Dear Alice,

Am I silly for letting people with "potty mouth" bother me? This behavior sours my space. What is a proper response to deter it, or is "no response" the best? What are the reasons for people using this kind of behavior?

Answer

Dear Reader,

People cuss for all kinds of reasons. They may want to express emotions such as anger, frustration, and excitement; to emphasize a point; to feel and appear powerful; to get noticed; to be funny? or perhaps just because they've grown up hearing and speaking slang, and/or because everyone else is doing it, and this may be a way of bonding. Since words and expressions traditionally considered curses are now so integrated into the everyday speech of different groups of people and media, those "mouthing off" may not think of them as offensive. For some folks, "dirty words" have become as commonplace as the words that are music to your ears.

Related, but with a twist, some people have started using words that historically had negative connotations, in part to neutralize their power to hurt. If words used to insult others are turned on their heads and used ironically in a positive context, they may, over time, become less hurtful, and less used altogether. However, this is not to say that some people may still feel offended upon hearing these slurs. Therefore, it is always good for a person to consider his/her audience.

So, do these causes for cursing (a partial list, for sure) mean that you have to remain silent? No fu?sorry, no way! You'll have to determine the appropriateness of voicing your feelings about someone else's, or a group's, "toilet mouth(s)," but why not mention that you feel uncomfortable? You might joke by saying that you'd prefer to engage in, or listen to, conversations rated G and PG. Offering your reasons might also be beneficial. For example, you find cursing ugly, unnecessary, hurtful, or whatever. You could also decide to flush the potty once and for all, and stop conversing and hanging with those whose language makes you cringe. Or, short of dismissing them, you could ask them, "Why all the bad words?" Their responses, "naughty" or nice, might be insightful.

Alice!
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