Dear Alice,

I'm a lesbian and I think that my roommate could be slightly homophobic. We have never really had a great relationship but now that I've come out to her, we don't talk much at all. How do I talk with her about this issue so that we can put it behind is without making it so awkward?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Sharing a space with a prejudiced person can create a tense environment for anyone, especially when they may be bigoted towards one or more of your identities. But from the sounds of it, you're willing to tackle your small corner of homophobia in the world, for the betterment of your living situation and your roommate. During this conversation, it may be helpful to focus on your relationship with her. It may also be beneficial to ask yourself some questions before you talk with her to clarify your objectives and preemptively navigate some of the inherent awkwardness these difficult types of conversations may have.

A working definition for homophobia is the irrational fear and subsequent discrimination or hatred of non-heterosexual persons, including various identities who make up queer communities (e.g., queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and sexual non-conformists, just to name a few), also sometimes referred to as LGBTQ+ communities. That being said, homophobia encompasses a wide range of viewpoints and attitudes, and manifests differently in different people. While there's no one known cause of homophobia, research has shown that having strong religious beliefs disapproving of sex or homosexuality and having little or no contact with LGBTQ+ people can negatively influence a person's attitudes towards people who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Homophobia affects everyone — when a particular group is marginalized or intimidated, no one can feel truly safe.

It's admirable that you want to address your roommate's behavior, and some positive results may come out of these ensuing conversations. In these early discussions, approaching the subject with compassion is wise, giving her the benefit of the doubt. It can also be helpful to explain to her what you're observing with your own eyes and noting how it makes you feel. You can ask if your observations are correct to give your roommate an opportunity to explain why her behavior...
may have changed. Additionally, it may be good to try steering the conversation so that arguing or fighting is avoided, especially about other issues besides the topic at hand. If she hasn't been introduced to the idea of homophobia, it could easily feel like an attack — stating your feelings and concerns while keeping dogma and preaching out of the picture may help to keep the conversation more calm and collected. While ignorance is no excuse to discriminate, the learning and change must have a beginning, hopefully ignited by this conversation.

It may be helpful to consider aspects of her life and circumstances before beginning your conversations: are you the first lesbian she's known? What were her experiences with lesbians and other queer people before you met her? Articulating exactly how she conveys homophobia will also be valuable to do before having a conversation. Does she give off a distinct coldness? Judgment? Unkind glances or comments? You can also check out some organizations dedicated to gay-straight alliances as you're addressing these preliminary questions. Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) [2], Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) [3], and Human Rights Campaign (HRC) [4] are some excellent places to start. Queer student organizations on campus may also be a good source of support, as it's likely someone will have encountered something similar before.

Also keep in mind that carrying the torch to end homophobia (so to speak) can be tricky. You're advocating both for her treatment of you and for wider understanding and tolerance of all queer folx. At the same time, it may be best to have reasonable expectations. For her, this may not be something she can "put behind her," but will resonate and bring up new issues. The light you're shedding on this subject may carry far into the future, and you may never know exactly what impact you've had on her thinking. Staying true to discussing how to successfully room together given your differences in sexuality may be the best point on which to focus. This all being said, it can also be key to make sure that you're taking time to care for yourself. These conversations aren't easy, so take the time to prioritize your own well-being and seek the care you need. If you find that your roommate isn't receptive, it may be helpful to reach out to people such as a resident advisor or other administrators who may be able to help mediate or address your living situation, as everyone deserves to be respected in a shared living space.

Good luck!

Alice!

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