Rumor control? Is s/he gay?

Dear Alice,

There's a rumor going around that I'm either gay or bisexual, and I have no idea how it got started because I've never said anything about anything to anyone! But it's spreading rather quickly and is causing me great psychological pain and I don't know what to do.

Signed, HELP!

Answer

Dear HELP!,

Rumors can be upsetting, regardless of whether their content is true or false. You probably realize that there is no one correct way to solve this problem, and that part of your action will depend on why this particular rumor is so upsetting for you. Before you know what to do, you may need to answer the question "why is this bothering me?" For example, do you consider yourself gay or bisexual? Do you ever have sexual feelings toward or about people of the same sex? If not, what about these rumors makes you uneasy? Are there other things about you that you fear will be exposed through rumors spreading?

Sometimes rumors are completely false and sometimes they contain a grain of, or even the whole, truth. A true rumor can be painful, especially if the issues being discussed are topics that we aren't ready to face ourselves. A false rumor can also be painful, as well as a sign of ignorance, fear, or discrimination; a way of teasing; or, for the rumor-spreaders to hide their own insecurities. Unfortunately, claiming that someone is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered is still a socially sanctioned way of insulting someone in certain social circles. Of course, this only serves to reinforce the idea that being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT) is a bad thing, an idea that services such as Go Ask Alice! hope to help eliminate.

Back to your particular situation, though. Here are some questions that you might want to ask yourself in order to have a more complete picture of the present situation, its consequences, and how you would like to see it resolved:

- Who are the people doing the talking?
- In what context?
- Is this part of a pattern in this group?
- Who are your allies?
Do you want to talk about it? with friends you choose? With an authority figure? In an anonymous statement? Not at all?
Would you like support from others who have had similar experiences?

Whether this rumor is based in reality or not, it might be worth responding to, because it is hurtful? not only to you, but perhaps also to LGBT people hearing the rumors, or to others who are afraid that they may become targets of this rumor-spreading behavior. You might think about soliciting the help of an RA, group advisor, or dean to organize a program with a campus group that might help flesh out the issues at hand.

Perhaps some more simple responses could work, too. You can demonstrate that the rumors aren't upsetting you (what the instigators most definitely want) by announcing the upcoming events of Queer Awareness Month at your school (October), or other similar programs that might redirect the attention from you as an individual to the larger context of gay rights, homophobia, and mutual respect, as well as some of the complexities of recent research on gender and sexual orientation. Or, you could ignore the rumors altogether, demonstrating that you don't feel such tactless behavior deserves your energy.

The following organizations may also be of some assistance and support to you:

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**GLSEN: Student Pride USA** [2]
*Student Pride USA is a for youth, by youth project working to support and help network Gay/Straight Alliances, and similar youth/student groups, across the nation. Only a few years old, Student Pride USA has worked to support over 700 groups by providing resources, materials, support, education, trainings, and connections on a daily basis.*

**Making Schools Safe** [3]
*The Making Schools Safe project is a resource to LGBTQ teens, especially those living in rural areas, that is organized by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).*

**National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI)** [4]
*The National Coalition Building Institute facilitates discussions and programs when conflict arises around real or perceived differences.*

As you can see there are a number of groups and agencies available to provide support and information. If the "rumor management" and peer-education feels like a daunting task, you may decide it's a good idea to enlist a friend or trusted authority figure to help squelch the gossip and spread some knowledge. Best of luck,

Alice!

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