Dear Alice,

My friend has only been at college for two weeks, and she has already had sex with several guys. She is having safe sex, so it's not dangerous in that sense and she claims to be enjoying herself. However, it seems to me that such behavior is unhealthy and damaging to one's emotional state and reputation? but I'm not sure how to explain to her how I feel, or articulate what is wrong with her how she's acting. Do you think what she's doing is wrong, and if so, how should I confront her?

-Concerned Friend

Answer

Dear Concerned Friend,

While it may be disconcerting for you to think of your friend having sex with multiple partners, it's tricky to pinpoint exactly how (and if) this behavior will impact your friend psychologically or socially. For some young women, casual sex can be associated with depression or lower self-esteem. But it's not safe to assume that casual sex will cause negative outcomes for all women (or your friend).

No-strings-attached sex may be more common than some people think. One study [2] found that 70 percent of college students had sex with someone in a non-romantic (casual) context in the last year. And while the verdict is still out on what impact casual sex has on young adults in general, girls and guys do seem to be affected differently by lots of mattress hopping. Some studies show that women having the highest frequency of casual sex also have the highest frequency of depressive pathology, perhaps as a result of seeking external validation via sex or male attention, or even because of an association with their sexual encounters and a strong sense of regret. However, there is no evidence to say that having casual sex causes feelings of depression, only that the two tend to be associated in some women.

When it comes to casual sex in college, drugs and alcohol can play a role. Probably the most ubiquitous combo of social lubricant and inhibition blocker out there, there is a not-so-surprising correlation between substance use/abuse and getting it on. If your friend is consuming drugs or alcohol as foreplay to her encounters, there is room for worry. Substance use and risk-taking go hand in hand, and casual sex from a health perspective is already on the riskier side of the spectrum. Even if a person normally has safer sex when sober, drugs or alcohol may impair sexual negotiation skills, making it harder to insist that partners use
condoms, dental dams, and/or other safer sex precautions.

An important factor to consider is the sexual double standard for men and women in many societies. This double standard says that different sexual behaviors (for example, casual sex) are acceptable depending on whether a person is a man or a woman. Sexual reputations (as you mentioned) are a perfect example of the double standard: active, healthy female sexual desire is labeled negatively while an active, healthy male desire for sex is not only expected, but positively encouraged. Activists from Lil' Kim to Hillary Clinton to Queen Latifa have commented on the injustice of the sexual double standard that negatively labels girls for acting on their desires while boys may be encouraged to play the field.

Mining the differences between empowered, pleasure-seeking behavior and a more harmful pattern of sexual decision-making can be difficult. Before talking with your friend, you may want to ask yourself what concerns you most: the perception that she is risking her reputation? The chance that she may be putting herself at risk for sexually transmitted infections and/or pregnancy? The idea that she will feel regret or other negative emotions as a result of casual sex? Once you're clear about your own concerns, you can propose that the two of you have a conversation about the fact that you seem to be making different sexual choices and how those choices may be impacting you positively and negatively. Remember to ask permission before getting started? your friend may not want to talk about it, that's her decision. Also, keep in mind that while you have concerns for your friend and are a good friend for expressing them to her, she may not end up sharing those concerns.

During the conversation, listen to your friend and be ready to offer support. If she does share your concerns, you could offer to talk more about her reasons for having lots of casual sex. If she does not share your concerns, you can let her know you appreciate the chance to talk openly and will always be her friend, even if you have differing perspectives. You can also point her to resources on campus, if appropriate. Columbia students on the Morningside campus can visit a health care provider at Medical Services by calling 212-854-2284 or logging on to Open Communicator and can speak with a counselor at Counseling and Psychological Services by calling 212-854-2878. Students on the Medical Center campus can reach out to Student Health or Mental Health Services.

We still have progress to make as a culture around gender equality when it comes to who we take home (and how often). Casual sex certainly comes with some risks, but sleeping around doesn't automatically equate to low self-esteem or an intention to self-destruct. Opening lines of communication with your friend about her intentions and feelings surrounding her casual rendezvous' should help determine whether your concerns are warranted and how to move forward.

Alice!

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