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,

Whether it occurs at school, in the workplace, online, or even in your home, bullying shares the same dynamics as sexual harassment, spouse abuse, and racism: an intentional aggressive behavior often repeated over time. Despite few people talking about it, bullying and harassment in general is all too common. Bullies come in all shapes, sizes, and ages, ranging from the mean, pretty girl to the large kid at school or roommate to a supervisor. And bullying may take many forms, including name-calling, threats, property destruction, emotional abuse, and acts of physical and sexual violence. All forms of bullying (physical, verbal, and cyber) have an underlying motivation on the part of the bully to coerce and control another.

Does your situation with your bully seem like it's getting worse? It's often the case with bullies that they "test" boundaries, starting with more low-level or subtle intimidation and then escalating to more severe forms if they feel that they may successfully do so. Bullying's abuse and also the inaction of bystanders, especially figures expected to respond, may become debilitating, including the loss of productivity, living in fear, self-blaming, and developing social isolation. Targets of bullying are encouraged to affirm that they did not cause the problem and that they would not be asked to solve the problem alone.

What to do about it? Several possible strategies include:

- **Call it out.** Naming the situation - bullying, psychological violence, psychological harassment, or emotional abuse - may help combat words from bullies and bystanders that say it's not a problem. Calling out the true situation may help highlight the situation as a problem, illegal, and something that is not your fault. This may help dissolve self-
blame and anxieties.

- **Talk about it.** Your personal health is a priority. People don't usually wake up wanting to be berated at school or work. 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, but talking it out with loyal peers, trusted figures, or a counselor may help work through the stress and trauma of being bullied as well as determine next steps.

- **Set boundaries.** If the bullying just began or is moderate, consider more clearly defining your relationship expectations, whether they're chore responsibilities, a role as a peer at school, or a working relationship. From there, emphasize boundaries from the relationship expectations in a firm, neutral way. Notice what happens when you set a boundary, such as refusing to clean others' messes, or informing them that they aren't holding up their end of the bargain at work. How does the bully react? Does the bully tell you to do something that goes beyond your boundary anyway? Does the bully become aggressive towards you or back off? Firmly and assertively (rather than aggressively) setting boundaries may often be effective to resolve and prevent bullying.

- **Schedule a meeting.** If the situation seems fixable, it may be worth giving a formal sit down meeting a try. This would be a venue to air the concerns you have about the condition of the situation and how you're being treated. You could voice your honest desire to work things out and to have a clean, peaceful, and cooperative environment. At the same time, prioritize your safety and health - if confrontation doesn't seem like it would be constructive, then try other options.

- **Request mediation.** If the 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 meeting. A Resident Advisor (RA) or another staff person in your Residential Life office, colleague or supervisor at work, or an authority figure (teacher, parent, or counselor) may provide support.

- **Seek outside help.** If mediation 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 systems taken to minimize contact with the bully. Reporting to higher authorities, such as the dean of student life, Human Resources personnel, or the police, is recommended if the bully refuses to stop despite repeated warnings to the bully and the proper offices. Explain to them that you tried to get your concerns heard with outside help and that they were unresponsive. Keep records of all correspondence. There have been lawsuits filed and won by people whose schools and workplaces refused to take action to protect them from bullying and harassment. But hopefully it doesn't come to that point.

- **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 or loyal colleague) that may accompany you as you are around the bully. If physical threats or violence occurs, please contact security or call 911.

- **Leave.** If the bullying situation becomes an aggressive relationship, consider disconnecting from the relationship the same way as terminating an abusive dating relationship [3]. Attempting to work things out with an abusive relationship may not be productive, healthy, or safe. In a work setting, try voicing your concerns of the bully during a voluntary leave. Those who leave taking control of the situation tend to bounce back the quickest.
Try to continue seeking support from friends and from outside help. Targets of bullying may direct the anger they feel about the situation inward or towards others. Consider speaking with a counselor to help work through the fears, stress, anger, and trauma that you may have been experiencing and to help you continue to explore your options. If you're a student at Columbia, you can make an appointment at Counseling and Psychological Services by calling x4-2878.

Some other resources include:

- Safe Horizon, for emotional abuse, is based in New York City
- Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) Stop Bullying Now, tailored for kids, parents, and caregivers
- Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) anti-bullying resources
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- Workplace Bullying Institute

Targets of bullying often need permission and support to voice what has been happening and to talk about how they're feeling. Assistance, whether it's the target of the bullying receiving help or a bystander stepping in, may help people experiencing bullying feel that they belong and dissolve self-blame. Again, targets of bullying aren't to blame and they wouldn't be asked to solve the problem alone, so give the tips above a try.

Alice!

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