

# Permission

Category: Me, Too

written by Regina Kaufman | January 10, 2023

I overheard the comments from across the busy clinic. The two students working with their assigned patient were gamely trying to dodge his questions and redirect the conversation. But despite their efforts, he persisted with his intrusive line of commentary: "You girls are pretty. You're both too pretty to be single. Do you have boyfriends? Are you getting married? Why aren't you getting married? You need to get husbands before your looks start to go. You should wear your t-shirts a little tighter."

The barrage continued without pause. The students began to look a little desperate.

There are always patients who seem to feel entitled to comment on students' looks, to pry into their personal lives, to drop sexually suggestive comments. Young women in my classes are more often subject to this type of commentary than young men. Students often try to deflect it and laugh it off, their discomfort evident, but they typically have neither the skill nor the confidence to set explicit boundaries when patients cross lines of impropriety.

We don't do enough to teach each other how to protect ourselves when it's needed. I'd talked with these students in the classroom about professional relationships. I'd said that courteous behavior should go both ways, that they could set boundaries. I had *told* them, but now they needed me to *show* them.

I crossed the room quickly. I knew this patient well. A brain injury more than 20 years before had left him impulsive and disinhibited. He's not malicious, but that doesn't give him a pass to misbehave. So, not for the first time, I told him to stop harassing the students. He acquiesced. I got the exercise session back on track. After he'd gone, I pulled the two students aside. They were upset. They hadn't known how to stop him without seeming impolite. They had protected him at their own expense.

I told them they could draw a line clearly. I gave them some words to work with: "Don't comment about my body. I don't want to discuss my personal life with you. I want you to stop asking me about that." I told them to say those things as many times as needed. They were relieved. They promised to try.

This is not a magic fix. The problem will certainly recur across patients and time, but now these young care providers had permission to say "Stop."

*Regina Kaufman*

*Springfield, Massachusetts*