

ART OF DOCTORING ASSIGNMENT #3: DIFFICULT INTERACTIONS

Dear --, thank you for your thoughtful reflection about your encounter with an intimidating attending. It's obvious to me you put a great deal of effort into understanding and learning from this difficult situation. I was especially impressed that you were able to peel back layer after layer, and ultimately identify your difficulty in accepting authority as a complicating factor.

I also found your analysis of your attitude toward authority to be insightful. I agree with you that you want to have enough humility so that you can learn from people in authority (and of course people *not* in authority); it is even true that sometimes pretty awful people can become, in some ways, our best teachers! On the other hand, sometimes those with authority abuse or misuse it, and challenging their actions may be not only in your best interest, but may also help others. As you wisely conclude, as with most emotional reactions, you want to make sure that it is well-reasoned and not reflexive; appropriate to the situation and to the goals you are pursuing.

Your observations about learning style are also interesting. People do learn differently; and people teach differently. While a little anxiety is useful in focusing attention, my own opinion is that people rarely learn well under conditions of humiliation and intimidation. They especially do not learn to *think* – at best, they are able to spew rote answers. When an attending or other instructor uses an aggressive teaching style, it's worth considering whether a conversation could help make this person more aware of the effects of his “teaching”; and whether there is room for negotiation. As you point out, this is not always possible; and then it's up to you on your own to figure out how to get the most out of a less-than-ideal situation.

Thanks for this honest introspection, --. Best, Dr. Shapiro