Different backgrounds — Should we get serious? [1]

Dear Alice,

My boyfriend and I have been together for two years. He is perfect for me, I couldn't ask for a better boyfriend, and we really love each other. The problem is that we have really different backgrounds socially and economically.

I have the more traditional family, parents married for 26 years and we're blessed enough to be financially very well off. However, his family has had lots of problems financially. In addition, his father isn’t financially responsible and he cheated on his mother. Besides that, we are different ethnicities.

My parents tell me that I can't be serious about him — they are afraid that his problems with his family will become my problems when we get married. Also, I can't communicate with his parents since they don't speak English very well. Over the past few months I've become increasingly irritated at his family. I have expressed to him that I don't know if we can really become serious because I don't want to deal with his family in the future. Am I overreacting?? I love him so much, but I feel like I can't marry him because of his background. What should I do? Am I blowing his background out of proportion in regards to a possible future together?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It appears that you care a lot about your partner and that your relationship holds special meaning. However, a relationship goes beyond what two people experience inside of their love bubble. Differences in each partner’s race or ethnicity, socioeconomic background, religious beliefs, and family beliefs can complicate a relationship and can be a source of stress. It is possible to navigate and appreciate cultural differences by having a mutual respect for one another's backgrounds and trying your best to understand and incorporate your differences. Though it may feel awkward or uncomfortable, now could be the right time to turn up the volume on the communication as it can be highly beneficial to the strength and success of your relationship.

It appears as though you have a strong relationship with your partner. If you’re contemplating a
marriage with someone of a different race or religion, keep in mind that despite language or cultural barriers, it's possible to find some middle ground. Each family differs in how they celebrate certain holidays, raise children, practice religion, spend (and save) their finances, and more. You've described your family as traditional, but what may be traditional in your family or culture may not be for others. What might seem a ridiculous way to do something to you might be a sensible option for somebody else. In a loving and caring relationship, it's critical to be open to compromise and to try to understand the families that you each come from as well.

In many cases, a relationship between two people often involves a relationship with both partners’ families as well. In some cases, this entails the union of two very different families. Family can be a great support system for many but also cause additional strain. Despite your admitted challenges with your boyfriend's family, it's key to recognize that your partner may love them unconditionally. Additionally, just as you would be “dealing” with his family in the future, he would also be part of your family. This could mean him taking on any concerns that arise in your family or handling situations that are unfamiliar to him. Just as you may have concerns about his family, he may equally have concerns about yours. If you know that the differences with in-laws will cause clashes between you and your partner, consider whether the relationship is strong enough to take this step, and whether the relationship is serious enough to make the potential problems worthwhile.

You mentioned that your parents tell you that you can't be serious about him. It can also be helpful to think about what you think and want separate from your parents. If they hadn’t mentioned it to you, would you be concerned about his family problems becoming your problems? What does it mean to “deal” with his family? Have you and your partner spoken about these differences between your families before? How does he feel about these differences? How much does it mean to you to have your parents’ approval in your romantic relationships? What would it mean for you to have your parents’ input mean more or less for you? Thinking through these questions may help you get some more clarity on how to move forward.

If there's a possibility of you and your partner splitting up as a result of differences in background, you may decide to communicate this with your partner so that nobody is surprised when that time comes. In situations like these, it can be helpful for either one or both partners to speak with a mental health professional. They may be able to give you some constructive guidance for handling courtship conundrums such as these. In this relationship game, open-mindedness, patience, and communication are the key players!

Wishing you the best,

Alice!

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