Dear Alice,

Okay, I think this is really embarrassing, but I have a vagina and testicles. I'm too ashamed to go and talk to anyone about it, my mom always asks me if I'm okay with it, but last time she did, I just ran away. I'm so upset, and I haven't told any of my friends because I know they would make fun of me. I just don't know what to do, I have a long term boyfriend and he always wonders why I won't show him my body. I was thinking about having sexual intercourse with him, but I know he would not want to have anything to do with me after he finds out. I'm not sure if I'm a man or a woman.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Despite society's attempts to neatly label people as "male" or "female," there are many folks like yourself who defy these socially constructed categories. People with sexual or reproductive characteristics that can't easily be categorized as male or female are referred to as having an intersex condition. People with an intersex condition may be born with reproductive organs in many shapes, sizes, and combinations, or may have genitalia that appear to fit one sex, while having chromosomes that fit a different sex. While you say you feel embarrassed, you should know that many people have intersex conditions, and there are people available to provide you with information and support. For more background, take a look at What does it mean to be intersexed, and how common is it? in the Go Ask Alice! archive.

Unfortunately, many people lack understanding about intersex issues, so it's not surprising that you are wary to open up to your friends and your boyfriend. First of all, it's entirely up to you if and when you disclose what you're packing below the belt. Some folks believe that having an intersex condition is a private matter. Other people feel that talking openly and honestly about their bodies is the best way to be themselves, and possibly to reduce the shame and stigma that may come with being a person that isn't easily labeled male or female. A third option is to take a "wait and see" approach by slowly earning a friend's trust and disclosing when you feel ready. For now, you may choose to tell one close friend, just your boyfriend, or no one at all.

If you decide to talk to others, you will indeed be taking a risk, and there are bound to be some awkward moments. As you mentioned, it is possible that a friend will make some insensitive comments? perhaps to hide his or her own discomfort or confusion. Given that
you have a friendship, it's possible that these negative comments will subside as they realize you are still, in essence, the same person they have always enjoyed hanging out with. It takes a lot of courage to put yourself out there; if you decide disclosing is the choice you want to make, you may want to consider how you can cope with potentially negative reactions from friends.

In regards to your boyfriend, deciding to have sex with a partner for the first time is a big step no matter what your sex or gender. You may want to take at look this question in the Go Ask Alice! archive, Trying to decide when to have first intercourse [3]. You say that your boyfriend will not want to have anything to do with you if he finds out your body is different from what he expects. You may be right or his reaction may surprise you. Perhaps he's more attracted to your funny personality, your zany trivia knowledge, or your sexy kisses and couldn't care less if you have some "extra" parts. Being vulnerable is a scary aspect of intimacy, but it can also bring you and your partner closer together.

Along those lines, there may be other positives to disclosing the fact that you are a person with an intersex condition. By talking more openly about your body with your friends and family, you may come to feel less embarrassed and more comfortable in your own skin. Disclosure may also be a turning point that deepens your relationship with a friend or your boyfriend. For example, your confidant may feel closer to you because you put trust in her or him. Disclosure also opens the door for your friend or boyfriend to confide in you about her or his own worries.

Before you have these conversations, it could be helpful for you to talk with a counselor or therapist who is familiar with intersex issues. A counselor can help you explore the pros and cons of disclosing, as well as your underlying feelings about body-image, sex, and gender. Columbia students can schedule an appointment at Counseling and Psychological Services [4] (CPS) by calling x4-2878.

In addition to counseling, you may find it validating to connect with the other people in the intersex community who share your experience. A good place to start is the Intersex Society of North America [5] (ISNA) which provides information about intersex issues like disclosure and surgery, as well as links to support groups [6]. Another resource is the Consortium of Disorders of Sex Development [7] which has produced guidelines for parents with children who have an intersex condition. These guidelines may be a helpful for ideas on having a more open discussion with your mom.

It can prove challenging to share a secret with your friends or your boyfriend, but their reactions may surprise you in a good way. Just as your mom wants you to be comfortable with yourself, your friends or boyfriend may feel the same way because they all care about you. Best of luck!

Alice!

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