

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My sister-in-law is the most arrogant person I've ever met. She constantly brags about her job, how much money she makes, and all the awards she's received from the company she works for. She condescending, and thinks she's smarter than everyone. No matter what anyone says, she has always done the same thing faster, sooner, or better. I can hardly stand to be around her, but I value my relationship with my brother. My whole family feels this way, so I know it's not just that she rubs me the wrong way.

-- Linda

Dear Linda,

I sometimes refer to this kind of pompous grandiosity as OPD – “Obnoxious Personality Disorder” – though, admittedly that is not a formally sanctioned diagnosis. What is so sad about people who compensate for low self-esteem with this persona of arrogant behavior, is that they cause others to dislike them, and that only adds to their feelings of low self-worth.

There is a world of difference between healthy self-confidence and hubris. In fact, truly self-confident people show humility, and don't feel the need to act superior, seek approval, or impress others. Because they experience self-love and self-acceptance, they can take pride in their successes without shouting them from the rooftops as your sister-in-law is doing. People with decent amounts of self-esteem see themselves as competent to cope with the challenges of life, and as being worthy of happiness.

Unfortunately, your sister-in-law is expressing her lack of self-confidence and her low self-esteem in a way that is making things worse for her. As she – consciously or unconsciously – senses that other people don't like her, her self-esteem will plummet. This, of course, will lead to more bragging as compensation for those difficult feelings. She is in a vicious cycle, and most likely doesn't have a clue about how her behavior affects you and others.

So, how do you deal with someone like your sister-in-law? Well, you could follow the advice of Ralph Waldo Emerson when dealing with this kind of arrogance. He suggested taking people to task and letting them make good on their brags. He wrote, “Humor him by all means, draw it all out, and hold him to it.” If you follow this line of reasoning, you could demand to see the awards she's received, a copy of her paycheck, and her score on the MENSA application (that's the society for geniuses!). But this seems a bit mean-spirited to me.

Do you know her well enough to talk with her about how you feel about her behavior? If so, you would be doing her a real favor and giving her the most valuable gift of honesty. That might help her to recognize what she's doing, and to make changes.

This may be a difficult conversation to begin, but you can rise to the challenge and express yourself authentically...and gently. The chances are that you will express your irritation and anger at some point anyway. But if you don't take action before you're ready to pop, there will be no “conversation,” most likely there will be a rant, with you yelling at her or avoiding her until she and your brother can't help but notice your

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absence in their lives. At that point, any expressions of your feelings will probably not be compassionate or gentle. Take a deep breath, and hope that she is receptive to this kind of honest feedback. This is not just an opportunity for insight on her part, but you'll grow as a person by having the interpersonal courage to deal with this problem directly.

Secondly, try to have compassion for her, even when she's bugging you with her litany of accomplishments. You can't change her, but you can change your own point of view. Understand why she is behaving as she is. Remember that her arrogance is a cover-up for a lack of self-love. She's suffering. Now, this does not mean you must be a doormat, or must put up with her endless bragging. It means trying to be patient with her, as you would with a wounded child, and send good, loving energy her way. It sounds like she needs that.

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.) www.fullpotentialliving.com