Dear Alice,

Where do I begin? My ex-boyfriend recently professed his undying love for me. It had been a year since we broke up and he told me it was one of the biggest mistakes he made in his life. In the year that we were "broken up," I struggled to let go of the past, to let go of losing him (he picked up a new girl in that time). So, of course I jumped at the offer of "getting back together." It has been a couple of months that we have been trying to rekindle our lost love, and it seems to me that he has made little effort to keep the flame burning or to light the candle for that matter. I fight day and night with the idea of moving on with my life (because these were the very same problems that ended our relationship the first time), but after waiting and dreaming for a year that I could have his true love back, I am very afraid that throwing it away will only devastate me. HELP!!!!

— Redley

Answer

Dear Redley,

Taking the time to reflect on your relationship and your personal needs is a great way to clarify how best to move forward, as an individual or as a couple. Self-exploration and honest communication can help you make choices about whether or not to stay with your ex-boyfriend. In order for the relationship work, it's key that both your and your partner's needs are considered. As much as you may care about him, you deserve to have your feelings reciprocated and your needs met. Spending some time on self-reflection and talking with him about your relationship may help you gain further clarity.

First, it may help you to consider what you’re looking for in a relationship. Have you considered making a list of what you want from a relationship — i.e., respect, daily phone calls, regular sex, romantic gestures, compassion, etc.? Are there parts of this list that are negotiable while other parts aren’t? Are your expectations for another person in a relationship realistic? While it is key to consider the needs and wants of your partner, try to focus on yourself during this activity.

After you’ve been able to figure out what you’re looking for, it can be helpful to think about how
he matches those wants and needs. How well do the qualities of your current (and ex-) boyfriend match your list? Is he presently meeting your needs? Is he capable of meeting your needs? What are you willing to give up or overlook? Where are you not willing to compromise? How comfortable or confident do you feel about discussing these qualities with your partner? How open do you feel he would be to the discussion? Reflecting on these questions may help you understand where there may be some gaps between what you need, what he’s providing, and whether or not your relationship is capable of having those needs met for you both.

During this process, it’ll also be key to speak with him about how he’s feeling in the relationship. Does he feel that his effort is lacking, or does he feel as though he is trying? Are his needs being met in this relationship? Taking the time to tell him how much you care about him and learn about how he values the relationship, while also sharing your concerns can be an opportunity to work through it together. Ultimately, although you care about him, you’ve noted some concerns with your relationship, and any changes that are made in the relationship need to be worked on by both parties. Are you are both willing to work towards those ever-changing goals together? If not, you may decide that being in this relationship no longer meets your needs.

You mentioned that you are worried about being devastated — why do you expect to feel this way? What positive feelings could come from ending the romantic relationship? Could you see him being a friend in the future if you want him to be in your life but aren’t suited for each other romantically? Do you have the support of friends or family to help you during this potentially challenging time? You could also consider seeking the support of a mental health professional as someone who isn’t closely tied to the situation and can offer an objective point of view.

Identifying your needs may help you to make these decisions, as well as encourage future healthy relationships, with or without your ex-boyfriend.

Alice!
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