

# Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

While eating dinner in a local restaurant, my wife and I experienced several events in one hour that left us amazed, and more than a little concerned about ourselves. We did not have a reservation and asked for a table for two. We were told there would be a 15 minute wait. We were finally seated about 20 minutes later, but the whole time, we could see three available tables and no one had entered or left the restaurant. We felt as though we were in a penalty box for arriving without a reservation. After we were seated and the waitress was going over the specials with us, a man walked up to our table, interrupted the waitress in mid-sentence, and told her to be sure he received the check at his table. Finally, a group of three couples at a table near us were leaving. All but one woman walked through the open path around our table. However, one woman tried to squeeze between my wife's chair and a column, repeatedly bumping my wife's chair. Her husband noticed our shocked faces and pointed out to his wife that she was bumping into my wife. The woman apologized, but gave one more bump as she finally squeezed through. During and after all of these events, my wife and I were quiet and did not object. My issue (and I know I'm not alone in this) is finding myself in a rude experience, but being totally unprepared to handle the situation. I just want to find a way to be assertive without being rude in return. Any assistance you may provide would be most helpful.

-- Bryan

Dear Bryan –

As your letter points out, I'm afraid that rudeness has reached epidemic proportions. A Gallup Poll conducted in 2000 found that 78% of Americans strongly believed that civility is a nostalgic memory, and that people's manners are far worse today than twenty or thirty years ago. Check out [www.rudebusters.com](http://www.rudebusters.com) for more bad news.

Let's start with the first insult during your dinner from hell. I asked advice from a friend who owns a restaurant (not the one you and your wife went to), who suggested that the vacant tables may have been due to circumstances other than punishing you in a long-wait penalty box. It may have been that there were several large parties in the restaurant, and the hostess/host was allowing time for these diners to finish so that you and your wife would have responsive wait staff to take and serve your order. It may also have been that these tables were being held for someone who had a reservation, but never showed (rudeness, it seems, goes both ways in the restaurant game). Let's give the restaurant a pass on this one, since we don't have enough information.

The man who interrupted the waitress needs to find a good etiquette teacher, or at least, become a regular reader of the "Miss Manners" column. Was it absolutely impossible for him to wait a few minutes for your waitress to take your order? I can't think of many ways to give him a pass for his rudeness, unless, perhaps, he had also said: "I am terribly sorry to interrupt, but my wife just went into labor and I need my check!"

Short of this kind of circumstance, he should have politely called the waitress to his table with his request, after she had finished with you.

I can't find any reasonable explanation as to why that woman squeezed her way out of the building, instead of following the path most traveled. At least she had the good sense to apologize.

There is a wide range of appropriate assertive behaviors that you can practice, so that you will be prepared if (most likely, when) these types of situations occur again. You have the right to speak up, Bryan, and you don't have to enter into the netherworld of rudeness to do so. "Excuse me, but there seem to be some tables free at this time. Are they available for us?" This is a perfectly reasonable statement. It would have been "in order" (excuse the pun), for you to say, with a smile, and a calm demeanor, to the man who interrupted your waitress: "Excuse me; we're in the middle of ordering our meal. I'd appreciate it if you could wait for us to finish." The restaurant management might also consider training the staff to respond in a similar manner, as I'm sure this is not the first time this situation has arisen there.

The first step towards developing assertive behavior is to know – in the deepest part of your soul – that you have dignity. You also have the right and responsibility to express yourself, and stand up for your own interests with honesty and respect for others. It is essential to develop those skills, which include the ability to clearly and politely state your feelings in ways that are congruent with body language: tone of voice, eye contact, and so forth. Even if you choose to eat at home from now on, developing these skills will serve you well in all aspects of your life. Your sense of self-esteem and empowerment depend upon it. Bon appetit!

Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com) or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at [www.fullpotentialliving.com](http://www.fullpotentialliving.com).