Dear Alice,

I have been dating my boyfriend for a while now, and we both agree that we love each other. But, always in the back of my mind, I have a fear that will not subside. You see, his father was very abusive to him and his mother while he was growing up. I have read that abusive behavior can be genetic, but he argues that it is not. I love him with all of my heart, but I am afraid that someday he may turn on me. Am I being too melodramatic?

?Scared and in love...

Answer

Dear Scared and in love...

Your fears are not unfounded ? violence does seem to breed violence in many instances. However, it is important to keep things in perspective. For example, diabetes may run in your family, but you may not have diabetes. If you have a family history of diabetes, you can be careful about your diet, knows the warning signs of the disease, and have your health care provider check for diabetes when you go in for a physical. In your partner’s case, his awareness might be the best means for him to break the cycle of violence.

Okay, diabetes is different from domestic violence. There is a parallel here, though. You see, it’s good that both you and your partner recognize and understand what sort of abuse he lived through. The next step is knowing and understanding what impact it can have, both for him personally and in his relationships.

From your comment, “I have read that abusive behavior can be genetic, but [my partner] argues that it is not,” it appears that you have been investigating family violence issues. Your partner has more evidence to support his side of the argument. Much study in this area has shown a strong relationship between socialization and violence, that it is a learned, rather than inherited, behavior. Although controversial, some researchers have examined whether or not violence can be influenced by biology or genetics as well. Theories have been offered, but, so far, results have been inconclusive.

If he hasn’t already, it may help if your partner went for counseling to sort out his past. If he has problems with anger or with expressing his emotions, now would be a good time to start working on that. You might benefit from speaking with a counselor, too. Or, the two of you could seek counseling together. Start with the National Domestic Violence Hotline [2] at (800) 799-SAFE (-7233) for referrals in your area. In addition, if either of you are Columbia students,
you can make an appointment to see a professional counselor at Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS). CPS offers short-term individual and couples counseling.

Wishing you happiness and harmony in your relationship,

Alice!

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Published date:
Feb 06, 1998
Last reviewed on:
Jul 24, 2012
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