Dear Alice,

I dated this guy for about five months and it was my first serious relationship that involved sexual activity. We broke up because he "wasn't ready for a serious relationship." We didn't speak all summer, and when I got back to campus, he called me and apologized for acting immature. He still isn't ready for a serious relationship, but he asked me if we could still date. I told him that it was okay, but that I didn't want a sexual relationship. We both agreed that we could date other people because we don't want anything serious.

I went to a party a week later, and met this really great guy who apparently is in the same frat as my ex. I would like to get to know him, but my friends keep telling me not to pursue ANYTHING with him because it will ruin the friendship between frat brothers. I don't think it's fair! Also, my ex has been leaving messages on my phone/email more frequently. He calls like we are just good friends, but I wonder if he wants me now because his friend likes me. I have feelings for my ex, but I want to put them on the back burner while I date other people. How do I still stay friends with him and start up something with his fraternity brother without tearing the two of them apart?

Sleepless in School

Answer

Dear Sleepless in School,

Juggling romance, exes, friendships, etc. can indeed be a tricky endeavor. It seems gaining a better understanding of what you want may be a good place to start.

First, there's the issue of your feelings for your ex. You say you still have some. What kind of feelings and how strong are they? It sounds as though you want him in your life in some capacity. Would you be satisfied just being friends with him? Would you feel okay if the two of you were less than friends? Is saving his feelings (assuming he is jealous and doesn't want you to date other people) more important to you than dating this person? It may be somewhat difficult to casually date two people who are friends with each other. How would you feel if dating the new guy meant eliminating your ex as a dating option, at least for now? You are clear about liking this other guy and wanting to see where things could go with him. Having that same level of clarity about your ex, if possible, may be helpful.

Secondly, there's the issue of your concern about the friendship between the new guy and your ex. Also, there is the issue of the pressure from your friends. Most importantly, there's
the observation you made in your question: It's not fair that you should be expected not to pursue anything with a great person you just met. That feeling perhaps stems from two places: 1) Your ex broke up with you initially and when he wanted to get back together, you both agreed to date other people and 2) Their friendship with each other is not your responsibility. It seems as though pursuing this relationship with the new guy fits within the agreements you and your ex made.

The issue your friends may be overlooking in their advice to you is that you aren't the only one making decisions about whether or not to date this new person: He gets to decide if dating you is right for him, too. He may or may not be weighing the factor of your ex ? his friend ? in his decision-making, but it does indeed seem unfair to place the responsibility of their friendship on you. Their friendship is really up to them to figure out, just like your friendship with your ex is between the two of you to sort out.

When two people break up, it is often painful when an ex starts dating a new person. One or both people may feel jealous, sad, angry, confused, or a myriad of other emotions. If you are worried about hurting him, you may choose to communicate with him compassionately without sacrificing your desire to date this new person (or other new people in the future) that he may be acquainted with.

In the end, it is your call whether or not to pursue this new dating possibility and if so, how and what to communicate to him and to your ex. These questions have no easy answers, but try getting some clarity about what you want and trust your gut to show you the best course of action.

All the best,

Alice!

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