Girlfriend gets scared every time I say, "I love you" [1]

Dear Alice,

I have a girlfriend who I love dearly, but every time I say I love her, she tells me that someday I'll leave her for another girl just because it happened to her before she met me. How can I prove to her that I'll never leave her and make everything right again? Your answer may save our relationship. Please Alice, I need your help.

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's no secret that getting close to someone emotionally requires a level of trust and vulnerability, and with it, the risk of getting hurt. Past relationship experiences, positive and negative, can certainly influence current and future ones, possibly long after those relationships have ended. By sharing her worry that you're going to leave every time you say, "I love you", your girlfriend may be expressing fear, anxiety, and insecurity borne of past experience (potentially romantic in nature). Because no one really knows what the future might bring, reassurances of your love and commitment may not be enough to turn these insecurities around for your partner. Rather, these feelings may be maintained or grow not because of anything you did or didn’t do, but what might be happening internally for your girlfriend, including harsh self-criticism and even comparison to others. With that in mind and by taking a cue from the reactions you’re receiving, it might be time to talk together and dig a bit deeper. It may also signal the need for some solo work on your partner’s part to work through the origins of her insecurities.

Have you had a chance to share more about your previous relationship experiences with each other? What do you know about your partner’s past loves? Has your girlfriend described a painful rejection or experience with a significant other before? Beyond her saying that you’re going to leave her, how else has your girlfriend described her feelings about your words of love? If you're coming up with a blank on these, turning pillow talk into real talk may be in order. You can set the stage for the conversation by finding a time where you both can be alone and feel comfortable chatting about these concerns. Once you’ve found the time, starting the conversation by reassuring your girlfriend that you care about her and value your relationship is a place to begin. And, though what you’ve highlighted in your question is your girlfriend’s feelings about what you’re saying to her, it’s good to remember that relationships are a two way street. Letting her...
know in what way this response has affected you and checking in with her to get her perspective is also key to moving forward together.

Hopefully, doing this will also allow you both the opportunity to learn a bit more about each other’s partnered past, identify how these past experiences may have or has affected your relationship, and explore in what ways your current relationship is different (or not). If you try and feel like you’re struggling to have an open and honest conversation, working through this issue together in couples counseling with a mental health professional may help mediate and facilitate this discussion.

That said, there may be a limit on what you’re able to do about your girlfriend’s insecurities. Addressing them will likely require some self-reflection and work on her part. It could be helpful for her to explore the roots of her insecurity on her own and look at the ways in which this fear may be keeping her from enjoying someone who is committed to and loves her. Meeting one-on-one with a mental health professional could be useful to further reflect and process these feelings. If she seems open to it, you could encourage her to consider this option as a show of support.

Ultimately, it’s up to her to determine what she needs or how to address these feelings so that she can live in the present moment and enjoy her relationship with you. No matter how sincerely and frequently you reassure her though, she may still feel insecure unless she gets to the root of what’s behind her feelings. You can have her back through this process, but some of the work on this front may be solo rather than partnered. In that vein, it may not be possible, nor is it your duty as a romantic partner to make everything right for the person you love. Coming to terms with that sentiment may be key if you find that after trying to get to the root of the issue hasn’t helped your relationship or your partner is unwilling to work on it. If it comes down to it, you may be in a tough position that requires you to examine your relationship and whether you’re getting out of it what you’ve been putting into it.

Best wishes,

Alice!

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Resources
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [10]