My partner feels more strongly about me than I do about him

Dear Alice,

I'm currently in a relationship. The person I'm with has strong feelings for me. The only problem is that I don't feel the same about him as he feels about me. I'm scared that if I break up with him that he will tell people private stuff that I told him, and also I have strong feelings for someone else. I have no idea what to do. I don't want to hurt the person I'm with, but I can't keep telling myself that I do have strong feelings for him when I don't. Help me please!!!!

Answer

Dear Reader,

One of the most challenging aspects of any relationship is listening to our inner feelings. You may find your internal voice overpowered by those of your partner, your family members, your friends, or even societal expectations. Especially around holidays, Valentine's Day, and special occasions, some people might say sarcastically, out of envy, "Oh, what a terrible dilemma. Someone loves you!"

As you've discovered, however, not having the same feelings for the person you're with as s/he has for you can be confusing, painful, and a bit threatening. Staying in a relationship where you don't feel fulfilled can be draining. Hurting someone you care about is difficult, too. For you, it sounds as though the situation has also brought up doubts about how much you can trust your partner with private information you have shared.

Before you make decisions about what you want to do and when, it might be helpful to think about your doubts in more depth. This might be quick and easy, or may be more complicated, if any of the following questions ring true for you. Either way, it might help to write down your thoughts and/or talk about them with a friend, family member, or someone else you trust.

- When did you first become aware that you didn't feel as deeply for the person you are with as he does for you?
- Have you ever talked about this with him before? If so, how did he react?
- Even if you haven't talked about it, do you think he has a sense of whether you're feeling less interested?
- What past experiences might make you worry that he'll gossip about you or betray your confidence?
How would you feel/what would you do if he does talk about you behind your back? 
Is your fear of his talking about you so great that it makes you want to continue the relationship?

After you think through your feelings, it will be time to make a choice about the action you want to take. Few situations have clear-cut solutions; you'll have to decide what feels better to you right now, being with him or not, telling him or not, and how to act in a way that is least hurtful to both you and him. If you decide to break off the relationship, it can be useful to rehearse what you want to say and how you'll handle his reactions. Here are some suggestions of topics you might want to discuss:

- Particular things that you've appreciated or enjoyed in the relationship
- Your desire to be upfront
- The fact that the two of you seem to want/need different things at this point
- Your readiness to move on and explore new things (Telling him there's a particular person you already like a lot may be hurtful. But if he's really resistant to breaking up, it might help him see the idea as real. Often, falling for someone else is a symptom that a relationship isn't working. Based on the situation, you can decide what you want to do.)
- Your hope and expectation that he'll be sensitive about private information and moments you've shared with one another. Assure him that you'll do the same.
- How you envision your relationship in the future: do you want to remain friends? Will it be easier if you stop seeing one another entirely?

Even if you know him well, you may not be able to predict how he will act or what he'll say. There's also no way to guarantee that he won't share your private information with others. What you can do is to treat him with the respect you are expecting for from him, and hope for the best.

Lastly, you may want to ask yourself if unbalanced feelings, where someone likes you more than you like them, and you feel stuck, have been present in past relationships, as well. If so, how did you handle them? If reciprocating strong feelings for someone has repeatedly been an issue in your relationships, consider exploring this a bit further. Sometimes this can indicate that a person needs more time to focus on themselves and their own goals, has fears about relationships, perhaps due to personal or family issues, or has been trying to make relationships work with folks they know aren't good matches for them. Exploring these possibilities and others, by yourself or with a counselor, can help you learn to develop meaningful bonds in future relationships. Hope this helps!

Alice!

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