

Criticism from Caring Friends by Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

The client called me, sobbing. She'd just gotten off the phone with her sister, who was trying to persuade her to take a \$5.00 an hour receptionist job. Sis had said to her, "You know, you can't keep screwing around like this. It's time you got your head out of your butt and took a job, any job, at this point! You can't afford to be choosy, and you're not really qualified to do anything anyway!"

My client had just divorced her husband. Her remarkable energy and her skills at organizing, persuading, and networking had built her ex's career. Now her new life demanded she support herself, and she wasn't sure how those abilities translated into a paying job. "Is my sister right?" she cried.

Why did this scene happen, and what do you do if it happens to you? And was this such a bad deal for my client?

Why?

You have marched bravely toward the future, determined to cut a new career path for yourself, willing to devote the necessary time to it. This search process is practically a full-time job. Where does your sister get off telling you to take a dead-end job?

The truth is, those near and dear to you have felt frustrated by your previous sorties onto the career battlefield; they've seen you try and fail. Perhaps they don't see your daily effort. Perhaps they don't believe you this time. For whatever the reason, they've lost faith in you. You will do yourself a big favor if you acknowledge the possibility of this truth to yourself. It means you won't go so willingly to these people for emotional support anymore. It might not be there.

But you should also be aware that my client's sister crossed a line. Indeed, where *does* she get off telling her which job to take or not take? It's my client's life, career and bank account. She has to live with the outcome of her decisions, not her sister-critic.

What to do?

- 1. Break the contact as quickly as possible.** You have nothing to gain by continuing the conversation and possibly a relationship to lose. You must not leave yourself open for unwelcome criticism.
- 2. Understand where it's coming from.** My client's sister was desperate for her. This might have been another person, one who made advice a condition for lending the job seeker temporary support money. If it is, then get back to the caller when you feel prepared to hear his counsel.

Sometimes your critic feels a right to dictate to you because you've accepted temporary support money from her. Does that give her a right to tell you what to do? That depends. Was it a

condition of the loan that you listen to criticism and advice? You need to carefully consider the deal you made when you took that money. You may very well have set yourself up for this harsh exchange.

3. Tell the person what you do and don't want from her. A day or so after the call, the client visited her sister and told her their previous phone conversation had not been useful to her, that what she needed from her was encouragement and support, and to trust that she was going to find the right path for herself. She realized her sister's words had come from a deep concern for her, and she appreciated that. If, however, she wanted to know how to be useful to her, this is what she could do.

The sister was part of a large network of community leaders as a result of having been through a leadership training program, a potentially valuable resource for my client. Would she go through the roster with her, to see if it held potential contacts?

Mysterious postscript

The sister's attack is actually a common occurrence. Friends do it to job-hunting friends. Wives do it to spouses. Career consultants do it to their clients when they've gotten frustrated at the lack of real movement on the client's part.

It wasn't nice, and you shouldn't let anyone do that to you. Once it's done, it tends to have an interesting impact on the job seeker.

In my client's case, she settled in more deeply to her job search. She dressed up more when she came to my office. She scheduled her time more tightly. She became more aggressive in her networking. And, she got her sister off her back and got that roster.

This happens so frequently, I've begun to wonder if a prod like this isn't a necessary piece of the job-hunt, or a blessing in disguise — that one thing that prompts the seeker to sit up and bound forward.

So, deal with the situation as fast and reasonably as you can, but don't kill the messenger. She might have brought you the news you needed to hear.

This story ends about a year later, when my client decided to go to professional school after running down a few career dead-ends, and it took her several years to finally become what she wanted. But once she set the career goal that proved right for her, she was profoundly motivated to achieve it.