Dear Alice,

My current girlfriend is still getting over an abusive relationship that she was involved in two years ago. The abuse included repeated rape throughout the two-and-half-year-long relationship. She has never been able to enjoy sex and cannot bring herself to do it again. Despite her feelings for me, she cannot relax enough during sex for it not to hurt her. I have not forced her into having sex she cannot enjoy. We have been together for nearly a year now and the problem does not seem to be getting better for her. She has nightmares and is uncomfortable and afraid in many day-to-day situations. She is worried that going to a counselor will mean she will be in counseling for the rest of her life to get over this. This has become such a hindrance to us being happy that I sometimes wonder if it is best to stay with her to try to help her through this, or whether I am out of my league.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Anytime two people come together in a relationship, they each bring bits of their unique pasts into the present as you well know. Unfortunately there aren’t easy or “right” answers for your situation. While it’s possible that staying to support her will help her in some way, there’s no guarantee that the relationship will necessarily improve. What may give you and your girlfriend hope is knowing that many survivors of abusive relationships have been able to put their past behind them enough to open doors to healthy relationships.

Now, we can speculate about how your girlfriend might benefit from counseling, but it’s her choice whether she wants to go. To start, she can choose to go to a counselor for a couple of months to learn to manage her feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. And, she wouldn’t have to be in counseling for life unless she chooses to be. It would be unethical for a mental health provider to lock her into counseling against her wishes. She’ll always be the one to call the shots about whom she sees, how often she sees that person, and for how long. With help, the strong, fearful feelings don’t have to last a lifetime. Additionally, you may want to consider going to see a counselor together. It might be more reassuring for her, would clearly show your support, and may help you better understand her thoughts and feelings. Many couples find seeing a counselor together to be helpful with a variety of relationship challenges.

You both might consider visiting the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) website for more information on survival after rape and sexual abuse. RAINN also operates a
24-hour hotline: **1-800-656-HOPE (-4673)**. Through this organization, she might find a counselor or group that specializes in treating people who've been abused.

Other places to consider for support include:

- Her/your school's counseling department or mental health clinic (if either of you are students).
- Her/your health care provider may be able to provide a referral to a trusted mental health care service.
- If faith-based support is a consideration, many members of the clergy are experienced in supporting individuals that are survivors of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.
- Her/your health insurance company?s referral source (if either of you is insured). The plan may have a list of counselors and a way to connect with services. That information should be on the insurance company?s website or brochure. You can also call the company to get more guidance.

No matter what, healing takes time and courage. Your girlfriend is a survivor, and you've been a supportive force in her life. If your girlfriend doesn?t choose to take opportunities to make some of the important changes in her life, then it may be that she isn?t ready right now. In that case, you also have some choices to consider, including whether you want to be her boyfriend right now or transition into another role. Congratulations on reaching out and making efforts to support your girlfriend.

Best wishes,

Alice!

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