once Curt sees that you have some understanding of his point of view, he'll probably be more receptive to your ideas for change.

Of course, there are times when we feel compelled, for whatever good and bad reasons, to respond to an incident at that moment, before we've had a chance to gain perspective on our initial reactions. That can be tricky, if our fear or anger get the better of us; but if done well, the resulting dialogue can be a good source of insight and quickly strengthen the relationship. Delivering a critical message well involves speaking with appropriate humility for one's own failings, emphasizing "I" statements, and acknowledging (at least implicitly) the worth of the other person and some of the common ground one shares with him or her.

And when criticism comes our way, it behooves us to try to overcome our defensiveness and understand the critic's perspective, because even criticism that is not delivered gently and humbly may have some truth to it. It's probably even harder to do so when we're criticized on ethical grounds...but more important as well.

Dear Ethy Kett,

I serve on a board of trustees at my condo association. I have become aware that a committee chair who is not on the board has—at least once, and maybe more often—presented a report that gives only the facts that support his personal preference. He does this instead of presenting all the facts and making a recommendation so that the board can decide on the basis of complete information. What do you suggest I do?

Sincerely,
In the dark

Dear Dark,

You are right that, generally, it is the committee's responsibility to present a complete picture of facts, options for addressing the situation, the pro's and con's of each option, and reasoned recommendations in order of preference. Then the board can make an informed decision. While this may seem obvious to you and Ethy, it may not be clear to all who serve on committees. Ethy suggests that boards write and regularly distribute such guidelines to committees.

In other words, it could be the committee chair that is in the dark. Assume good intentions and ask to speak to him. Lay the facts out as objectively as possible. You might say, "In your report on such-and-such, you said Later, I learned about the following other factors that you didn't mention. . . ." Then you could delicately raise the issue by saying something like, "I wonder whether you're aware that the board prefers to hear all the facts and arguments relevant to the available options, along with the committee's recommendation."

Perhaps, at this point, the chair will indicate awareness of the board's preference but will have a reasonable explanation as to why those factors didn't apply in this case and didn't need to be discussed. However, if not, you could apologize that the board may not have made those expectations clear and say that you are recommending better communication from the board to committees. You might then ask the chair to amend the report.

If the chair denies any error, you can ask the board to inform the committee members, giving them the opportunity to require the chair to do the right thing—or to select a new chair.

Transform complaints into wants, and problems into opportunities

Practice understanding rather than blaming. Find the want behind your complaint; ask for what you want. Ask others to identify their wants. Search for ways to act on your concerns. Become part of the solution.

Dear Ethy Kett:

I have a friend--I'll call her Mona--who is driving me crazy with complaints about a group to which we both belong: how it is suffering from a crisis, a leadership conflict, yada yada yada. From my limited knowledge, I doubt that the situation is being portrayed in full, but I don't know for sure. The discussion typically leads down a familiar path of criticism about how wrong certain actions are and how her expectations of the group are not being met.

I enjoy griping as much as the next person, and I realize that this kind of conversation may be a way for Mona to connect with me and share common concerns. But I also have a vague feeling that the effect on the group as a whole--and on both of us, the listener and the speaker--is negative. Can you suggest how I could respond to such remarks?

Dear Ethical Reader:

You are right that this kind of conversation is partly a form of bonding, because most of us like to share our pain and opinions with a sympathetic soul. It makes us feel better to have someone hear us out and nod in agreement.

But your feelings of unease are right in telling you that this kind of talk may not be healthy. Ongoing negative talk is injurious both to your friend's spirit and to the fabric of the group to which you belong. It reinforces the vein of negativity in Mona, obscures the benefits of the group in her mind, and discourages any impulses she might have to take action to improve it. In addition, there is the possibility that the information she is passing on is inaccurate and that she is contributing to the spread of gossip that may unnecessarily alarm or disturb others in subtle ways. Such gossip can also damage other individuals who are involved in the situation, creating impressions in a listener that may affect future interactions with those people.

On the other hand, you didn't bring the topic up. You're only listening to your friend, who has a right to her concerns. In fact, there may well be an issue here that needs to be resolved by the group you belong to. What are you to do?

The next time Mona starts complaining, there are several tacks you could take to help her think about the situation in a healthier way, depending on the nature of the complaint. If it stems from an unpleasant personal incident Mona had with someone in the group, you might suggest that she discuss it with the person

involved, at some time when she is in a calm frame of mind. You can gently remind her that it is a good idea to assume that the other person has good intentions, even if she doesn't understand what they are. If something about the group itself seems to be troubling her or not meeting her needs, you could ask what she would like to do about the situation. It can be a positive step for her to consider actions that she or the group as a whole might take to improve the situation (turning complaints into wants). Finally, if her negativity seems unfocused, or simply the result of a pessimistic habit, you could ask what she likes about the group, or what drew her to it, to turn her thoughts in a more positive direction.

If those ideas don't seem to work and she persists over time in badmouthing the group, you may want to begin dissociating yourself from her negativity. You might say something like, "I'm sorry you're so frustrated/dissatisfied/unhappy with the group. But I notice that when I listen to complaining, it gets me down and spoils my enthusiasm. I don't want to dwell there. I would rather talk with you about the good things we find in our group and what we want more of and how we might contribute to that." You will need to be patient, because this is a habit and it WILL come up again. When the complaining starts again, you could say, "Unless we can talk about something positive we can do about this, I'd like to talk about something else," and redirect the conversation.

Dear Ethy Kett,

I'm not really sure this is an etiquette issue...but I've been noticing that people sometimes don't give enough thought to whether their habitual communication style provides interest to others. Imagine, for example, a spouse or housemate who bursts in the door each evening with a big sigh, saying, "I'm so tired," not appreciating how burdensome it becomes to listen to that day after day. Or a friend who works in a glamorous job and enjoys varied leisure activities but doesn't mine that for conversational topics, and instead always focuses on examining her inner life or asking for emotional support. That's interesting to a point...but I confess that I'd enjoy a broader range of subjects! Any suggestions?

Dear Ethical Reader,

Ethy pleads guilty to a charge of intellectual imperialism: she has great difficulty thinking of a single aspect of human relationships where etiquette is not relevant! (Her economist friends make the same claim, but have thus far failed to convince her.) And the issue you raise is certainly no exception.

The etiquette guidelines that seem most applicable here are the ones about transforming complaints into wants, resolving incidents, and eliciting the best. You're already pretty clear about what you want--more varied topics of conversation. The next step is to ask for it in a positive, encouraging way. How exactly you might do that depends on the situation. In the case of that hypothetical friend, you might say something like, "You know, Zelda, I'm really fascinated by that wonderful job you have. What's going on there lately? I'd love to hear what you've been up to." If Zelda's been reluctant to discuss her job or leisure activities because she was afraid you'd think she was bragging, your request might be just the permission she needed.

Other conversational habits might have deeper causes, and require more effort to break. The case of a spouse or housemate who announces daily how tired he or she is might require a more direct approach. First, you would get permission to discuss an issue of concern to you. Then you could say something like (but maybe less condensed than), "Norbert, I notice that you've regularly been complaining of being tired when you come home at the end of the day. It is painful to hear you say that almost every day. Would it be helpful to talk together and brainstorm some ideas about how you could get through the day with more energy? My hope is that you can feel better again and we can find some conversation topics to help bring us in touch with each other at the end of the day."

Depending on how such a conversation evolved, you might want to ask Norbert if there's something he'd like from you. He might decide, for example, that he'd love a few minutes' shoulder-rub to help him make the transition from work to home. Or he might reveal that he's tired not only because of what's going on at work but also because of certain pressures he feels at home. In any case, the key is to express yourself so that Norbert understands that you are asking out of concern for him and your relationship--i.e., that you are trying to elicit his best. Hopefully, that will make him feel safe enough to be honest about the problem, embarrassing or painful though it may be for him.

Of course, different people do prefer different kinds of conversation. Sometimes, you just may not have enough conversational overlap with a particular person. In such a case, you'll probably have to find some other basis for the relationship that de-emphasizes conversation (e.g., going to movies together), or to let the relationship go--while still honoring the person's unique gifts and perspectives. But again, before giving up or exploding from frustration, do try asking for what you want. It doesn't always work, but it sure beats not asking!

E*nhance your community*

Participate in community life as you are able, contributing your unique self to any group you are with. Improve and practice community-building skills, including communication, conflict resolution, and team-building. Realize your potential for leadership and greatness!

Dear Ethy Kett,

I wish I could enjoy the Community Hour after Sunday platforms more, but when I'm talking with one person, I'm frequently distracted by thoughts of four other people I need to have a quick word with about some WES business. Or I see three other people, besides the one in front of me, that I haven't seen in ages and want to catch up with just as much. Help!

Dear Ethical Reader,

Okay, take a deep breath. Hold it. Exhale slowly. Repeat. Now, doesn't that feel better?

Yes, being part of a community as vibrant and stimulating as WES can sometimes feel like trying to drink from a fire hose. And it's particularly hard for those of us who have a tough time setting priorities.

I suggest breaking this problem into two questions: what are you really trying to accomplish, and how can you go about doing so? Broadly, I hear you saying that you want to maintain close relationships with a number of people at WES, and that you want to keep the commitments you make in various WES activities--both admirable goals, of course! Within those broad goals, you might find it helpful to prepare for the Sunday platform by making a mental or physical list of your top priorities.

In some cases, that list will obviously have too much on it for one Community Hour, which will be your cue to start thinking of other ways to accomplish your goals. Perhaps some of those business items can be handled through quick phone calls or emails during the week. Perhaps you can arrange to meet one of those friends you haven't seen for a while for lunch or coffee.

Getting clear about your goals, and keeping them to a realistic number, should reduce your stress level and enable you to be more truly "present" and attentive with people during Community Hour. If you've made a quality connection, even a brief one, a graceful exit (something like, "It's great to see you again! I hope you have a great week," or "I'm glad to have caught up a little bit. Will you excuse me?") will generally leave people with a good feeling about the interaction.

One caveat about priority lists: although they can help some of us focus, we should always strive to remain open to new opportunities that present themselves. Life in community is filled with serendipity, and our lists exist to serve us, not the other way around!

Dear Ethical Reader,

Over the past year or two, Ethy has received questions regarding how to apply Ethiquette to difficult situations in relationships so as to bring out the best in all involved. For a little change of pace this month, Ethy will present some examples of how readers used Ethiquette successfully in their daily lives.

One reader (let's call her "Florence") wrote that she was concerned because one of her closest friends was not returning her phone calls. When Florence finally reached the friend (let's call her "Maris"), Florence interrupted the flow of nervous chatter to say she was feeling hurt and to ask what was going on. Maris said, "You and my (new) boyfriend don't seem to like each other, and neither of you is talking about it." Florence was able to tell of her troubling experience of the boyfriend in another context and of her concern for Maris. This had been on her mind, and she had worried about whether she should tell Maris about her reservations. This conflict in Florence may have caused her to be reserved--her own equivalent of the non-returned calls. In the end, she was unburdened, Maris had a "heads up," and Florence could feel that she had said what she needed to say and could therefore let go of the issue. The feeling between the two was spontaneous and warm by the end of the conversation.

Another reader wrote that he had said to his ever-critical older brother, "I don't want your criticism. I want your acceptance and appreciation." The brother was startled but was noticeably easier to be around after that. The reader was especially proud that he had made his statement immediately, before he was very angry, that he had said it in a way that was not hurtful at all, and that he had asked for what he wanted. He is prepared to do it again and again if necessary.

Still another reader wrote that a manager at his office is very quick and vocal in acknowledging people for their contributions. The manager's appreciation for those around him seems to instill confidence and good spirits in people and thus to help elicit their best.

A fourth reader, who attended a WES workshop on how to disagree without being disagreeable, wrote about two participants who practiced listening attentively and respectfully to each other when their positions on the issue being discussed were diametrically opposed. They also practiced asking questions to further explore perspectives that they did not yet understand, and did not criticize each other. There is no doubt that all participants took a stand on a matter they cared deeply about and that, through this process, they increased the understanding of everyone present.

Many of the issues Ethy considered during this past year pertained to communication and conflict resolution skills. By finding ways to express the difficult things that otherwise would fester and ultimately deaden relationships, we keep our community vital and strong. We can help elicit the best from each other in other ways, too, including those illustrated above and also by honoring agreements, keeping confidential information private, and recognizing the uniqueness and worth of each human being." Keep the questions coming. And keep telling Ethy about successes too.