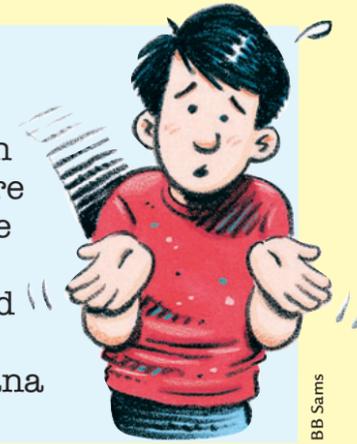




Dear Arizona,
My friend has a medical condition that makes him act in unusual ways sometimes. Before we became friends, I thought he was kind of weird, but now I understand him better. Am I a bad person for thinking he was weird?
—Meanie in Montana



My Super-Sensitive Friend

By Lissa Rovetch Art by Amanda Morley

Dear Meanie,

Your situation reminds me of when I got to know my friend Jackson.

You know how, when you're having a bad day, every little thing hurts your feelings? Well, I found out from Jackson that some people can't help feeling that way most of the time.

When I started taking karate, I did way more stuff wrong than right. I tried to relax and focus, but sometimes I'd get so frustrated that I'd accidentally make this strange little noise that sounds like a duck choking on peanut butter.

It's pretty much the most embarrassing sound a human being can make. And whenever I made it, this kid named Jackson would look over at me and smile. But it wasn't a mean "you're such a clumsy weird-sound-maker" kind of smile. It was a friendly "don't worry about it—you're cool anyway" kind of smile.

I think Jackson was nice to me because he had quirks, too. You see, his karate uniform was at least three sizes too big, and he was always tripping over his pant legs. And whenever he'd fall down or somebody would bump into him, instead of just shaking it off, he'd be like "Ow, ow, ow!" Tears would roll down his face, and it

was kind of confusing because you wouldn't think the pain was that bad.

Well, anyway, after every class, while Jackson and I waited to be picked up, we

had this thing where we'd trade corny jokes.

"Why did the monkey fall out of the tree?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Jackson. "Why did the monkey fall out of the tree?"

"He let go!" I said.

Jackson laughed. "Good one! What did the farmer say when he lost his tractor?"

"I don't know," I said. "What did the farmer say when he lost

his tractor?"

"Where's my tractor?" said Jackson.

I laughed. "OK, now that one is completely corny!"

"Not as corny as this one," said Jackson. "What's green and smells like paint?"

"Don't tell me," I said. "Green paint?"

"Hey, you stole my punch line!" Jackson laughed. "I'm going to miss trading corny jokes almost as much as I'll miss karate."

"You're leaving?" I said. "Why?"

"Well," said Jackson, "you know how my uniform is so big?"

"I guess," I said.

"It's because I have this condition that makes me way too sensitive," he explained. "When

clothes fit me tightly, they scratch and it feels almost like poison ivy. Sometimes it stresses me out so much that I can barely breathe!"

"That sounds horrible!" I said.

"Is that why you get hurt so easily?"

"Yeah," he said.

"It's like most people come with some kind of invisible layer that protects them against things like that scratchy-clothes feeling, or lights that are so bright they hurt your eyes, or sounds that are so loud they hurt your ears, or smells that are so gross you feel sick, or even things that shouldn't hurt your feelings but do. And then there are a few lucky people, like me, who were born without

that protective layer."

It was obvious by the way Jackson said it that he was being completely sarcastic when he used the word *lucky*.

"Wow," I said. "That sounds unbelievably hard!"

"Well, sometimes it gets better and sometimes it gets worse," said Jackson.

"Lately it's been worse, and this uniform feels like it's suffocating me. Since you're not allowed in the dojo without it, I'm going to have to drop karate."

"I can't believe the sensei is making you leave!" I said.

"Oh, he doesn't even know," said Jackson. "I haven't told him why I'm leaving."

"You have to tell him!" I said.

"No," said Jackson. "There's probably a good reason for the uniform rule."

"How do you know unless you ask?" I said. "Come on—let's ask together!"

It really wasn't any of my business, but I truly couldn't stop myself. And to make a long story short, our sensei was glad Jackson talked to him, and he *did* end up making an exception to the rule! Now Jackson wears a loose T-shirt and shorts to class—and we still get to trade corny jokes.

So, dear Meanie, if you really *were* mean, you wouldn't have taken the time to get to know your friend. When you think about it, each of us is unusual in some way. And once people take the time to get to know each other, they usually understand each other better! 🍷

Now we still get to trade corny jokes.



Jackson was going to drop karate.

Our sensei completely understood.

"You have to tell him!"

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Ciao for now, Arizona