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It's the small things that bug us -- no, really

By SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan:

I work in a small open office and have good relationships with my co-workers.

One of them, however, has personal habits that I find disgusting and distracting. Most notably, she often eats at her desk, chewing noisily with her mouth open.

Perhaps no one else is bothered by this, but I am. I don't want to create an uncomfortable environment, and I have been raised not to pick on a person's table manners. By the way, she's 20 years older.

Should I say something?

-- Sensitive Sue

Dear Sensitive:

Blowing off small irritants is not as easy as it seems.

Lynne Truss, the British fuss-budget with a new book on rudeness, *Talk to the Hand*, knows this and is funniest when lampooning her own pique.

So does Larry David, of television's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, who gives us an uncut look at what bugs him.

Mr. David knows that it's not what other people do that drives us nuts. It's the fact that we allow it to happen.

You might think that distress caused by big problems would outlast the annoyance of chronic little ones, but the opposite is true, according to Daniel Gilbert, a social psychologist at Harvard University.

In a series of clever experiments that charted how people judged small slights versus big setbacks, he showed that most of us expect to feel worse about a broken ankle than a plantar wart.

But that's not what happens. Psychological mechanisms protect us from intense emotional states so they don't last very long.

"But small threats get in under the radar. They evade our defence system by not ringing the alarms," he said.

"People rationalize divorces, demotions and diseases, but not slow elevators and uninspired burgundies," he wrote in the original study, aptly titled The Peculiar Longevity of Things Not So Bad.

"Had We Only Known We'd Have Done Something" should be its sequel.

If I'd known a splinter would still be bugging me, I'd have done something about it last week.

If you knew today that your colleague would still be crunching fries and sucking salt and grease from her fingers two years from now, would you do something? Would you agitate for change?

If the answer is yes, say something tactful right now. Tell her that the smell and noise are driving you crazy (say nothing about her manners).

If you're too chicken, approach the office manager without mentioning any names. Present the proposal that people eat in the kitchen and not at their desks -- for the common good.

Civilized offices have meeting rooms, smoking rooms and bathrooms just for such obtrusive activities.

They exist so you don't have to wag your finger and sniff the air, like Ms. Truss does in her chapter My Bubble, My Rules: "Surely we all agree that the question, 'Should I do this?' ought to have an automatic subsidiary question, 'Should I do this here?' " she writes archly.

By all means, do it. Just do it in the kitchen.

Dear Susan:

Although I am not the head honcho at my office, I work with professionals and administrative staff whom I might call subordinates if I were so inclined. They help me do my job, but that is their job.

To show my appreciation, I always buy them significant Christmas gifts and sometimes birthday gifts as well. I get thanked, but I never get anything from anyone in return, not on Christmas, not on my birthday, not any day.

Should I keep up the tradition?

-- Santa

Dear Santa,

It's lonely at the top. When superiors give gifts to their minions, it's considered gracious (well, it depends on the gift). When gifts go from the bottom up, it's seen as currying favour.

From the time of manna -- the first-ever gift certificate -- gifts have floated down from the top to the less powerful. They confer status, anthropologists say, not only because those who give them can afford to, but because they're then rewarded with more influence.

In short, keep up the tradition. If you want anything in return, think about giving unusual gifts that will offer you a little thrill, too.

A few of my favourites: the hardcover book *Material World*, by Peter Menzel, which profiles 30 families from around the world, photographed surrounded by all of their possessions.

Or how about CDs by local musicians (your team gets to hear something new and the musicians get to eat dinner), exchangeable for Pavarotti or something else, of course.

Then again, donations to a social agency in the employee's name can buy gifts for children in your area whose parents can't afford them. Attach it to something small for the employee, who also gets a thank-you letter (you get the tax receipt).

Whatever you decide, don't expect them to reciprocate. You're Santa, remember?

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.

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