Afraid to have sex?  

Dear Alice,

My girlfriend and I have been going out for more than two years now. I am a first-year student (eighteen years old) and she is seventeen. We haven't had sex yet, but during the last year and a half we tried pretty much everything there is besides it. I really feel this is the right time, but when I try to talk to her about it, all she says is that she is afraid. She says it is not that she does not believe in losing virginity before marriage, she is just afraid. I don't want to pressure her, but I just feel that maybe I am not the right person for her or something. What should I do? Thanks.

?Curious

Answer

Dear Curious,

Before we get into the nitty gritty, here are the three key words to remember: trust, communication, and respect. "Losing" one's virginity, or choosing to have sexual intercourse for the first time, can be a major decision. Addressing your partner's concerns is especially important, both in terms of respecting your partner's feelings and for strengthening your relationship. Should you two ultimately decide to have sex, it is important that both you and your partner feel 100% comfortable with your decision.

You mentioned that your partner is afraid? do you know exactly what she is afraid of? Discussing the following topics with your partner may give you a better sense of what she is afraid of when it comes to sex, and help you build your communication, trust, and respect for each other.

Does she worry about unwanted pregnancy? Above the pleasure, exploration, and fun, sex comes with a whole lot of responsibility. It is important that you and your partner have a strategy for birth control, and have spoken about what you would do if she became pregnant. Fortunately, there are a multitude of methods to protect you and your partner from unplanned pregnancy, including male condoms and hormonal birth control methods. More information about protection can be found in the Go Ask Alice! Sexual & Reproductive Health archive.

Is she concerned about sexually transmitted infections (STIs)? Even if you and your partner are each other's firsts, it can be reassuring to talk about STIs, including HIV. Having this conversation can be tricky, but it is a crucial component of being comfortable when having
sex. Remember, having an STI test is the only surefire way to know that you and your partner are STI-free. Also, male condoms are the most widely used form of protection against both STIs and pregnancy.

*Does she fear physical pain?* It is important to speak with your partner about how you imagine your first time to be. For women who have never had vaginal intercourse, the first few times experiencing penetration can be uncomfortable or painful. Fortunately, there are plenty of ways to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. These include going slowly, using lots of lube (silicone or water-based), and most importantly, being totally ready, both emotionally and physically. For you and your partner, discussing a fear of pain may turn out to be quite a relief. Check out First intercourse: Minimizing pain and maximizing pleasure.

*Are you the right one for her, is she the right one for you?* While this may be a difficult question to ask, it is extremely important to be honest with each other. Are you having fun in your relationship? Are you able to communicate well with each other? Are you caring towards one another both emotionally and physically? These characteristics of a relationship signify compatibility and maturity – both important for a satisfying and healthy sexual relationship.

After you bring up these questions to your partner, the two of you may need some time to think to yourselves. Be sure to allow your partner time and space if she does not want to answer you right away. A good old-fashioned "pros" and "cons" list can also help you and your partner sort out feelings, desires, and concerns about sex. If something stands out or keeps coming up in the list, it might be an important topic of conversation to bring to the table.

In the meantime, don't forget to continue to enjoy spending quality time with your partner. Regardless of your sexual activity, being in a relationship is a unique journey – filled with companionship, love, and just enjoying the little things together. Take the time to enjoy being with your partner, and continue to learn more about each other. Having a happy and healthy sex life requires trust, communication, and respect. Developing these three things with your partner will help build a strong foundation for the rest of your relationship – both emotional and physical.

Alice!

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