History lesson: How do I ask about my partner's past? [1]

Alice,

How would I go about asking a partner about his past?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Getting in the know about your partner can be great for your relationship, but it might be helpful to first figure out what you mean by "past." Do you want to ask about your partner's ancestry? Details about their childhood? Or, do you want to know what they were like in fifth grade? If you want to find out more about your partner's life, go ahead and ask, share, and inquire. If you're unsure of where to start, how about something like: "Honey/Buttercup/Sweetie, I really like you, and I want to get to know you better. May I ask you about ________?" You can be playful and respectful — sometimes getting to know funny little tidbits of information about each other can be a relationship booster.

If by "past," you mean sexual history, then a little more consideration may be required. Try to be sensitive when bringing up this topic and beforehand consider what information you want to learn from your discussion. Why do you want to ask about your partner's history? Do you want to know how many sexual partners and what forms of sexual contact they've had? Are you interested in knowing if they've been tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) recently or ever? Or, is there any reason to think you might be at risk? Would it make you feel closer and safer to know these details about your partner's past sexual activities? Are you worried about your or your partner's sexual health? When you ask, it may be helpful to communicate the reasons why you're asking and to be prepared to share your own history.

Once you have a sense of what you want to know and why, consider where you want to have this conversation. A private, comfortable setting could be beneficial — perhaps when snuggling on the couch, resting in the park, eating dinner at home or in a quiet restaurant corner. Then it's up to you to bring up the topic in a way that fits your needs and your relationship; here are a couple of suggestions on how to get the conversation started — but you can modify them, or use your own ideas, in any way you feel is appropriate to your particular situation:

- "Hey, I think it's time for that talk. Yup, that one."
- "This is kinda hard or awkward to talk about, but have you ever been tested for STIs? [Wait for a response] Maybe we can get tested together?"
- Let's talk about sex baby? our sexual histories that is...
You might also reassure your partner that you care about them and that you want to learn, support, and figure out which precautions to take - not to pry or judge their history. If you need a little extra help you may want to meet with a health promotion professional. These folks can help you prepare for these types of discussions and even help you role-play to practice starting a conversation.

Just to be prepared, consider possible answers you might not expect, and remember that your partner could be sensitive to your reactions. Try to avoid assumptions and reactions that might come off as judgments (like laughing or impressed whistles). Also, be willing to offer your own personal information - it's only fair that the sharing go both ways and it might serve to strengthen your relationship even further.

Good luck!

Alice!
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