

Post-Polio Health International (PHI)

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Question: At a recent meeting, someone found it fun to mock me as she spoke. My body is quite misshapen and the brace makes me appear to look stiff and odd. She focused on me in a friendly, humorous way as if seeking my approval for doing her performance so well. Earlier, I saw another member go through a similar act mocking a woman who is not disabled, but does have a unique way of speaking. There will be more meetings and I haven't decided the best way to handle this. How would you suggest I respond?

Response from Stephanie T. Machell, PsyD:

Even children know that mocking others in this way is unacceptable. Though some people have conditions that prevent them from understanding how their behavior affects others it seems unlikely there would be two people in the group with such conditions. More likely the mockers think they are funny. But their behavior makes them bullies. And bullies thrive on reactions – the group's as well as the target's.

If the group enjoys the performance or is fearful of confronting the bully, and/ or the target has an interesting reaction, the mocking will continue. You don't indicate how the rest of the group or the other woman who was mocked reacted. But because two members of the group mocked two other members, and because the member who mocked you seemed to think you should have enjoyed her performance, it sounds like mocking others is part of the group's "culture" and acceptable for at least these two members. Depending on your personal style there are many ways of dealing with the situation. If you are comfortable with confrontation you can bring the issue up in the group. Be prepared that if this really is part of the group's culture, the members may support the mockers, and that if they do, you may be scapegoated in some way. If not, the group may be glad you spoke up!

You can talk to the mocker outside the group and tell her you find her behavior hurtful and offensive. Maybe she really doesn't know this is wrong and will give you a sincere apology and never do it again. Or she may become defensive and blame you for your reaction to her "humor." You can wait for a repeat performance. When the mocker looks for a reaction, you can say something. For example, "I never cared for that sort of humor."

Or, "Was that supposed to be me?" Or, "I wonder why you would do that?" Or, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." Or, "Isn't that interesting? Can you do Cagney?" Or, as Miss Manners used to recommend, just look at the person without reacting.

Or you could say, "Good thing this isn't a workplace. You could be fired for doing that!" Remember, if it is a workplace or somewhere else where rules exist about bullying you can report the mocker to HR or whoever else enforces the rules. Or if this is a group you can leave, you could decide you don't want to be part of a group that has this culture.

Is the other woman who was mocked someone you feel comfortable speaking with? Two people confronting a bully – or a culture of bullying – may be more effective.

Whatever you decide to do, the most important thing is to remain calm and non-defensive. The less reactive you are, the less interesting you are as a target, and the less likely it is that the bully can interpret your response as defensive or hurt so the show can go on.

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