

Shy grad student ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I am a male, second-year grad student who has never had a relationship. In high school, I was very shy; in college, I started getting over this (and made lots of female friends), but since I started grad school, I have had almost no time for a social life ? once every three weeks or so I have a drink with a classmate, but that's all I can manage. I try not to think about relationships ? when I do, I find myself feeling very lonely. I masturbate whenever I get horny. Am I abnormal? Should I see a therapist or something?

Shy, lonely and introspective

Answer

Dear Shy, lonely and introspective,

Some people are "late bloomers" and postpone having relationships until later in their lives. School, work, extracurricular activities, careers, and plans all take precedence. Grad school and studying often leave little room for dating. In your question you describe yourself as shy and lonely. If you had written that you had close friends and a fulfilling life, but just hadn't met the right romantic partner yet, then the concern would be different. Shyness is one thing and loneliness is another. Many shy people are able to find partners and have meaningful relationships, the way you were/are able to make friends with women.

Researchers have learned a lot about shyness in recent years. It is a trait with both genetic and environmental components. Shyness is frequently viewed as a negative trait, especially in societies that value individuality and assertiveness. Recently, however, scientists have identified positive aspects of shyness. For example, shy people tend to be good listeners and observers, and are more likely to think before they speak. So you may be able to see your shyness as a part of who you are, and an element of what makes you unique. Similarly, people are attracted to others who value and demonstrate thoughtfulness and good listening skills. It's not clear, however, if your shyness, your graduate work, or a combination is causing your loneliness.

Is it okay to masturbate when you're lonely? Of course. It's also okay to masturbate when you're happy or with someone else. What matters is how you feel.

If you were to contact your school's counseling service, your concerns are appropriate issues and questions to talk about with a therapist. You may learn that your shyness represents

something else, or you may find comfortable, creative ways to spend time with others. To address your need to feel less isolated, perhaps breakfast dates or study groups would make a difference. You may also identify ways to make time and have energy for meeting with potential friends or starting relationships. Some therapists and clinics specialize in shyness, but this is not essential.

You've made a brave step by reaching out to *Go Ask Alice!*. When you reach out again, you may be surprised by what happens when you take the risk. If you want to see a counselor you can talk to your health care provider for a referral.

Alice!

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