Dear Alice,

My boyfriend and I have been going out for over a year and we live together. Lately, he has been drinking with his friends a lot every weekend, even without me. Everyone (including me) says he won't ever cheat on me, but all the girls love him. I'm scared he's going to get drunk and cheat on me and not realize it until the next day. What should I do?

Answer

Dear Reader,

From your letter, you describe two different issues to sort through. First, it sounds like your boyfriend's drinking more than he used to, and it's natural that you're worried about it. Second, you have concerns about him cheating on you, particularly when he's been drinking heavily. These two things are certainly connected, but it might be helpful to think about them separately, at least at first.

To begin with, let's consider your boyfriend's change in drinking behavior. When did he start drinking more than he used to? Has something changed in his life, such as more pressure at school or work, a recent death of a loved one, or something else? Sometimes people drink more during times of stress because alcohol makes them feel better, at least temporarily, helping them to forget about a current problem. You've also mentioned that he often drinks on weekends with friends, when you're not around. Has anything changed in your relationship? Is your boyfriend hanging out with a new crowd of people? Have the two of you ever discussed his drinking before?

You're also worried about your boyfriend cheating on you while he's drunk. Although many people drink in order to loosen up and have fun, if someone's behavior changes drastically while using alcohol and other drugs, or s/he acts in ways s/he regrets later, it is usually a sign that it's time for him or her to sit down and take an honest look at his or her drinking habits.
Next, you alluded to your boyfriend not remembering his experiences when drunk. Sometimes memories are fuzzy after a night of drinking, but this is different than when someone drinks too much and doesn't recall at all parts, or all, of a set of experiences where alcohol has been involved. This memory lapse is called a blackout. Has your boyfriend ever blacked out before, with no, or impaired, recollection the next day? Blacking out, particularly repeatedly, can be a sign of problematic drinking. It also seems to be a warning signal of the potential for alcohol abuse.

The next issue you might think about is your fear that your boyfriend will cheat on you. It's normal to feel insecure sometimes in relationships when we care about someone. However, if your boyfriend hasn't ever cheated on you, then you might want to ask yourself why you've been feeling insecure or mistrustful. Assuming that you think your boyfriend is charming and attractive, maybe it's not all that surprising that "all the girls love him." Maybe you just need to hear him reassure you that he would never cheat on you. If not, your current situation may be a signal that there are larger questions about trust in your relationship. Are other things going on that bother or upset you? Were there issues like this in any of your previous relationships? even non-romantic ones?

It would probably be helpful for you to take some time to think about each of these issues before talking with your boyfriend about them. You may want to explore your feelings with a trusted friend or family member, or even with a counselor, who can help you sort through how you'd like to handle the situation. When you're ready, talking openly with your boyfriend about how you feel could give you the reassurance you need and ease some of your anxiety. You may want to address each of your concerns separately, rather than bombard him with all of them at the same time, all lumped up together. Give your boyfriend a chance to hear your concerns and respond to them. At first, he may feel confused, deny the possibility of a problem, or simply feel overwhelmed or attacked. Be clear about what you've noticed and what you worry about. Some ideas to try are:

"I care about you a lot, and lately I've noticed that you seem to be drinking more than you used to. Is there anything going on that's causing you stress?"

"Sometimes I worry that when you've been drinking, something will happen... with a girl."

"I've noticed that sometimes when you drink, things happen that you don't remember. I'm wondering what you think about that... [give him a chance to respond]... Maybe we could work out a system to help you drink a little less."

"I know it might seem silly, but I worry that you're attracted to other women."

Also, you may want to read Trouble Controlling My Drinking [2], which explains the difference between an alcohol abuser and an alcoholic, and lists some warning signs of a drinking problem.

Being honest about your worries can get these issues out into the open, so that you and your man can start working towards a compromise or resolution. Whatever the issue is, talking with your partner is the only way to know what's going on.
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