Dear Alice,

I'm a teenage gal in a great relationship with another girl who goes to my school. We're both out to our parents and some friends, with okay reactions. The problem is, our school is pretty homophobic, and word is getting out that we're dating. My parents worry we might be physically or verbally assaulted at school. My neighbor, who owns guns, has already asked me about it, and I'm scared for our safety. What can two girls in a homophobic suburban school do? We don't have the same support system some college students do. We don't have a GSA and I don't trust any of the school staff much. Please help!

?Worried about Gay-Bashing

Answer

Dear Worried about Gay-Bashing,

How frustrating, angering, and discouraging it can feel to be true to yourself and find a great relationship, yet be faced with homophobia, scrutiny, and the fear of violence. Your concerns are unfortunately not uncommon, and are warranted. But you also have a right to a safe, peaceful, and fulfilling life. Coming out to yourself and to the people you care about is a courageous and self-affirming act; it has also started to build a team of allies and supporters that can help you and your girlfriend to feel pleasure and safety in your relationship.

Your situation has many levels of complexity and no clear-cut resolution. You do, however, have options. It might help to divide up some of the different topics in thinking through your feelings and course of action. Included here are a number of resources and strategies that you can consider. Sometimes thinking about all the options at once seems daunting, and that's okay. You may choose to act on only some now, putting the rest of the information in your back pocket to refer to later on, if you need to.

Your Parents

You mention in your question that you're already aware that your parents are worried about your safety. Talking with them might be hard, but it'll likely also be a relief for both you and them to put the issues out on the table. It can be painful for parents to acknowledge that they cannot completely ensure that their child will not come to harm. Even when there's no immediate threat, it's common for parents of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered teens to feel anxiety and sometimes even guilt. It might be helpful for your parents to have the opportunity to speak with other parents in similar situations. Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)
is a national organization with local chapters—a place for you, your family, and your friends to get support. PFLAG's website has a wealth of information that you can look at on your own, or with your parents, as well as contact info for chapter meetings and a focus area on safety in schools.

In addition to discussing in general about feelings, it can be helpful to talk specifically about what you would do if an incident requiring attention were to arise. Who would you tell? How would you react in the moment? Who do you and your parents feel comfortable having as allies? What do you need from your parents? What kind of assurances do your parents need? You could even come up with scenarios and play them out in your conversation.

**Your Girlfriend**

You and your girlfriend have a great relationship, but the fear of harm is certain to be a stressor. You might start by being honest with each other about your ideals and how you are going to balance these with protecting yourselves. Some of your decisions may be political and others may be about your gut instincts. For example, how do you feel about holding hands in public? Do you talk about your relationship openly with people at school? What would it mean if you decided not to? There are no right or wrong decisions here—it's just a matter of what makes you feel safe and comfortable.

Make sure that while taking time to focus on the challenges, you also build in plenty of fun. It's not uncommon for a romance such as yours to become overly dependent in the face of outside worries. Remember to build and keep up new external connections and friends. One question to ask yourselves is whether or not you want to talk with your parents together with your girlfriend, with her parents, too, or if each of you will decide to take care of your own families. How does her family feel about your relationship? Do you want to get your families together to strategize? Who are your and her supports outside of your relationship?

**Your Friends**

Your friends are important in building comfort and safety at your school and in your community. Whether you know other young people who are gay or not, most people have experienced feeling judged or unaccepted, maybe even threatened, at some point in their lives. On the other hand, it can be difficult in school to "go against the grain." Some people might be too worried about creating tension or being noticed if they were to openly support you and your girlfriend. You can start by appealing to the sure bets, then extending your reach to friends and peers who will empathize with your experience, maybe because of their racial or ethnic identity, or possibly due to something else about them that caused them to experience prejudice from close-minded people in your community. Try the rebellious crowd, who might be up for a little "action." The idea here is to energize people so that if homophobia were to flare up, you'd be prepared with a group of supporters.

**Your School**

Chances are, just on the basis of statistics, there are gay or gay-friendly teachers and administrators at your school who may be able to provide support. They too, though, may be worried about homophobia and, therefore, remain closeted. Unfortunately, too few schools actively and visibly support and embrace their queer students and staff. But this doesn't necessarily mean that they allow violence or harassment. You and your parents might start by doing some research into anti-harassment, anti-prejudice, and/or anti-violence statutes in your
area or school. You may decide to approach your school administrators in advance of anything specific happening, just to start the conversation and feel out their opinions and approach. That way, if something were to happen that would require their assistance, you already have a contact and an "in."

Another option is to suggest to the administration, student government, peer counseling program (if your school is lucky enough to have one), or another student activist group that the entire student body might benefit from an anti-prejudice workshops or programs. Numerous organizations that provide this type of programming for schools all over the country are available, sometimes at very minimal cost. For example, the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) [3] is a non-profit group that does just this; another is the Anti-Defamation League [4]. Your action may wind up not only serving you, but also inspiring others around you to be open about themselves as well.

Other Resources
You can use some of the above strategies to reach out in advance to other helpful people in your community. For example, if your neighbors say or do something threatening, you can contact the local crime victims division of your police department and put them on notice. Just in case, you might also want to research what kinds of services are available for crime victims in your area (listed under hospitals, social service agencies, and community centers in the phone book), as well as what the hate crimes legislation is in your state.

Many other national and local organizations exist that can provide strategizing help, emotional support, legal advice, and socializing opportunities, including:

GLBT National Help Center [5]:
A website peer counseling, information, and referral line that can direct you to other organizations nearby.

GLSEN: Student Pride USA [6]
Student Pride USA is a for youth, by youth project working to support and help network Gay/Straight Alliances, and similar youth/student groups, across the nation. Only a few years old, Student Pride USA has worked to support over 700 groups by providing resources, materials, support, education, trainings, and connections on a daily basis.

Outproud [7]
This is the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth, which has some great information, including a school resources library that can help you make your school a more welcoming place for all students.

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund (LLDEF) [8]
The nation’s oldest and largest legal organization working for the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, and people with HIV/AIDS has a special section on school-related issues on their web site.

By developing allies and planning in advance how you would respond if homophobia were to rear its ugly head, you have access to more options and control. It can also help reduce your parents’ fears by giving them an active role in keeping you safe. Plus, you’re likely to make some new friends, and gain some information and confidence in the process as well. Also, know that when the time comes, you can use some of these same skills to find and contribute
to one of the many communities out there where you'll be accepted and valued for who you are.

Best of luck,

Alice!

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