Bad experiences with men = Lesbian?

Dear Alice,

I am a woman who has always been attracted to other women. Until recently, I was attracted to men as well. Now I am almost exclusively attracted to women... which would be fine, except that I think this attraction has a lot to do with painful experiences I've had with men. When I was younger, my father was dominant and somewhat abusive, and my first boyfriend was emotionally manipulative and pressured me to have sex with him. After breaking things off with him, I had a very positive sexual relationship with a woman. Am I a lesbian, or am I a bisexual who is just afraid of men? If the latter is true, is there any way to get over this fear?

Thank you.

Answer

Dear Reader,

It sounds like you've had some very hurtful experiences with people close to you, and you've given a lot of thought as to how those experiences affect your relationships and sexuality. It's understandable that you might be having fearful responses to men, and you deserve support in working out those issues.

Your question brings up some of the complexities of sexuality: how feelings and attractions can change over time and how difficult it can be to define identities. Attraction is complex; people can be attractive physically, emotionally, intellectual, or in other ways. Part of what you find attractive about women might be a sense of safety or comfort you feel with them. It's possible to be attracted to someone and, at the same time, have conflicting feelings of fear, guilt, or anger that can weaken attraction or interfere with your ability to have a healthy or satisfying relationship. Are you no longer attracted to men at all, or are you still attracted to them but have difficulty with relationships? It's also possible that your tastes have just changed with time.

Sometimes it's useful to divide people into categories like "lesbian" or "bisexual" to build communities or raise awareness. However, because of the fluidity and complexity of sexuality, no one else can say who is "really" lesbian or bisexual. It's up to people as individuals to figure out which label (if any) works for them at any given point in their life.

Labels aside, it makes sense that past negative sexual and emotional experiences with men might affect how you feel about men with whom you now interact. Even though on a rational
level someone can think, "Just because some men have hurt me, I shouldn't be afraid of all men," it can be hard to stop negative feelings. Talking with a counselor may help you think through your painful experiences and understand how they impact your thoughts and behavior now. S/he can help you learn new ways to respond to thoughts or situations you find troubling.

The negative experiences you've had with men may affect more than just attraction. Do you find it interferes with your ability to trust men as friends or to feel confident interacting with new people? Getting support related to your past may help you in many areas of your life? you deserve it!

Alice!
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