Dear Alice,

I have a rather strange question.

My girlfriend does not masturbate. We’ve talked about it a few times, and she has basically said that she would like to be able to masturbate, but can't get the feeling that it's "dirty" or "wrong" out of her head. She has no problem with me masturbating (she enjoys it, actually) -- but she simply can’t get herself to do it. Any suggestions to help her feel more comfortable with herself and her body?

? Argh

Answer

Dear Argh,

While masturbation is healthy, safe, and natural, the reality is that many people feel disgusted, guilty, insecure, or indifferent towards the act. And while this is true for people across all genders, this appears to be especially salient for women, as masturbation has historically been seen as a ‘male’ behavior (it's key to note that research primarily referenced women, and it didn't note sex assigned at birth). Regardless of your views about masturbation, it’s crucial to respect your partner’s sexual decisions and not pressure her into doing anything she doesn’t wish to do. If your girlfriend is interested in exploring self-pleasure in the future, you may encourage her to reflect on her current feelings, and seek out more information about masturbation and her body (whether this be on her own, with you, or with another trusted third party). To help, you can validate her feelings and empower her to confidently make decisions that she feels are best for her.

While your girlfriend's feelings about masturbation may feel off to you, her feelings are actually quite common! Similar to your girlfriend, studies show that many women feel that masturbation is ‘dirty’ or ‘wrong.’ These feelings may be tied to historical views that sexuality was to primarily or solely exist for the purposes of reproduction. Although these views towards sexuality as a whole may have evolved over time, women’s sexuality, particularly with masturbation, hasn’t changed as quickly, leading to the beliefs among some that masturbating is immoral, shameful, and unsafe. Research indicates that while some women reject these beliefs and ‘flick the bean,’ others have continued to internalize these thoughts and prefer keeping their hands to themselves.
There are differences among those who feel comfortable exploring their bodies and those who don't. But what separates women who are comfortable with masturbation from those who aren't? Researchers conducted a study looking at multiple groups of women who had varying attitudes towards masturbation. Overall, they found that women from families which promote traditional gender roles (in this case, understanding women's sexuality as for the purpose of reproduction) tend to have misconceptions about masturbation, the female body, and sexual pleasure. Women who held negative or indifferent feelings towards masturbation were more likely to express difficulty in talking with their partners about their sexuality — including masturbation and sex. Specifically, women who were strongly opposed to masturbation reported that they found it "abhorrent." The group that was less opposed or indifferent to masturbation reported not thinking about the act, or felt they didn't know much about it, what it entailed, or how to navigate the female body. Additionally, they prioritized their partners' sexual pleasure over their own. Finally, the group of women who did masturbate (and found it pleasurable) experienced open and relaxed communication with their partners about their sexuality. This research suggests that individual's backgrounds and communication styles influence their perceptions towards masturbation.

Now, this isn't to suggest that individuals from certain backgrounds will automatically view masturbation a certain way. If you're not sure why your girlfriend is uncomfortable with masturbation, it might be helpful to start a conversation with her in a calm and open environment — preferably not around the time you two get intimate. You could start off by expressing that you respect her decision to do (or not do) what she wishes with her body, and that you're simply there to provide support. She may find thinking through some of these reflective questions to be helpful: Why does she feel that masturbation is dirty and or wrong? What messages, information, or experiences may have shaped her current perspectives on it? What were the sources of the messages or information? Has she ever tried it before? How did that feel? You may find that she's uncomfortable (or unwilling) to think through these questions; if that's the case, it's best to not push her and share that you're open to continuing this conversation in the future, if she's interested.

Finally, if your girlfriend seems receptive to the idea, you could suggest some resources and even she this response with her. She may find it helpful to speak with a trusted third party to help her work through her concerns. Your girlfriend could also talk with a mental health professional to process her feelings separate from her romantic relationship with you, and without undue pressure of wanting to please you. If those strategies aren't appealing, you could also recommend she check out Planned Parenthood's page on masturbation and the Masturbation category of the Go Ask Alice! Sexual and Reproductive Health archives, both of which shares its benefits (including health benefits) and offers tips to make it fun and enjoyable. Tapping into these resources may help your girlfriend become more in tune with her body and desires. However you choose to proceed, if your goal is to help your girlfriend become more confident in herself and her body, it's best to listen to and validate her concerns, and actively empower her to do what she wants to do.

Good luck!

Alice!

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Relationships
Relationship Stuff
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Masturbation

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Safer Sex Map (Morningside/ Barnard)
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Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
Center for Student Wellness (CUMC)
Mental Health Service (CUMC)

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