Definition of virgin? [1]

Dear Alice,

How do you define a virgin? I have never had any sexual intercourse. However, I live in with my girlfriend and we often have "intimate actions" and oral sex. Are we still considered virgins?

Sign me,
Cherry picker

Answer

Dear Cherry picker,

Frustrating as it may be, the simplicity of your question belies the complex definition of the term "virgin." To some, a virgin is someone who hasn't had sexual intercourse (that is, penis-to-vagina intercourse). To others, a virgin is a person who has not engaged in any intimate acts, including deep kissing, genital touching, and oral, vaginal, or anal sex. Still others may allow certain intimacies, like kissing and touching below the belt, while excluding other sex acts. Some people believe they are a virgin until they have sex with someone of the opposite sex, while many believe that people who exclusively have same-sex partners can and do lose their virginity. Finally, some believe that people who have been sexually assaulted, but have not had consensual sex, are still virgins.

Why the variation? Definitions of virginity are often deeply personal and stem from religious, cultural, historical, and family influences that emphasize different values. Some people want to remain a virgin for religious or cultural reasons, some relate the concept of purity to being a virgin, others simply don't want to have sex.

As you probably are aware, the idea of virginity is an old one. People in ancient Greece and Rome used the term virgin to refer to a woman (or a goddess) who was autonomous, or on her own, not owned by any man. It was only later that it came to apply solely to sexual virginity. When the meaning changed, the implication was that remaining a virgin until marriage guaranteed that a woman would uphold a family's honor by passing from father to husband "unspoiled." Because at that point there was no dependable birth control, it also made it more likely that babies would be born to married couples.

It's normal to question whether you are still a virgin, and if so, whether or how long you wish to remain a virgin. It's also normal, if not especially easy, to come up with your own definition of what virgin means to you. In fact, it's a great way for you and your girlfriend to begin an open
conversation about the many ways of being sexually and emotionally intimate. Maybe you can reach a definition you both like and agree to. You might start by thinking about these questions: Is being a virgin important to you, your partner, and/or your family? How so? What does being a virgin include (or exclude)? Is the technicality or terminology important?

Like so many of life's grey areas, only you can determine if you're "still a virgin." You might find guidance from your partner, family, friends, religious leaders, teachers, counselors, books, articles, or other sources. Ultimately, defining such a seemingly simple word could lead to a rich process of self-discovery and growth. Enjoy the journey!

Alice!
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