My dad's cheating on my mom... [1]

Dear Alice,

I found out a few years ago that my dad has been having little affairs with other women. He has been meeting them on the internet, and there are at least 2 that I know of that he has actually met and been with in person. I have read some of the online conversations, and my dad says that he does not love my mom anymore, but I know that my mom still loves him. I can't understand how he could do this, or how the other women can go along with this knowing that he is married, has kids, a grandchild, and another grandchild on the way. I love my dad, and we have always gotten along great. I want to confront him about this, but I cannot get up enough nerve to do it. I am the only one that knows about this; I have no one to talk to about this and I don't know what I should do. I want my dad to know that I know what has been going on, but I don't want to confront him in person, and an e-mail seems too cowardish. Do you have any advice on what I should do? I would greatly appreciate it.

Sincerely,

Knows too much

Answer

Dear Knows too much,

It's pretty clear you're upset to know your dad has been "having little affairs" outside of his marriage with your mom. You also seem committed to letting your dad know that you're on to him. Before you jump in, it's always good to go into a confrontation after thinking hard about three things: 1) the goals you hope to achieve by confronting; 2) how you will confront (face-to-face, phone, email, etc.); and 3) how the person might react.

First, what are your goals? In other words, what do you hope this confrontation will lead to? For starters, you're especially concerned with how your dad's affairs don't fit his role as a dad, husband, or grandfather. So, one of your goals might be to show him how his actions don't fit with the roles you value. Or, you might want to know what he's thinking. Broadly, your goals might relate to:

- information you want to tell your dad
- information you want him to tell you
- mending your hurt feelings
- whether or not he continues to act out his affairs
Once you've decided on your goals, you can choose how you will confront your dad. You mentioned that email's out because you feel it isn't gutsy enough. At the same time, you also say you don't want to confront him in person. There are other options. For example, you could write a letter or a note, but you might lump that into the not-gutsy-enough category? like email. Or, you could choose a less direct route, like leaving some sort of evidence that lets him know that you know about his affairs. Another less direct way to let him know you are on to him would be to tell another person and ask them to confront him. Although these less direct strategies might seem tempting, you'll be best off if you choose to confront him in a way that also serves your goals. You may feel better about the end result of this difficult confrontation if you talk with him. Through talking, you can ask questions and get your point of view heard. Because you'd prefer not to talk in person, you could think about calling him on the telephone.

It'll also be helpful for you to imagine how your dad might react to this very personal and, potentially, embarrassing confrontation. Do you know your dad's typical reactions to being surprised or embarrassed? If so, you could try to figure out how he would react to your first confrontation. If he seems too nervous, angry, or down-right speechless at first, consider ending the talk to let him have some private time. It's important for you to break the conversation into several different episodes if you get the feeling that your dad's (or your own) reaction to the confrontation gets in the way of moving toward your goals.

Importantly, you might be worried about how this confrontation might affect your relationship with your dad. Because you want to keep your good relationship, consider focusing your conversation on how his behaviors are causing you discomfort, while letting him know you still love him. It's the behaviors that you'll want to zoom in on, not your dad as a person. What would it be like for you to tell him how hurt and confused you are about his secretive behaviors? How can you let him know that you still cherish your relationship with him, despite your feelings about what he's doing?

The hard reality of this situation is that no amount of preparedness and strategy will take away all of the stress you're feeling. This is emotionally challenging, and you find yourself hard-pressed to understand how your dad could act in such ways. To boot, you don't seem too fond of the idea of sharing these feelings and thoughts with others. While that's understandable, it's really tough to do something this awkward on your own. It's a good thing that you sought some outside advice from Alice, and it might help to enlist the support of some non-family members as you get through this tough time.

Alice!
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Published date:
Sep 22, 2006
Last reviewed on:
Jan 05, 2007