Dear Alice,

I'm just wondering if you have any advice for the girlfriend of a trans guy. I absolutely adore him, but sometimes I feel so bad for him because he has to go through a lot of awful stuff with society and his family. I know I can't fix things for him, but is there anything I should be doing/saying to constructively make him feel better? What should I do when he gets depressed?

?Loving Girlfriend

Answer

Dear Loving Girlfriend,

It's great that you want to be the best partner possible. Helping a loved one deal with the pressures of society and family difficulties is not easy, but there are things you can do and resources you can seek out to help you and your partner cope. One consideration is to remember that your feelings and your partner's feelings about being transgender may diverge; that is, while you sometimes feel bad for him, he may or may not be feeling bad for himself. Acknowledging your observations that he faces some hard situations and asking for his perspective might be a good way to begin a conversation.

As an opener, you could opt for frankness and say something like "I've noticed that [so-and-so] is having trouble accepting you being a guy? does that bother you? Can I do anything?" Or you might want a more general, subtle approach, like "It seems like you've had a rough time with your family lately, do you want to talk about it?"

Talking with peers can help you and your partner learn ways to deal with difficult situations, hear from others with similar experiences, and feel like you are part of a larger community. You might consider looking for a support group in your area where you and your partner can meet others who identify as transgender or are in relationship with a trans-identified person. FTMInternational[2] has a number of online and in-person meetings for both FTMs (female-to-males) and allies (including family, friends, and partners) across the globe.

Another way to show support for your partner could be to join an organization or advocacy group on your own.

Having open and honest conversations about your partner’s and your own experiences with
gender identity and expression may be a good way for you both to express your feelings and show each other your concern. Try being open and honest about how you are feeling and ask him to share his feelings and the type of support he appreciates. At the same time, be aware of his needs and don’t pressure him to talk. Above all, it’s a good idea to treat your boyfriend as a well-rounded person, who has many identities, interests, and experiences. If he senses that you feel bad for him and/or pity his situation, this could be doing more harm than good. During your conversation you might also ask your boyfriend what he loves and appreciates about himself, so that you can remind him of his great qualities when he does feel down.

If he is feeling depressed, you can do your best to support him, listen to him, and let him know that you care. You may consider encouraging him to see a professional who has experience dealing with these issues.

Many couples struggle with support and communication, especially in dealing with complex topics like gender identity; you can check out the Go Ask Alice! Relationships [3] archive for more tips. Best wishes to you both,

Alice!
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