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## Rumor control <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

There's a rumor going around that I'm either gay or bisexual, and I have no idea how it got started because I've never said anything about anything to anyone! But it's spreading rather quickly and is causing me great psychological pain and I don't know what to do.

Signed, HELP!

### **Answer**

Dear HELP!,

Rumors can be upsetting, regardless of whether their content is true or false. There's no one correct way to address this problem, and part of your approach may depend on why this particular rumor is so upsetting for you. Before deciding what to do next, you may want to answer the question "why is this bothering me?" Is it that there's no basis for this rumor and that it's completely false? Or, is it that you have sexual feelings toward or about people of the same sex but aren't ready to share that with others? If not, what about these rumors makes you uneasy? Are there other qualities or aspects of your life that you fear will be exposed through rumors spreading? Whether you felt as though you were outed or not, it may be helpful to let others know that discussing someone's sexuality without their consent not only is disrespectful to their privacy, it has the potential to put them in harm's way. Figuring out the answers to these questions may help you determine how to best move forward.

Sometimes rumors are completely false and sometimes they contain a grain of, or even the whole, truth. A true rumor can be painful, especially if the issues being discussed are topics that people aren't ready to face themselves. A false rumor can also be painful, as well as a sign of ignorance, fear, or discrimination; a way of teasing; or a way for the rumor-spreaders to hide their own insecurities. Unfortunately, claiming that someone identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+) is often used as a socially sanctioned way of insulting someone in certain social circles. It's hurtful — not only to you, but perhaps also to people who identify as LGBTQ+ hearing the rumors, or to others who are afraid that they may become targets of this rumor-spreading behavior. This takes away the autonomy or self-determination of any person to share their own truth as they want to, with people they choose,

and when they see fit.

After thinking about why this rumor is bothering you, you may find yourself wanting more information. Here are some questions that you might want to ask yourself in order to have a more complete picture of the present situation, its consequences, and how you would like to see it resolved:

- Who started the rumor?
- Where did the rumor start?
- Who are the people doing the talking currently and in what context?
- Is this part of a pattern in this group?
- Who are your allies?
- Do you want to talk about it with friends you choose, with an authority figure, in an anonymous statement, or not at all?
- Would you like support from others who have had similar experiences?

Exploring these questions may help in deciding what steps to take next. Your approach to handling this rumor might depend on whether or not the rumor was spread with malicious intent or if one of your friends passed on the information to the wrong person. You have a choice in how you would like to respond. You may demonstrate that the rumors aren't upsetting you by allying yourself with an LGBTQ+ group in your area. This might redirect the attention from you as a person to the larger context of gay rights, homophobia, and mutual respect. Or, would you feel better not responding at all? Ignoring the rumors altogether may demonstrate that you don't feel the rumor deserves your energy. You may also reach out to authorities or support systems in your area to address any personal safety concerns you may have.

This issue is also serious because it could out somebody (that is, telling others that a person identifies as LGBTQ+ without that person's permission), which isn't only hurtful, but can put their personal safety at risk. LGBTQ+ students who experience anti-LGBTQ+ harassment often have lower educational attainment, experience a higher rate of mental health concerns, including an increased chance of suicide, and are at a higher risk of becoming a victim of violence. Outside of school, LGBTQ+ teens are more likely to face rejection from their support system, including their parents and religious organizations.

Whatever your decision to address this situation may be, there are many resources to help you. If you're a student, you may want to see if your campus has an LGBTQ+ resource center. The following organizations may also be of some assistance and support to you, especially if this rumor is outing you before you're ready:

- GLSEN: Student Pride USA [2]: Student Pride USA is a for youth, by youth project working to support and help network Gay/Straight Alliances, and similar youth/student groups, across the nation. Only a few years old, Student Pride USA has worked to support over 700 groups by providing resources, materials, support, education, trainings, and connections on a daily basis.
- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) LGBT Project [3]: The ACLU started the ACLU LGBT Project as a resource to LGBTQ+ teens that helps protect the rights of individuals to express their identities as they choose and do so in a safe environment.
- National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) [4]: The National Coalition Building Institute

works with various campuses and organizations to help establish an environment that welcomes diversity.

These organizations may provide different types of support in addressing the situation from a number of angles. If the "rumor management" and peer education feels like a daunting task, you may decide it's a good idea to enlist a friend or trusted authority figure to help squelch the gossip and spread some knowledge. As you noted that this experiencing is causing you psychological pain, you may find it helpful to speak with a mental health professional as you process this experience, what it means for you, and how to provide assistance in thinking through how to address it.

Best of luck,

Alice!

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