

People think I'm gay... but I'm not ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I am what you may call a nice guy. I'd say I'm rather sensitive and easy going. I don't really like sports, racecars, or other uber manly things. I've never had a girlfriend. Finally, I enjoy theater arts and my favorite cable station is a decorating network. You can see where I'm going. BUT I ENJOY WOMEN. I'm very attracted, I think about them all the time; I check out female butts when I walk to class. Yet everyone, especially women, seems to think I am gay. It bothers me because it makes me feel like less of a man. Additionally, how am I supposed to get this woman that I've been waiting for, for all these years, if she thinks I am gay? Please help me!!!!

Sincerely,

"MO" is me.

Answer

Dear "MO" is me,

Man or woman, masculine or feminine, gay or straight. Entrenched in a culture whose institutions perpetuate these rigid dichotomies and strict gender ideals, it may be extremely difficult to break the norms and be accepted for doing so. However, the fact that you are comfortable in your personal tastes, regardless of their alignment with these ideals, shows confidence which many women find extremely sexy. Though some may find a man's penchant for cars and sports to be the seeds of attraction, it's oftentimes more the content of someone's character that truly tips the scales when it comes to love.

As you've experienced, if you don't conform to a traditional male gender role, some people may label you as homosexual, "metrosexual," "girly," or simply just less of a man. The irony is that there is no one-size-fits-all representation of masculinity. Gay men may like sports and cars, too, and it has nothing to do with who they're sexually attracted to. "Feminine" characteristics such as caring for others, expressing emotion, and getting enjoyment out of the arts, theater, and fashion have nothing to do with anatomy, but are still widely seen to be emasculating and unacceptable in males. To be fully accepted by others (at work, in relationships, etc.), men and women may feel pressure to adhere to their respective gender role rather than finding their own unique placement on the spectrum of gender identity. But why is that?

For some men, this feeling of being different, wrong, or "weird" may lead to denial of self. For

example, this is often noted as one of the forces that keep homosexual or bisexual men in the closet. One of the unfortunate side effects of this is that boys who are raised to strictly adhere to these gender roles instead of developing their own sense of self-identity often exhibit more violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and unsafe sex practices. This brings up the question of whether these roles are benefitting or hindering young men. Though for many, it may not be an issue, in your case, it seems the latter. The fact that you are able to step outside the proverbial box in spite of this is great. But being outside the norm may be difficult and garner criticism, so the trick is learning how to manage that while also maintaining your self-confidence.

One way to do this is to surround yourself with people who don't make snap judgments on your sexuality based on surface traits like your affinity for the arts. It may take time and a little extra effort but first ask yourself a few questions: Do you find this judgment to be more prevalent within certain groups of people? Could you try to shift your social circle to include people who may be less likely to assume your sexuality before getting to know you? Perhaps you could explore clubs, organizations, or common interest groups that would allow you to not only pursue your hobbies like theatre and decorating. This might also give you the chance to meet women in a more personal setting. Doing so may give them get to know you and either avoid or get beyond any initial assumptions they may have about your sexual orientation.

Bottom line: surrounding yourself with people who accept you for you will likely up your chances of finding a woman who will find you attractive and date-worthy. In reality, there are very few people who perfectly fit the ideals of masculinity, femininity, or the other dichotomies that many cultures perpetuate, so it's futile to try to be someone you're not. Those who jump to conclusions or choose to think less of you because you don't conform are the ones missing out. Embracing this and the fact that you are worthy of acceptance and love regardless of how "manly" you are, will lead to a sense of self-worth that may translate to a greater sense of confidence when it comes to dating.

Alice!

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Footer menu

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Links

- [1] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/people-think-im-gay-im-not>
- [2] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/relationships>
- [3] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/finding-partner>
- [4] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/how-do-i-know-if-im-gay>
- [5] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/looking-love-online>
- [6] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/am-i-gay-next-generation>
- [7] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/masturbating-stats-are-there-gender-differences-and-why>
- [8] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/grads-meeting-grads-0>
- [9] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/they-dont-believe-im-gay-0>