

Dear --,

Thank you for writing about this incident and for sharing it with me. Wow! It sounds like you were treated very unfairly, with no attempt at empathy, and instead a lot of blaming and shaming. No wonder you felt angry and upset! You were also concerned about how these incidents would affect your peds evaluation. It's not at all surprising that all these feelings came up. It sounds like you were sick and exhausted, pushed to your edge, and instead of encountering understanding and help, you were criticized and punished. This encounter embodies the *worst* of medical education.

You made a comment that you're not sure how it could have been handled differently. It might be more accurate to say, there might have been some other choices, but even if you'd said or done something different, it might not have affected the end result. That's true. We can't change other people's behavior, we can only try to open up different paths, and see if they'll begin to walk down them.

So, was it understandable you were upset and angry? Yes. Did you "deserve" to feel this way because you were being treated unfairly? Again, yes. But did these feelings improve the situation at all? Probably not. Did they hurt the mean resident? Maybe a little, but maybe not. Did they hurt you? Here I think the answer is yes again, because you are still wrestling with this 2 ½ months after it occurred. So one goal would be to help the mean resident to start "walking down a path" of kindness and compassion, but another goal would be to reduce your own "unnecessary" suffering (by that I mean that some suffering is "necessary": when you're sick, you feel miserable, and you can't change that much. But on top of being sick, if you start to feel angry, upset, defensive, helpless, scared, then you've just added some "unnecessary" suffering to what you already had to endure.

Maybe there are some different ways the scenario could have played out. First, it might not hurt to try that "Algorithm for Challenging Situations," since this certainly sounds like a challenging situation. So here's how things might proceed...(collapsed version, for the sake of simplicity!).

SICK -- (X); Hi, Mean Resident.

MEAN RESIDENT (MR): (Grunts; doesn't answer)

X: Is something wrong?

MR: Yes. You were late this morning, plus you didn't show up at all yesterday.

SICK -- (X): (Takes a breath; quickly thinks to herself, "I'm thankful I have a resident to teach me, even if she does it in a rather mean way. My intention is to really hear the resident's point of view, to share my own perspective, and see if we can't resolve this situation. And I resolve to try to use only right speech, even if the resident doesn't do the same." Then decide whether you're going to address this situation, or let it go. If you decide to address it, things might go like this ).

MR: Why aren't you saying anything?

X: Sorry, I was thinking about what you said. MR, it sounds like you have two concerns about me. I was late this morning and I didn't come in yesterday. Is there anything else I missed?

MR: No, but that's more than enough!

X: And you seem really upset about both of these incidents.

MR: You bet I'm upset.

X: Could we talk a minute about them?

MR: Fine. But hurry up, we have patients to see.

X: (At this point, you have to look honestly at the criticism and see whether it has any merit. Try to do so nondefensively – is there anything you can learn from this input? Depending on what you decide, you might answer like this:) As far as being late is concerned, I agree with you that, as doctors, we should try really hard not to be late. I sincerely apologize for causing inconvenience to you and the rest of the team. Just by way of explanation, not as an excuse, I ran into some unexpected road construction this morning, and as a result I didn't get here till 7:05. But tomorrow, I'll make allowances for this, and arrive on time. Thank you for pointing this out.

MR: (caught off-guard by the apology) Oh... you're welcome.

X: Thank you. In terms of yesterday, I can certainly see how shocked and disappointed you'd be if I just didn't show up when you expected me to be there.

MR: That was *exactly* how I felt!

X: You were counting on me and I let you down.

MR: Right.

X: No wonder you were upset! Can I share with you what happened from my point of view? (MR nods) I've been really sick for the last week. I thought that because it was Veterans' Day yesterday, it was a scheduled day off, and it would be a perfect time for me to stay home and try to recover. Did I misunderstand? Was I supposed to come in according to the schedule?

MR: (a little confused) Well, you don't *have* to come in, but I did kind of expect it, since a couple of months ago a student *did* come in on *her* day off.

X: Oh, I didn't know that. Did you tell me about that?

MR: No, I didn't. I thought it you were really dedicated, you'd show up.

X: I really appreciate your sharing both that event and your expectation with me now. I had a different understanding, but now that you've clarified for me, I'll be sure to talk with you if I'm feeling so sick I'm worried I can't work or if the schedule shows I shouldn't be here, so we can problem-solve together and avoid any more miscommunications. How would that sound?

MR: (Begrudgingly) That would probably work.

X: (Friendly) Good. Now could I ask you a favor?

MR: Omigod! You *cannot* go home just because you're coughing a bit.

X: No, no, that's not what I was going to say. I noticed when I came in to the work-room you were expressing your feelings about me to the other residents and students.

MR: That's right. I was pissed!

X: Yes, I really understand that. I can see now how I violated your expectations, and how much that hurt. Still, I'd like to request that, if you have any concerns about my attitude or behavior in the future, you speak with me directly about them. It would really help me get as much as a can out of this clerkship if we had direct communication between us.

MR: Okay, but I call 'em like I see them. If I think you're slacking off, I'll tell you.

X: That's not a problem. You're my teacher and I want to learn from you, both in terms of the knowledge you have and just how to handle things generally. Peds is pretty challenging, dealing with such sick kids and worried parents all the time.

MR: (Feeling acknowledged) Yes, it can be tough.

X: Could I ask you one more thing?

MR: Make it quick.

X: I was wondering if one of the reasons you were upset with me is because you think these events – being late today, not coming in yesterday - mean I'm not taking this rotation seriously?

MR: (Softening just a little) I think you can see how I could draw that conclusion.

X: Yes, I can see that. But I honestly love Peds, and even considered going into pediatrics. I've really tried hard to learn as much as possible, and take good care of the patients. Has any of this come across to you?

MR: (Thinking) Well, you're not a *terrible* student. You did do that extra research on pediatric skin rashes, and there was the night you stayed late with that kid just holding her hand and reassuring her. I guess you've done a pretty good job overall.

X: Thank you. I really appreciate your being able to see me in a balanced, fair way.

MR: Okay, enough chitchat, let's get to work.

X: That's a really good idea. Let's go.

In this exchange, X first figures out her intention, how she wants to behave and what she wants to accomplish. She uses lots of empathy to really see why MR is so upset, and nondefensively acknowledges what she can learn from MR's criticisms. She also nondefensively explains her point of view. Further, she makes a request of MR not to engage in third-party communications about her, but to discuss problems with her directly. Finally, X encourages MR to reflect on the totality of her performance on Peds, so that she can evaluate her in a more balanced, fair way.

--, I understand that many of the particulars of the exchange above couldn't have happened for one reason or another. All I'm trying to suggest is that there might be alternative ways of dealing with this kind of unpleasant and unfair attack. Please feel free to disagree with me on any of the above or discuss with me further.

I really appreciated your honesty and self-probing. I know you to be a student of absolute integrity and commitment, and I trust that if you were home with the flu, it's because you were really sick. In fact, I think it makes a lot of sense for sick doctors to stay home, especially when they're around vulnerable kids who don't need extra illnesses. And I think there are even some doctors who would agree with me. But the point is not that you're right and she's wrong. The point is that that situation is what you had to deal with, and what would be the way that would cause the least additional suffering and have the best shot at a somewhat improved end result.

Finally, you can't control the outcome, you can't *make* people understand your perspective. But by being calm, centered, empathic, and nondefensive, you can increase the likelihood of this happening. And if it doesn't, and MR is just as nasty at the end of your dialogue as at the beginning, then you have to forgive her for being such a witch, and forgive yourself for not being super-woman medical student.