Dear Alice,

My girlfriend and I have been dating long distance for about seven months. I have found out through keen observation and affirmation from an old roommate of hers that she is a rape victim. For the last three months or so she has been going through a lot of changes with job acquisition, living conditions, and I don't know what else. In this time, communication between us has grown to an insignificant level (in my opinion). It seems as though she is putting her job, spiritual drive, personal life, etc before me. Almost to the point that she doesn't want to include me. I think this has something to do with the rape issue and her ability to trust people. I think she may be unable to believe that I could love her unconditionally.

I have been thinking my situation over and don't know what to do. I love her with all my heart but I am receiving virtually nothing from this relationship right now. Do I hold on to her and give her the space to come to grips with her life and hope that I will be in the big picture later on, or do I end it on the condition that she needs time for herself to decide if I am an important part of her future life? Please respond because I'm crawling out of my skin.

? Bubbles

Answer

Dear Bubbles,

It sounds like you're trying to be sensitive and understanding of your girlfriend and the things going on in her life. Long-distance relationships can be difficult in general, and if your girlfriend is experiencing big transitions in her life or dealing with traumatic issues from the past, sustaining your bond from afar may be especially tough.

You say communication in your relationship is at an insignificant level. Developing and practicing communication skills is crucial in any relationship. In a long-distance situation, verbal and written communications take on additional importance because the day-to-day messages you send through touch, facial expression, or just your presence are missing. What do you think could help improve communication between you and your girlfriend? Do you have regular times that you can reach out to one another? A means of communication that you both enjoy? If she's always busy the one time of day you're free, or you're a phone fan but she prefers email, it may contribute to blocks in communication.

Beyond the logistics of contact, it sounds like you may be having difficulty communicating your
needs to your partner. Can you put into words what you hope to receive from the relationship? It's possible she is purposefully putting other things in her life before you, and it's also possible she's just unaware of how you feel. It seems just as critical for you to understand her feelings and needs from her perspective.

You speculate about various factors that may be influencing her emotions and behavior. It may be helpful to ask her directly about the possible impact of sexual violence on her life or the impact on your relationship of current changes she is experiencing. What does she feel is influencing your relationship or communication? How might you best support her? If she wants professional help related to rape or current stressors, are there outside resources you could suggest?

You seem to be willing to make compromises to help your partner work through the things going on in her life. It's also key for you to think about your own feelings and work out a balance between supporting your girlfriend and taking care of yourself. Is meeting your needs also a priority for her? If she needs time to settle into a new environment or work through personal issues, what is the time line? If the relationship is a priority to her, how can she help to meet your needs as she focuses on taking care of herself as well? Having open, honest dialogues with her that convey the feelings you expressed in your letter can hopefully help you both better understand one another and decide on the future and form of your relationship.

Alice!
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