

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My sister-in-law is a good person but she loves to talk about other people and spread bad rumors around. She does this every time we're together. Last week she talked about a co-worker of hers in very demeaning terms. She said some things about this co-worker's marriage that I know for a fact are not true. She didn't realize that I know her co-worker – she attends my church – and I like her a lot. Can you give me some suggestions about how to deal with this? -- Jan

Dear Jan,

Your sister-in-law seems to be addicted to spreading gossip and rumors. I'll bet that many of her conversations begin with: "Hey, you'll never guess what I heard!" Or, "don't tell anyone I told you, but..." Rumors and gossip tear around companies and neighborhoods like wild fires. And once they get started, they prove the old saying, "A rumor without a leg to stand on will find some other way to get around."

Rumors are like that old game of "telephone" – the one where you whisper a secret to one person, who whispers it to another, and so on. The fun in this game is that by the time the message gets to the end of the line, it barely resembles what was first said. So rumors are usually only a good source of misinformation.

And did you ever notice that rumors-- and their related cousin, gossip-- are almost always negative and sometimes downright nasty? I mean you hardly ever hear someone whisper conspiratorially, "Did you hear that Tom and Mary's marriage is just wonderful?" or "Don't repeat this, but Susan is a very responsible parent and she's doing a great job as a manager." Rumors and gossip never focus on positive things about other people.

In fact, rumors and gossip break trust, attack the spirits of others, and send out negative energy. Rumor-mongers are generally attempting to divide people into groups ("us" against "them") and persuade others to see things their way under the guise of "reporting" information. Quite often people who spread these kinds of rumors and negative commentary are insecure people who want you to be on "their side."

Nevertheless, it's not good to let this behavior continue without responding honestly. By listening without trying to stop your sister-in-law you become a kind of co-conspirator. From your letter, it is clear that this makes you (understandably) uncomfortable. Besides, think of all the other interesting conversations that you could be having. Think about world events, spiritual growth, books, movies, how the kids are doing in their studies, and the ways that your tulips are blooming. Almost any subject seems more interesting and enlightening than nasty gossip about other people.

The game of "telephone" stops when we choose not to pass on what we don't know to be true. Sometimes it requires putting a stop to this behavior. Let your sister-in-law know that you are not interested in dissing other people and that you don't appreciate it when she does this. You can be gentle and kind (remember that she is likely to be an insecure person) but let her know that you don't want to participate. Change the

conversation. Be honest with her and let her know that you would prefer to spend time talking about good things about other people.

If you look for the good in others and spread THAT word, you will be pleased to know: what goes around comes around.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) All of the "Your Personal Coach" columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.