Dear Alice,

What would you suggest I do to spice up my relationship with my boyfriend? We are no longer affectionate to each other like we used to be when we just met. Please help me. I am desperate for your advice.

Answer

Dear Reader,

As you settle into your relationship, it's pretty common for the initial flames of passion to die down a bit. But even if the flames aren’t a raging bonfire, there would ideally still be some fire burning in the pit and some heat to keep you both warm. When you say you are no longer affectionate with each other, you may find it useful to first ask yourself: What would I like to see change in this relationship? Affection can take many forms and mean many different things. What does this mean for you? For some people, a loss of affection may refer to a change in their actual feelings about their partner or about their relationship. For others, it may refer to a change in loving or caring behavior towards their partner, even if underlying feelings of love and affection remain the same. For others, it may refer to a decrease in the level of sexual intimacy or the frequency of sexual activity in the relationship. So perhaps you are thinking of one or two of these areas or maybe all of them apply in your situation.

While it is not always easy to identify one’s feelings, it may be useful to first assess your own feelings for your partner. The flavor of love in a relationship can change over time, and this is normal. Over time, the very intense feelings that you first felt when you were falling in love with your partner can change. The love can become deeper, but less all-consuming than in the initial period of the romance. This does not mean that all passion and eroticism are gone from the relationship, only that the intense urgency of the previous feelings is replaced by persistent feelings of love and affection. Some people, in taking stock of their feelings, may find that they don’t feel they love their partner, or they feel a strong connection with them, but one that no longer feels sexual. Check your own barometer on your feelings and see what your gauge reads. It may be useful to ask your boyfriend about his feelings. Have the two of you ever communicated about the lack of affection? If not, what might it be like to bring this up with him? See if you can get a sense from him about his feelings, as well.

If the two of you both love each other still, and both wish to stay together, talk about what you both would like to see different in the relationship. Do you find you agree on the changes
you’d like to see or that there are some areas of departure? Are there areas where compromise could be made? Here are some possible ways to talk about changes you might like to see in your relationship:

- I’d like for us to cook more meals together.
- I’d love it if you could (insert affectionate action your boyfriend used to do but no longer does) for me again like you used to.
- I’d like for us to have one night a week that is designated as our date night.
- I’d like for us to talk more openly with each other about sex and brainstorm ways we might spice up our sex life.
- Are there ways you’d like for me to show you more affection?
- Is there anything I can do to support you in showing more affection to me?
- When you do (insert affectionate action here), I feel loved by you. Can you do that more?

Talking with each other about your needs in the relationship is a good first step in getting those needs met! Even if you initially change your behavior, it may not mean that you suddenly feel closer to each other. Keep at it for a while, even if it feels like a lot of work. Relationships in real life (unlike relationships in movies), do take work. They are like gardens that require upkeep (or fires that need to be stoked). Healthy relationships need both partners’ attention. Be curious about each other’s needs, willing to think about and share your own, and willing to work together to meet as much of those needs as feels reasonable for each person.

If working this out on your own feels like it still isn’t getting you anywhere, trying couples counseling is another good option. A therapist can help you both notice what patterns may be interfering with the intimacy or affection in the relationship and may be able to help you both learn to shift those patterns.

Good luck adding the spice!

Alice!

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