

# The one who repeats an insult is insulting you

By Deborah Tannen

I have a friend who broke off relations with her in-laws for several years: "I told them that if they talked about me in a certain derogatory way again, I would stop speaking to them. They did it, and I kept my word." I asked how she knew they'd talked about her. She said, "My husband's cousin Judy told me."

Her response made me wonder which family member had set out to hurt her. It's conceivable that her in-laws believed their critical remarks wouldn't cause her pain, since she wasn't present to hear them. Perhaps the person my friend should have aimed her anger at was cousin Judy. Had she done so, she would have been heeding the advice of an Arab proverb: *Ma shatamak ela man balaghak*. (Roughly, "the one who repeats an insult is insulting you.")

Saying something critical about someone is fundamentally different from saying the same thing to the person directly. In fact, it isn't the same thing at all. If Sally tells you that Mary thinks you need to lose weight, you have no way of knowing how this came up between Sally and Mary. Maybe, as you probably assume, Mary originated the judgment. But perhaps Sally offered the opinion first, and Mary simply agreed, in order to be nice to Sally. And Sally may have quoted Mary in order to express her own opinion while deflecting your anger toward Mary.

Hearing criticism secondhand is like being shot by a gun with a silencer. The wound is intensified by the shock of being struck by an attacker who is nowhere in sight. It also gives you a devastating glimpse of yourself reduced to a topic of conversation.

Repeating negative comments can be hurtful even when the reporter has the best

intentions. Before I met and married my husband, my mother took every opportunity to tell me how worried she was about my single status, and that if I wanted to find a man, I'd better stop spending so much time at conferences and take a vacation at Club Med. I'd ask her to please stop bringing it up, and she promised she would try. But then I'd be talking to my older sister, who'd tell me how concerned our mother was, though my sister assured her I would be fine: "I told Mom that you love your work, have loads of friends, and are much more likely to meet Mr. Right at a conference than on the beach in Tahiti." What my sister said was prophetic: I did eventually meet the man of my dreams at a conference. Still, it hurt to be reminded that I was the constant object of my mother's worry. In retrospect, I should have been as firm with my sister as I was with our mother.

When you get an inkling that someone is about to tell you something that was said about you, it's typical to feel your ears perk up even as your heart sinks. The wiser move—if you can manage it—is to stop the speaker in her verbal tracks: "I'd rather not hear what Herman said, since he's not here. Let's stick to what *you* think." If you can't head off an insult, you can at least ask, "Why are you telling me this?" or "How do you think your telling me this will make me feel?" In other words, when someone comes bearing secondhand criticism, you need to ask the gift horse to open its mouth for inspection. ■

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