Abusive girlfriend

Alice,

Please help me. My girlfriend hits me all the time and I don't know what to do. Shall I break up with her????

Answer

Dear Reader,

Thanks for reaching out. It sounds as though you need to protect your physical and emotional well-being. Violence is not a part of any relationship. There are some things you could think about that might help you figure out some steps to take.

First, do you have a safety plan?
You mentioned that your girlfriend hits you frequently. Although it's difficult to tell how dangerous and harmful her punches are, let's assume for a moment that you are in danger. That's quite serious and your safety should be your number one concern. Do you have a plan to keep yourself safe in the event that your girlfriend tries to hurt you again? People who work with survivors of violence call this a safety plan. Think about whom you could call, or a safe place you can go, if you ever feel unsafe. Thinking about this ahead of time can allow you to act quickly and protect yourself. Keep a list of "safe people" on a sheet of paper so that you can call them when you're in trouble. For people who live with an abusive partner, it can be helpful to have a bag packed and ready to go in the event that they need to escape a violent situation. Some people have to keep these numbers, and any bags of clothing, important documents (e.g., identification, credit card, social security card), and other necessary items, in a secret place so that the abuser doesn't find out and get mad. Only you know what is best for you, but the above ideas have helped others in similar situations. Don't be afraid to lean on others for support. Turning to family, friends, counselors, a minister or rabbi, or someone you trust could be helpful.

Next, it might help you to know about patterns of violence in relationships.
Research shows that violence in relationships tends to occur in a cycle. For example, you and your girlfriend might feel happy and calm, then small things start to happen - she seems to be easily angered or controlling, or you feel more on edge around her. People who work with survivors of violence generally call this the tension-building phase, which often escalates into violence. Following the violence (i.e., hitting, kicking, biting, throwing objects, hair pulling, etc.), there is often a honeymoon period, where the abuser feels guilty and tries desperately to gain his or her partner's forgiveness with promises that "it will never happen again," "this time
things will be different," or "please give me one more chance. I was just under a lot of pressure with work (or school, or family pressures)." This cycle can repeat anywhere from a few times a year to several times a week.

*It's important to know that violence does not discriminate.*
People of all genders, races, classes, ages, religions, nationalities, socioeconomic groups, and capabilities are involved in violent relationships. It can happen between partners in a casual romantic relationship, same gender relationship, or a marriage of 50 years.

*Resources are available to help you.*
These resources can help you explore your feelings about your relationship and guide you in making a decision that is right for you:

**On-campus**
- Columbia Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) [2]
  - x4-2878 (to make an appointment to speak with a counselor)
- Barnard Student Health Services ? Rosemary Furman Counseling Center [3]
  - x4-2091
- Barnard-Columbia Rape Crisis/Anti-Violence Support Center [4]
  - x4-WALK (24/7 Peer Advocates)
  - x4-HELP (Peer Counselor Help line available 7-days-a-week, 7 - 11 PM)

**Off-campus**
- 24-hour National Domestic Violence Hotline [5]
  - 1.800.799.SAFE (-7233) ? 7-days-a-week
- Safe Horizons [6] (in New York City)
  - 212.577.7777
- The Safety Zone [7]
  - *A web site with information on available abuse and domestic violence resources, particularly those in New York State. Nationwide resources are listed under "web links."*
- New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project [8]
  - 24-hour Hotline: 212.714.1141

Ultimately, the decision of whether or not to break up with your girlfriend is up to you. Use the above-mentioned resources and don't be afraid to ask for help. Remember, you are not alone and there is help available for you.

Alice!

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