

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: RESPECT

A united front against meanness

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Dear Susan,

My partner has returned to his profession after an HIV diagnosis, another long illness and, not surprisingly, some depression.

He likes his co-workers and they like him, with the exception of one unpleasant colleague, whom he describes as a know-it-all and control freak. He claims she dislikes and dismisses him because he's a privileged white gay man.

I've suggested that he ask the boss to rearrange the workspace, minimize contact with the control freak, ask other colleagues for advice, and just be thankful that they are pleasant. But he is becoming increasingly bothered by this person.

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There may be grounds for complaint, but I also think he needs to seek some emotional distance in order to thrive at work. Do you have any suggestions?

- Eddy in Montreal

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Dear Eddy,

Your partner is lucky to have you on his side, but in this situation luck and love may not be enough. Caring spouses can work miracles, including boosting the immune systems of their partners through the protective umbrella of sympathy, advocacy and support. But prejudice calls for a more concerted response.

By putting up with cruel, dismissive or aggressive comments, your partner unwittingly is broadcasting the idea that he sanctions them. His first task is to stand up for himself - not out of anger or frustration, although both are understandable - but as a way of affirming his purpose.

It takes grit to return to work after a grave illness. Why is he doing it? Most people work not only to put food on the table but to feel engaged in a project bigger than themselves. He has to communicate what's driving him while expressing his refusal of shoddy treatment. Then he can tender a mild suggestion of a truce to the unpleasant colleague.

One script might go something like this: "After suffering the symptoms and stigma of HIV, it wasn't easy to come back to the

office. But being productive and working alongside colleagues I respect and who respect me is important to me. That's one reason why it's painful when you treat me dismissively - even if it's not intentional. Let's find a way to be more collegial - and to communicate with levity."

Harvard University professor William Ury, an expert on negotiations, calls this type of rejoinder a "positive no." It identifies and defends a personal value while saying no to whatever might erode it. Then you open the door for a different kind of relationship, one that demands neither potshots nor loss of face.

Still, your partner can't do this alone. Quebec is the only province that has laws obliging employers to provide a workplace free of psychological harassment.

Before lodging a complaint, it's only fair that your partner warn his employer that the office atmosphere has a hostile edge - especially if he suspects biases based on gender orientation or health. It's not only a question of decency but of productivity. According to several studies, including those by University of British Columbia business professor Daniel Skarlicki, people are less productive when morale is low.

Your partner's colleagues should be included in his defence. As you suggest, he can ask those he trusts for advice but he can also enjoin them to stand up to the rude one when she snubs him or makes cutting remarks. A unified group can make standards of behaviour explicit and create a more humane reality.

A unified group can make standards of behaviour explicit and create an alternate, more-humane reality. The American novelist John Barth gave a nod to such backroom solidarity when he wrote: "More history's made by secret handshakes than by battles, bills and proclamations."

Your partner can shift the conflict from the personal to the political by closing ranks with his allies.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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