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Belittling remarks can wear away trust

Last week's column discussed the person who delivers a cutting or unkind remark and then ducks behind the excuse, "I was just kidding" or "Can't you take a joke?" While we all genuinely and innocently misfire in our remarks from time to time, the person who regularly hides sarcastic or hurtful comments behind an excuse is neither innocent nor genuine.

When this occurs frequently, two things are happening to make the exchange possible. First, the "kidder" chooses not to appreciate the reaction of the person he's kidding. For reasons that serve him, he ignores discomfort, hurt feelings, interrupted communication. Maybe he doesn't like the focus of attention to be on someone else, maybe he doesn't want to hear or talk about what's being said. Perhaps he's angry at the other person and this is his way of venting safely, or in extreme cases he may have reached a point where he feels contempt toward the other person and so-called kidding is an acceptable way to show it.

The second thing that makes this behavior possible is the fact that the recipient accepts it. Behavior like this hits us where we're vulnerable. Quick-witted folks who can immediately snap back with a biting response can defend themselves verbally (although they shouldn't have to). People who are strong enough to be honest or wise enough to understand what's really happening may be able to call the kidder on this dishonest behavior, placing responsibility for the hurtful words where they belong and addressing the anger that lies behind them.

Most of us, however, don't think that fast. Maybe we don't want to believe the person we trust and care for could be so thoughtless. We're taken aback, caught off-guard. We're not thinking of a sharp retort because we're hurt. At least, that's what happens at first.

Eventually, however, we protect ourselves. Maybe we stop communicating or we answer a hurtful remark with a hurtful remark. On some level we shut down and the trust we had erodes. If we're frequently put on the defensive by someone, we may get defensive ourselves. We may even begin to turn the tables and deliver a snide or unkind remark followed by the very same excuse we've heard so many times, "Just kidding."

While everything we say has value, there are times when our communication is especially personal or revealing. The worst scenario is when someone cuts us down or changes the subject as we're sharing something that really matters. Whether the offender is fully aware of his behavior or not, the result is the same as a glass of cold water in the face. The message is, "You don't matter; I don't want to hear this."

Within every relationship there's a balance of power. Healthy relationships between adults contain enough mutual respect and trust for a shift in the balance of power to be safe for everyone. Even if the communication drifts into unhealthy patterns, the relationship contains enough honesty and mutual respect for two emotionally mature individuals to get it back on track.

In an unbalanced relationship, unhealthy communication and the resulting shift in the balance of power are scary for the less powerful person. To avoid confrontation, she may go along with the story, offering a weak smile or swallowing her pride and hurt and pretending it didn't matter.

If you grew up in a family and culture that trained you to accept belittling or disrespectful behavior and which minimized and white-washed hurtful behavior as "teasing," then you've been primed to have the same thing happen in your adult life. Regardless of whether this is an old pattern or a new one, the first step to changing is to recognize what's really going on.

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