Hi Alice,

I just discovered this service, and hope you can help me. I'm a grad student (mid-twenties) and was very deeply involved with a man several years older than me. Although it was a monogamous relationship—we had a wonderful and very fulfilling sex life, and were generally very happy in each other's company—he was unwilling to make a firm promise not to date other people if he found someone he liked. I broke up with him because I didn't like what this ambiguity was doing to me—making me extremely possessive, jealous, etc. We have both been hurting a great deal since then and were planning on getting back together... but he backed out because he doesn't feel able to make a commitment. Part of this is cultural (he's Indian, I'm American), and part of it is probably developmental, as he didn't start dating until quite late by American standards.

In any case, we were considering marriage at one point last summer, and I am still deeply in love with him. He still has very strong feelings for me as well, but I get the sense that the fear of commitment is paralyzing him. I'm at the point where trying to let go and get on with my life seems to be the only viable option, but I'd love to hear your suggestions and comments.

? Heartbroken

Answer

Dear Heartbroken,

On one hand, it sounds as though you may be on the same page about how you feel about each other; on the other, you may be looking at two different books when it comes to what it means to be in a committed relationship. Without a doubt, this can be a tough spot for both parties. That said, for a relationship to be successful, partners often need to come to an understanding of their mutual feelings and what is permitted in the partnership. This helps ensure that all involved feel secure and respected. It appears you've had a number of conversations about what commitment looks like for the two of you, and in that case, it's wise to continue to be honest with each other. As you decide how to move forward, it's also critical to be honest with yourself. Taking some time to reflect on your own wants and needs is a great place to start. Then, determining whether and how you might communicate those with your partner may also be on the table. Although this process may be difficult, try to stay true to yourself and clearly communicate your feelings and desires.

It seems like you have a sense of what you value in a relationship based on your question.
However, if you’re still feeling unsure which direction to go in, it may be a good idea to pause and spend a little more time pondering your wants and needs. Monogamy (dating or having sex with only one person and that one person only dating or having sex with you) seems preferable to you? is that still the case? How does being in a relationship with only one person make you feel? Is there anything about a monogamous relationship that you would be willing to compromise on to be with this partner? Relatedly, would you be open to a committed, but non-monogamous relationship (i.e., where he?s your primary partner, but one or both of you may seek out other romantic or sexual partners)? How do you think you’d feel being in that type of relationship? If you think you?d consider it, what sorts of parameters would you like to discuss with him to feel good about that dynamic? Thinking through these and other questions about what your relationship preferences, boundaries, and needs will help you determine what’s right for you? and will likely inform how to proceed with the person you love as well.

Following some self-reflection, if both you and he still have strong feelings for each other, you may want to have a conversation about how you could get back together in a way that meets both of your needs. If you?d still like to pursue a romantic relationship, consider the ways in which you?d be willing to compromise and ask the same of him. What are the relationship scenarios with which you?d both be happy? For both parties, what aspects of a relationship are negotiable and which ones aren’t? As you discuss, it’s also good to keep in mind that you may not come to an agreement. If you can’t see eye to eye (or heart to heart), you could then think through how you’d like to communicate that and talk through how you’ll move forward, be it as just friends or through ceasing communicating all together. In any case, setting aside time to have these conversations and being honest with each other (and yourselves) is key.

After sorting through your thoughts, you may decide not to pursue any form of relationship with this person. That’s not always an easy conclusion to come by; figuring out that a relationship you’ve invested in quite a bit no longer meets what you need can certainly be rough. This is especially true if your feelings about the other person haven’t changed. Taking time for yourself in this process is wise, both in terms of self-care (getting enough sleep, eating a balanced diet, getting regular physical activity, etc.) and reaching out to friends and loved ones for support. If you find that you’re still struggling to sift through your thoughts and emotions, you may also decide to speak with a mental health professional to help you process.

Heartbroken, no matter how you move forward, staying honest with yourself and identifying more about what you want will help you find it in other people and relationships? both now and in the future. It’s not a quick and easy response to your current situation, but it may be a more informative one. And, who knows? if this relationship isn’t the one for you right now, you may find there are others out there with whom you connect, are attracted to, and value the same things in relationships down the road, if you’re open to it.

Alice!
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Moving On [4]
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Mental Health Service (CUMC) [11]

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