Can I ask my girlfriend not to drink at college? [1]

Dear Alice,

My girlfriend of about a year is going to college next year as am I but we are going to attend different colleges. We are about forty-five minutes apart in distance and we have no problem whatsoever in keeping the relationship and we plan on keeping it alive and healthy, but I have a problem with alcohol. I don't drink alcohol and don't ever plan on it but I am curious as to it being rude or improper to ask her not to? Is it my place at all to ask her that she not drink at college? I feel strongly about her in this situation. She doesn't drink but thinks she might like it... Is it fair or my place to ask her not to drink? Thanks, Alice...

Worried Sick!

Answer

Dear Worried Sick!,

To drink or not to drink, that is a college question. Each person faces the decision around if, when, and how much alcohol is appropriate to consume. And being open, honest and direct in your communications with a partner regarding the role of alcohol in your lives does not sound like such a bad thing. It's certainly all right for you to express to your partner your opinions and concerns about drinking. Voicing your feelings with her is an important step toward reaching a mutually comfortable decision about whether, and how much, alcohol to use. It's crucial that each of you has a chance to air your views on drinking? how you think it might affect you as individuals and as a couple. Ultimately, your partner will have to decide for herself what is right for her. It may comfort you to know the majority of college students handle their drinking well; if you're both aware of healthy drinking choices [2], and practice them, the likelihood of problems is much lower.

Before you talk with your partner, you may want to spend some time thinking privately about why the possibility of her drinking upsets you. Has a friend or family member had trouble managing her or his drinking? Are you worried about her health or safety? Do you have concerns that her behavior or feelings would change if she drinks? What specifically makes you nervous? You might find it helpful to sort through these issues with the help of a trusted friend, counselor, religious leader, or health care provider. Also, think about how her drinking would affect you and your relationship. Perhaps you're worried that she would pressure you to drink when you spend time together. Or do you think she won't like you anymore if you stand by your decision not to drink? Maybe you're imagining that under the influence of alcohol,
she'll become enamored of someone else. During your heart-to-heart, you and your partner can talk about some of these feelings. She may have similar worries.

In fact, it's likely that each of you has some anxiety about this issue and about leaving for school in general. You're probably both also thinking about your transition into a longer-distance relationship. Beginning college for the first time can be an exciting, yet challenging, experience. It's possible that some of the focus you've been putting on the alcohol issue is actually being diverted from more general worries about the future of your romance and your success in a college environment. You could say something like,

"You know, I've been thinking a lot about leaving for school lately. One thing I wonder about is the fact that some people like to start drinking when they get to college. What do you think about that?"

Or, "The idea of drinking alcohol kind of makes me nervous. If you drank at school, what do you think it would be like?"

As might be expected during times of transition, you and your partner are likely to go through a lot of changes. For many, college is a time to experiment, whether it's staying up until 4am and sleeping until noon, breaking out of a "reputation" developed in high school, or seeing how it feels to use alcohol and/or other drugs. You can gather more information from the Go Ask Alice! Alcohol and Other Drugs [3] archives. Talking about the possibilities and how you feel about them is a healthy process — one you and your partner can help each other through.

Alice!
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