People think I'm gay... but I'm not [1]

Dear Alice,

I am what you may call a nice guy. I'd say I'm rather sensitive and easy going. I don't really like sports, racecars, or other uber manly things. I've never had a girlfriend. Finally, I enjoy theater arts and my favorite cable station is a decorating network. You can see where I'm going. BUT I ENJOY WOMEN. I'm very attracted, I think about them all the time; I check out female butts when I walk to class. Yet everyone, especially women, seems to think I am gay. It bothers me because it makes me feel like less of a man. Additionally, how am I supposed to get this woman that I've been waiting for, for all these years, if she thinks I am gay? Please help me!!!!!

Sincerely,

"MO" is me.

Answer

Dear "MO" is me,

Sexual attraction[2] (who you're attracted to) and gender expression (the way that you express gender in your actions and appearance) are entirely different concepts, so having people conflate the two is understandably frustrating! Gender roles are societal pressures that say that there are masculine traits and feminine traits and leave very little room for nuance or for traits and identities beyond a gender binary. For example, aggression, stoicism, athleticism, anger, etc., are often associated with men and masculinity, and submission, emotions, domesticity, caretaking, etc. are often associated with women and femininity. When people don't conform to gender roles that are consistent with their sex assigned at birth, they may face consequences in various areas of their lives, just as you have. Ironically, however, it’s pretty difficult for any one person to express solely masculine or feminine traits, and most people exhibit a unique mixture.

It can be difficult to challenge rigid dichotomies and strict gender ideals, especially when they’re entrenched in a culture. However, being sensitive and enjoying decorating don’t make you any less of a man, nor do they make your attraction to women any less legitimate. The fact that you’re comfortable in your personal tastes, regardless of their alignment with rigid expectations, shows confidence, which many people may view as an attractive trait. While some straight
women look for “macho men,” plenty are looking for men who know what they like and aren’t afraid to show it, even if what they like falls outside of traditional gendered expectations.

The fact that you're able to step outside the proverbial box is great! But challenging gender norms may be difficult and garner criticism, so the trick is learning how to manage that while also maintaining your self-confidence. One way to do this is to surround yourself with people who don’t make snap judgments about your sexuality based on surface traits such as your affinity for the arts. It may take time and a little extra effort but first, you could ask yourself a few questions to start: Do you find this judgment to be more prevalent within certain groups of people? Could you try to shift your social circle to include people who are less likely to assume your sexuality before getting to know you? Perhaps you could explore clubs, organizations, or common interest groups that would allow you to pursue your hobbies such as theatre and decorating while connecting with others who are also fond of these activities. This might also give you the chance to meet women in a more personal setting, allowing for you to get to know each other beyond any initial assumptions they may have about your sexual identity.

As it’s the case that very few people fit nearly into the ideals of masculinity or femininity, it’s worth considering what credence to give to conforming in one way or another. Those who jump to conclusions or choose to think less of you because you don’t conform are the ones missing out.

Here’s to you being you!

Alice!

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