My girlfriend can't get over that I experimented with men

Dear Alice,

My girlfriend of one year still cannot get over that I have experimented with men. I told her pretty early on in the relationship that I had fooled around with men. I disguised it in many ways but after a year, I just told her for a period of my life I use to have sex with men. I told her I don't have any tendencies to go back to men, I love her, and I want to be with her, but this is a fact of my past. She has tried to get over it, says she loves me, but whenever a gay issue comes up, she looks at me weird and says how she can't get the image of me "receiving anal" out of her head. I have answered all her questions about it, I have been brutally honest with her about it, and she still cannot get over it. What should I do???

Thanks Alice,
Ghosts of the Past

Answer

Dear Ghosts of the Past,

First of all, kudos to you for being open and honest in sharing information about your sexual history with your partner. These topics can be very challenging to bring up, but you plowed through anyway and have maintained an open, honest, and patient stance in the face of her worries. Your concerns about her ongoing reactions are valid, but by understanding both your own feelings and her feelings, you can determine the next best steps for your relationship.

Before jumping into deep conversations with your girlfriend, asking yourself the following questions may help you work out your own feelings on the matter: How do you feel about the fact that she can't seem to get over this aspect of your sexual past? What goes through your head when she brings your past up or gives you a weird look? These feelings can help guide your response and possibly spark a meaningful discussion. It may also be helpful to clarify with her exactly what's behind her concern. Is she concerned you may leave her for a man? Or is it about discomfort with a certain sexual act? Is it a combination of these factors? Or something else entirely? Working through these questions could help alleviate her ongoing concerns.

Once her concerns are identified, you can approach the conversation in ways that best address them. If her concern is that you identify as gay, or if she's confused how you could've had sex with men and are now happy with her, it may be helpful to break down sexual orientation (how people feel attraction towards others), sexual identity (what people
call themselves), and sexual behavior (what people do sexually) and explain yours to her in that context. Looking at sexual orientation, identity, and behavior this way is sometimes uncomfortable because it introduces ambiguity and dispenses with easy labels. Some people respond to this type of information with confusion, disbelief, or even anger, while others find it a welcome relief to not have to fit people into boxes and labels. She may find that an explanation of sexual orientation, identity, and behavior helps her accept your past.

At its most simplistic, sexual orientation is about to whom you are attracted. More specifically, it's about the people for whom one experiences feelings of attraction, which can be physical, sexual, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual. This can be complex. Some people may experience all these attractions at once with a particular gender [2], while others experience some forms of attraction with one gender and other feelings of attraction with another gender. Your attractions may also change over the course of your life.

Along with sexual orientation, there's also the component of sexual identity. This is the descriptor (if any) you give yourself as a sexual being. Consider the following:

- Some people use the word queer as an identity to recognize the fluidity of sexual attraction and gender identity.
- People who identify as men and who are sexually and emotionally attracted to some other women may identify as straight.
- People who identify as men and who are sexually and emotionally attracted to some other men may identify as gay.
- People who identify as women and who are sexually and emotionally attracted to some other women may identify as lesbian.
- People who are sexually and emotionally attracted to some men and women, as well as people who identify their gender identity as something other than men or women, may identify as bisexual.
- People who are uncertain of their sexual orientation may identify as questioning.
- People who don't experience sexual or romantic attraction may consider themselves asexual.

Finally, sexual behavior is what people do sexually with other people. Here's the kicker: these identities don't always line up the way some people believe they should. For example, if someone identifies as a man, is attracted to only men, and has had sex only with men, then it follows that they are likely gay, right? No, not necessarily. Not everyone defines themselves in the same way or with the same terms, and human beings don't usually come in neat little categories. Not only that, some people prefer not to define their sexual orientations or identities at all, or they find that how they define themselves changes over time. To further illustrate this, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [3] (CDC) found for people age 18 to 44 in the United States that 17.4 percent of those who identified as women and 6.2 percent of those who identified as men reported having same-sex sexual contact at some point in their life. However, only 1.3 percent of those who identified as women and 1.9 percent of those who identified as men identified as ?homosexual, gay, or lesbian.? Based on these results, same-sex sexual contact doesn't mean a person identifies as gay.

It can be very difficult when your partner takes issue with some aspect of your history or experience. Is it possible that her concern is motivated by homophobia (fear of or dislike of lesbian, gay, or bisexual people)? If so, is she willing to work through that? If the answer is yes, you can begin to approach the conversation together (Homophobic roommate [4] in the Go Ask Alice! Relationships [5] archives may help you figure out how you'd like to best
approach this conversation). If the answer is no, then ultimately you may have to decide if you want to continue trying to reassure her. You can’t change your partner’s reaction, but you can decide how much you want to be exposed to it. While you care about your partner, you also express a need to be fully accepted for you who are and your experiences. Moving forward, ask her to talk openly and honestly with you about her concerns or ask your partner to speak with someone else they trust about this issue to take some of the pressure off you. If these don’t seem possible, consider whether you could continue to be in a relationship with someone who doesn’t accept your past. Only you can know what’s right for you. Whatever you decide, remember that there’s nothing strange, wrong, or unusual about having had same-sex sexual partners. You may also find working with a mental health professional to be helpful, as they can help you navigate these concerns in this and any future relationships.

Hopefully these strategies can help your ghosts fade away so your past is just your past — worth celebrating and accepting exactly as it is.

Alice!

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 Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, or Questioning [7]
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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [15]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [16]
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