

Family Life... Sister is mad at me after I agreed with her

Situation:

My sister called me at work the other morning, wanting me to meet her for lunch. Her voice indicated that she was upset, and it's not like Brittany to be even close to tears. As we sat at the park eating our fast food, she poured many stories of her husband's spending habits and how much in debt they were getting.

Shocked at what Brittany was telling me, I agreed with her that Adam, her husband, was acting pretty immature when it came to money, and that the situation wasn't likely to change soon, if at all. Brittany was quiet for a few minutes, then started defending all of Adam's behavior. What startled me the most was when she lashed out at me with: "What right do you have to call Adam immature?"

I was trying to be a good sister. Yet now I feel like the enemy. This thing is keeping me awake at night. Can you help me sort this out?

Answer:

Actually it's quite common for someone to complain about what's wrong, and then do a complete about-face when you agree with them. Especially if they're at the point where they have no clue as to what step they want to take next.

I know a person who spent hours and hours telling his therapist how bad his home life was. At their fifth session, the professional commented: "You have choices, you could end the marriage. The client got mad and accused the therapist of suggesting that he get a divorce, when in fact all the man did was point out the truth – we always have choices, in every situation.

When someone's upset, anxious or tense, it's average for them to pour out a story and perhaps overstate the facts. Agreeing with them, often jolts them into looking at the situation more realistically.

Since we don't live with them, or know what's going on inside their heads, we have no idea whether or not their situation is really as bad as they portrayed it to be.

In the future you could ask your sister in a loving, straightforward way: "Do you want me to simply listen, or offer solutions?" And it's totally up to you if you want to listen, or not listen. Again, when someone is anxious or upset, sometimes no matter what you do, you can't do anything to please them. No matter what you do, you end up being the "bad" guy.

Do what's good for you. Look at the consequences to your own emotional health. If you can listen as an objective by-stander, and remember that you can't control or fix your outer environment, good. If you are going to replay the scenes that your sister describes

over and over again in your head, night after night in your bed – if you're going to pour your energy into her problems, instead of taking care of yourself, maybe that's not-so-good for you.

When I was still in the corporate world, there was a woman who told a group of us a rather lengthy story about all the disagreeable and upsetting things that happened to her during the ten days she spent at a plush vacation resort in the Caribbean. Then at the very end, she added that she and her husband were going back to the same resort again next year. Very spontaneously I said: "If it was so bad, why are you going back." She looked surprised and announced: "It wasn't that bad."

Needless to say, at that point I chose not to comment out loud. And in my mind I immediately said, "She's not wrong, she's average."

