Dear Alice,

Thanks for your wonderful advice on so many topics! I haven't seen a post related to a little problem I've been having, though.

It seems the paper thin walls in my apartment make it tough for me and my boyfriend to be intimate, during conversations, during sex, without the neighbors reacting. If I'm on the phone and tell him how I feel about him, the couple next door starts to crack up. I thought at first it was a coincidence, but it has happened about 7 or 8 times (probably once or twice a week). Once I even said, "let's talk later, I think the neighbors are listening" and they shut right up.

What's most offensive to me is if we make a noise above a whisper while talking or making love, we hear the neighbors react by sarcastically making sex noises and laughing next door. This feels like a big invasion of privacy. It's making me self-conscious to make a peep during intimacy ? I don't want an audience!! Help, Alice! Do you have any suggestions??

? Just the four of us

Answer

Dear Just the four of us,

You're not alone in valuing privacy, especially in intimate situations. And, it's hard to think of a positive side to having paper-thin walls. If the neighbors were your friends, your set-up would have let you to play a little practical joke on them involving a conversation you "accidentally" let them overhear. But, since you don't seem to be on great terms with your neighbors, it seems best to focus on privacy-enhancing solutions.

First though, limiting your self-expression during sex ? or even during conversations with your partner ? because of what the neighbors might hear puts an unfortunate burden on your relationship. It's polite to consider that other people might not want to hear your every word or listen to you have sex 24 hours a day, but intimate conversations and sex are natural and nothing to be ashamed of.

Still, some privacy is clearly important. Do the neighbors have any kind of regular schedule? Maybe they're usually away from home at certain times. You might use those times for more private activities or conversations.
Have you ever spoken directly with your neighbors? They might appreciate more privacy too, and you could work out a solution together. If you'd rather not talk with them, and it seems like they're always there, maybe playing some music could camouflage your conversations. Sounds of the ocean? A little Mozart? They also sell small machines that produce "white noise," which masks other sounds without being loud. Sometimes counseling offices use this kind of machine to help ensure confidentiality, and some people use them if background noise prevents a good night's sleep.

Rearranging your living space might also enhance your privacy. Could you move your bed or bedroom farther from the wall you share with the neighbors? Hanging a thick tapestry on the wall might also offer some noise-dampening effect. If you can't move somewhere with thicker walls, or replace your neighbors with a lovely couple who is hard-of-hearing, increasing the ambient noise level in your living space may offer you more privacy, or at least prevent you from hearing your neighbors make fun of you. Hopefully, you can focus on enjoying your music and your boyfriend.

Alice!
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