Girlfriend's ex-boyfriend won't go away

Dear Alice,

What should I do about my girlfriend's ex-boyfriend? Their friendship is getting out of hand. He is consistently telling her how regretful it is for him and he wants her back badly. He would go out of his way to see and to talk to her. This is affecting my relationship. It is affecting my girlfriend emotionally. This has been going on for four years. I met my girlfriend two years after their break up. He is now more persistent than ever.

? Miserable one

Answer

Dear Miserable one,

This sounds like a difficult situation for all involved. However, you can only be responsible for your own part in the trio. It can be a wonderful thing when ex-lovers become friends after they break up, but it's not always possible. And when it is, it takes a lot of work on the part of both "exs." In your case, it sounds like neither your girlfriend nor her ex are willing to do the work to achieve a friendship. And why would they? They still see each other, he has an excuse for not starting another relationship, she still receives flattery and attention, and she still has you. You say it is starting to affect your girlfriend emotionally? that's easy to see after two years of keeping this up.

It sounds like it's time for you to decide what you'd like to see happen and discuss it with your girlfriend. Try not to criticize your girlfriend? focus on her behavior with this guy. Make time to talk to her when neither of you are upset and when this guy has been out of the picture for a few days. Here's one way you can structure your conversation:

- Let her know what's bothering you: "I'm very uncomfortable with you continuing to see [her ex's name] while he's still interested in a relationship with you."
- Then tell her how you're feeling: "I feel frustrated because this is undermining our relationship of two years."
- Let her know what you want to happen: "I'd like for you to stop seeing him until he's truly ready to build a friendship with the two of us as a couple."
- Clarify your role: "I support you, and I'm with you in your efforts to do this."
- And, if you're ready, you'll likely have more of an impact if you also bring up the consequences of your requests not being fulfilled: "If things don't change in the next month, we're going to have to re-evaluate our relationship."
You may not choose to use these exact words? use whatever language feels most comfortable for you. Write it down if you like; practice if you're comfortable. Having notes when it's time for the conversation can also help you both stay on track, especially given the emotions linked to the topic. You may also find it helpful to talk it out with a counselor beforehand. And, when you're ready to have a chat, make sure to avoid starting the discussion during a volatile moment. Difficult conversations are, as the descriptor implies, potentially difficult. Despite the challenge, these conversations often help bring people to the same place on an issue and enable both to focus on a solution.

Best of luck to you as you open the doors of communication,

Alice!

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Published date:
Nov 30, 1993
Last reviewed on:
Apr 06, 2015
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