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Bullying ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I'm sharing an apartment with three other people. Our ages vary from 17 to 30+. I consider myself a very neat person and respectful to others. We all share the cleaning duties of our apartment, which I have gladly done, but the problem is that I am becoming increasingly verbally harassed from the roomies to clean and pick up messes that I didn't make. I can take constructive criticism but now it's turning towards bullying. What options do I have? We mostly get along, but I'm tired of being their whipping stick.

— Frustrated

Answer

Dear Frustrated,

Your frustration is understandable, and looking into how to handle this situation is a great first step. Bullying can occur at school, in the workplace, online, or even in your home, and it can share similar dynamics as sexual harassment and relationship violence. The American Psychological Association ^[2] (APA) defines bullying as a form of aggressive behavior in which someone intentionally and repeatedly causes another person injury or discomfort. All forms of bullying (physical, verbal, emotional, and cyberbullying) have an underlying motivation on the part of the bully to coerce and control another. And those who are bullied could experience depression, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, academic impacts, and changes in sleep as a result. But, there are strategies you can use to handle this situation — read on!

Bullies can come in all shapes, sizes, and ages, ranging from kids at school, to roommates in college, to a supervisor at work. Additionally, bullying may take many different forms, including name-calling, threats, property destruction, emotional abuse, and acts of physical and sexual violence. You indicated that your situation seems like it's getting worse. This often occurs because bullies "test" boundaries by starting with more low-level or subtle intimidation and then escalating to more severe forms if they feel that they can do so without the fear of repercussions. It may be helpful to keep in mind that you are **NOT** the cause of the problem and don't have to solve the problem alone. If you feel comfortable, there are some possible strategies that you can try out:

- **Talk about it.** Your personal health is a priority. Targets of bullying may feel ashamed, feel that they're at fault for not "standing up" to the bully, feel weak, feel like talking does no good, or believe others don't care because of the inaction of bystanders. However, talking it out with loyal peers, trusted figures (e.g., family, clergy, teachers), or a mental health professional may help you work through the stress and trauma of being bullied as well as determine next steps.
- **Schedule a meeting.** If the situation seems fixable and you feel comfortable doing so, it may be worth giving a formal sit down meeting a try. This would be a venue to air your concerns about the situation and how you're being treated. Consider starting with "I feel _____ when you say/do _____" and give some examples of the bullying you've experienced. You could voice your desire to work things out and to have a clean, peaceful, and cooperative environment. It may also be helpful to remain calm, since many bullies enjoy getting a rise out of their victim.
- **Request mediation.** If meeting seems like a good option but you're worried about being outnumbered or treated unfairly, see if you could get a neutral third party to mediate or facilitate the conversation. If you're living in university housing, consider asking a resident advisor (RA), hall director, or a professional from the Ombuds Office to assist. Alternatively, a mental health professional may also be able to assist.
- **Set boundaries.** If you're able to schedule a meeting, consider more clearly defining your relationship expectations. Emphasize boundaries and relationship expectations in a firm, neutral way. Boundaries could include refusing to clean others' messes, or informing them that they aren't fulfilling their responsibilities. Firmly and assertively (rather than aggressively) setting boundaries may often be effective to resolve and prevent bullying.
- **Seek outside help.** If meeting feels too unsafe or if the bully refuses it, the next step may be to report their behavior to the proper office. Document each bullying incident that occurs — the time, place, and details of the incident (like what happened, and who said or did what). It may be useful to have some possible solutions in mind, such as a request for new roommates or a schedule change to minimize contact with the bully. Reporting to higher authorities, such as a Hall Director, the Ombudsperson, a medical or mental health professional, or the police, is recommended if the bully refuses to stop despite being repeatedly asking them to stop.
- **Safety plan.** If you feel unsafe, develop a plan of what you might do if you start to feel like you're in danger. Try to identify your supporters (close friends, family, loyal colleagues) that could accompany you if/when you are around the bully.
- **Leave.** If the bullying situation becomes an unhealthy relationship [3], consider leaving. Attempting to work things out with an abusive relationship may not be productive, healthy,

or safe.

Many victims of bullying think that they did (or are doing) something wrong, but this is not your fault. By trying some of these strategies, you are taking control of the situation. You might also consider speaking with a mental health professional to help work through the fears, stress, anger, and trauma that you may be experiencing and to help you continue to explore your options. Some other resources include:

- [Stopbullying.gov](#) [4], tailored for kids, teens, young adults, educators, parents, and communities from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
- [PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center](#) [5], information for kids, teens, and families

Frustrated, your next steps are up to you. Consider using the above-mentioned strategies and resources and don't be afraid to ask for help. Remember, you're not alone and there is help available for you.

Alice!

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