Dear Alice,

I have been with my long term girlfriend for five years. I am seriously thinking about getting engaged.

Over the last three years she has taken control of our sex life. I have definitely become submissive in the bedroom. We don’t get into BDSM, but she always decides when, where, and how. She loves this control. While I have come to accept my submissive role, and I do certainly enjoy making love to her and pleasing her, I have asked her on many occasions for some variety. I would like to enter her sometimes and she has not performed oral sex on me for years. Granted, I am a bit under average in the endowment area and she always has a hard time reaching orgasm with straight intercourse. I have tried to talk to her, but she always shuts down the convo by making me admit that I love pleasuring her. Of course when we start fooling around I am so excited that I just follow her lead.

Honestly, I am very happy in every other aspect and I don't want to add any friction to the relationship. She is a very private person and doesn’t like to talk sex. Visiting a therapist is not an option as I have already subtly suggested it and been rebuffed. Should I be overly concerned? Should I continue to press the issue (although it doesn’t seem to be getting me anywhere) or just accept my role? Again, I do enjoy pleasing her and I usually get off. I guess I could be happy continuing this way and I don't want to lose her. I would love your thoughts.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Relationships are more than just love and sex, and though there are numerous examples of what they can look like, there are some mainstays of healthy partnerships. These include open communication (talking and listening), mutual respect, and honesty. You may think of these three components as the legs of a stool that your relationship is resting on. If any of the legs are missing or weakened, the stool and whatever it supports could be unstable. Even if your relationship with your girlfriend thrives on the current power dynamics, you may want to consider whether or not these factors are present. Additionally, whether you talk to your girlfriend about this is up to you. Compromise is a key component of relationships, so taking stock of whether
you're getting what you need out of the relationship may weigh into your decision about whether or not you want to bring up this discussion.

You mention that when you try to bring up your interest in mixing up your sex life, your girlfriend shuts down the conversation. Do you openly communicate with each other otherwise? Is it just the topic of sex that makes her close down? Are you bringing up the issue in a space where the two of you feel safe and open to communicating about a potentially uncomfortable subject? How does it make you feel when you can't openly express your sexual needs or desires with your girlfriend? You have a right to your emotions and beginning a conversation with "I" statements such as "I feel…" may allow you more of an opportunity to express your desire for a switch in the bedroom in a way that she may be receptive to the ideas. Maybe even try writing down your concerns (kind of like what you did in writing this question) so you know what you want or need to say to your partner before decide to have another conversation.

Once you begin the conversation, framing it as part of the basic need for open and honest communication in your relationship (rather than making it a "sex talk") and conducting it in a caring, understanding, and supportive way may help her open up and become more comfortable in the situation. Planning to chat when there are no other emotional or environmental distractions may give you the opportunity to ask her why she shuts down when you bring up the topic of sex. Many people grow up with the idea that sex isn't a topic to be discussed, so that may be one reason why your girlfriend is so hush-hush about it. Honestly discussing your relationship concerns, wants, needs, and goals (about sex and everything else) is part of a healthy partnership, so nesting your sex talk in a larger conversation may help ease her into what has previously been an uncomfortable subject.

Relationships aren't static, so bringing these issues out into the open may help your relationship mature. Considering that you hope to marry your girlfriend, the issue of sex will be one you will have to deal with for a very long time. Relationships will inevitably have friction, but ignoring or pushing aside your partner's feelings or your own may be causing more friction in the long-term than having this uncomfortable talk. In healthy relationships, working through friction directly may even help stoke the fire that keeps your relationship strong. Moreover, your concerns and desires, whether about sex or anything else, deserve respect, especially from someone with whom you hope to spend the rest of your life.

For many, sex is meant to be both physically and emotionally pleasurable. If it's not and you'd like to experience it more, it may be a sign to consider whether the relationship is meeting your needs. Though compromise and negotiation are also key components of a healthy relationship, with as much concern as you're dedicating to her enjoyment, you deserve the same effort on her part. If you feel like your emotions are being invalidated or that they aren't a priority, you may want to consider if this is an area in which you feel comfortable compromising. Further, while you note she has trouble experiencing orgasm through penetrative sex, orgasm doesn't need to always be the end goal. Just as you consider her pleasure and experience, it may be useful to discuss what activities you both enjoy where orgasm isn't the focus.

Understanding your girlfriend's position in this situation may help you better understand how to address your communication gap, but letting it slide and putting your needs on the back burner may just lead to friction building up and eventually bubbling over. Though your girlfriend may not
want to speak with a mental health professional or other health care provider, you may find it useful for yourself as you navigate this aspect of your relationship. Just remember the analogy: the stronger the legs of communication, respect, and honesty, the more stable the stool that supports your relationship.

Good luck!

Alice!

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Published date:
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Last reviewed on:
Dec 20, 2019

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