Can I ask my girlfriend not to drink at college?

Dear Alice,

My girlfriend of about a year is going to college next year as am I but we are going to attend different colleges. We are about forty-five minutes apart in distance and we have no problem whatsoever in keeping the relationship and we plan on keeping it alive and healthy, but I have a problem with alcohol. I don't drink alcohol and don't ever plan on it but I am curious as to it being rude or improper to ask her not to? Is it my place at all to ask her that she not drink at college? I feel strongly about her in this situation. She doesn't drink but thinks she might like it... Is it fair or my place to ask her not to drink? Thanks, Alice...

Worried Sick!

Answer

Dear Worried Sick!,

To drink or not to drink, that is a college question. Each person faces the decision around if, when, and how much alcohol to consume. You can certainly express to your partner your opinions and concerns about drinking. However — only she gets to decide for herself what feels right for her. Keep in mind that healthy relationships often include a respect for each other’s differences, honesty about thoughts and feelings, and space for independence. Curious about how to weave all that together? Read on!

First, it can be helpful to be honest with yourself about from where your feelings around alcohol are coming. You may want to spend some time thinking privately about why the possibility of her drinking upsets you. Has a friend or family member had trouble managing their drinking? Are you worried about her health or safety? Do you have a religious or cultural practice of not drinking alcohol? You might find it helpful to sort through these issues with the help of a trusted family member, friend, mental health professional, religious leader, or health care provider.

You may also be thinking about how her drinking would affect you and your relationship. Are you worried that she might pressure you to drink when you spend time together? Do you have concerns that her behavior or feelings would change if she drinks? Are you worried that she may feel attracted to someone else in a social situation with alcohol? During your heart-to-heart, you
and your partner can talk about some of these feelings. She may have similar concerns about how other changes in college might impact your behavior, too. Even though you’re the one who is raising this topic, her perspective is just as valuable. Make sure the conversation leaves space for both of you to openly share your thoughts on alcohol and how you think it might (or might not) affect you as individuals and as a couple.

It’s likely that each of you has some anxiety about this issue and about leaving for school in general. You may also be thinking about your transition into a longer-distance relationship. Beginning college for the first time can be an exciting and nerve-wracking experience. It’s possible that some of the focus you’ve been putting on alcohol is actually related to more general worries about the future of your romance and your success in a college environment. To start talking about these anxieties, you could say something like, “You know, I’ve been thinking a lot about how our relationship might change when we leave for school. One concern I wonder about is the fact that some people like to start drinking when they get to college. What are your thoughts on that?” or, “The idea of drinking alcohol kind of makes me nervous. If you decided to drink at school, what do you think it would be like?”

As might be expected during times of transition, you and your partner are likely to go through a lot of changes. For many, college is a time to experiment, whether it’s staying up until four a.m. and sleeping until noon, breaking out of a reputation developed in high school, or seeing how it feels to use alcohol or other substances. It may comfort you to know that there are many strategies for lower-risk drinking that college students (or anyone who chooses to drink) can employ to minimize negative consequences of alcohol use. You can also gather more information from the Go Ask Alice! Alcohol and Other Drugs archives and read up on getting the most out of long distance relationships in the Long-Distance and On-Line Relationships category of the Relationships archives.

From what you’ve shared, it sounds like you have a strong relationship that means a lot to you. Giving each other space to talk about the future and how you feel about it is a healthy process — one that with mutual respect, you and your partner can help each other through.

Best of luck!

Alice!

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