Dear Alice,

My friend has only been at college for two weeks, and she has already had sex with several guys. She is having safe sex, so it's not dangerous in that sense and she claims to be enjoying herself. However, it seems to me that such behavior is unhealthy and damaging to one’s emotional state and reputation? but I'm not sure how to explain to her how I feel, or articulate what is wrong with her how she's acting. Do you think what she's doing is wrong, and if so, how should I confront her?

? Concerned Friend

Answer

Dear Concerned Friend,

While it may be disconcerting for you to think of your friend having sex with multiple partners, it's tricky to pinpoint exactly how and if this behavior impacts your friend psychologically or socially. For some, casual sex can be associated with depression or lower self-esteem, but for others, it can be a healthy part of their sex life. However, rather than deciding that this is detrimental to your friend, it may be helpful to have a conversation with her first (more on this later).

No-strings-attached hook-ups may be more common than some people think. Some researchers have found that up to 80 percent of undergraduate college students have engaged in casual sexual behaviors (anything ranging from kissing to sexual touching to penetrative sex) and more than 30 percent have engaged in casual sex (both oral sex and sexual intercourse). And when it comes to emotional implications and how people report feeling after their casual encounters, the results are varied. Some people are boosted emotionally by casual sex, while others may experience feelings of loneliness and regret. Therefore, if your friend is saying she is enjoying her encounters, this could well be the case.

Another factor to consider is the sexual double standard for men and women in many societies. This double standard says that different sexual behaviors (for example, casual sex) are acceptable depending a person's gender. Sexual reputations (as you mentioned) are a perfect example of the double standard: active, healthy female sexual desire is labeled negatively while an active, healthy male desire for sex is not only expected but positively encouraged. Activists have commented on the injustice of the sexual double standard that negatively labels women for acting on their desires while men may be encouraged to play the
Mining the differences between empowered, pleasure-seeking behavior and a more harmful pattern of sexual decision-making can be difficult. Before talking with your friend, you may want to ask yourself what concerns you most: Are you worried about the perception that she is risking her reputation? Are you concerned this behavior isn't in line with your friend's values? Is it the chance that she may be putting herself at risk for sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy? Are you concerned that she will feel regret or other negative emotions as a result of casual sex? Once you're clear about your own concerns, you can propose that the two of you have a conversation about them. Be sure to approach it from your own observations, rather than assumptions you may have about the behavior that is occurring. Further, make sure to ask permission before getting started? your friend may not want to talk about it and that's her decision. Also, keep in mind that while you have concerns for your friend and are a good friend for expressing them to her, she may not end up sharing those concerns.

During the conversation, listen to your friend and be ready to offer support. If she does share your concerns, you could offer to talk more about her reasons for having casual sex. You could also encourage her to have a conversation with a mental health professional if there are concerns about her emotional well-being. If she doesn't share your concerns, you can let her know you appreciate the chance to talk openly and are still her friend, even if you have differing perspectives.

While all sexual activity can come with some risks, it doesn't mean that those who enjoy casual sex have low self-esteem or find it emotionally damaging. Having sex (or not) is a personal choice, and if you're concerned about your friend's choices, you may want to just speak with her about them. Opening lines of communication with your friend about her intentions and feelings surrounding her casual rendezvous may help determine whether your concerns are warranted. You clearly care about your friend, but ultimately, she will be the one deciding if she needs to make any changes. This also means that she may make decisions with which you don't always agree, so take care to not pass judgment if her behaviors don't align with your own beliefs and values. As her friend, you can remind her that you are there to be supportive and communicate your concerns, especially if she seems down or shows signs of distress.

Best of luck to you,

Alice!

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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [11]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [12]
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