Dear Alice,

My girlfriend and I have been dating long distance for about seven months. I have found out through keen observation and affirmation from an old roommate of hers that she is a rape victim. For the last three months or so she has been going through a lot of changes with job acquisition, living conditions, and I don't know what else. In this time, communication between us has grown to an insignificant level (in my opinion). It seems as though she is putting her job, spiritual drive, personal life, etc before me. Almost to the point that she doesn't want to include me. I think this has something to do with the rape issue and her ability to trust people. I think she may be unable to believe that I could love her unconditionally.

I have been thinking my situation over and don't know what to do. I love her with all my heart but I am receiving virtually nothing from this relationship right now. Do I hold on to her and give her the space to come to grips with her life and hope that I will be in the big picture later on, or do I end it on the condition that she needs time for herself to decide if I am an important part of her future life? Please respond because I'm crawling out of my skin.

— Bubbles

Answer

Dear Bubbles,

It sounds like you're trying to be a sensitive and understanding partner while your girlfriend is coping with everything going on in her life. Long-distance relationships can be difficult in general, and if your girlfriend is experiencing big transitions in her life or dealing with trauma from the past, sustaining your bond from afar may be especially tough. That being said, it may be good to have a conversation with her about what each of you needs from the relationship and the ways you can or can't provide that to each other. Having clear communication and expectations in the relationship may help both of you through this time.

Developing and practicing communication skills is crucial in any relationship, whether or not you're in the same location. In a long-distance situation, verbal and written communications can be key because the day-to-day messages you send through touch, facial expression, or just your
presence are missing. Some questions that you may find helpful to reflect on before speaking with your girlfriend include: how much communication would you consider to be a significant level? What do you think could help improve communication between you and your girlfriend? Do you have regular times that you can reach out to one another? Are there means of communication that you both enjoy? Talking through some of these questions with her can help you come to a mutually agreeable plan for how and how often you'll communicate while being long-distance.

Beyond the logistics of contact, it sounds like you’re not getting what you need from the relationship. It’s possible that your partner is unaware of how you feel. Can you put into words what you hope to receive from the relationship? This discussion may be an opportunity for both of you talk about what you need from each other. It’s also possible that she’s purposefully putting other priorities in her life before you, either because she too isn’t getting what she needs from the relationship or perhaps it’s her way of coping. In any case, just as you deserve to have your needs met and feelings heard in the relationship, she does too.

You mention that there could be a variety of factors that are influencing her behaviors and responsiveness. Instead of speculating, it may be helpful to directly ask her what, if anything, has caused the changes you’ve observed. It could also open the door to talking about the impact those changes have had on your relationship. What does she feel is influencing your relationship or communication? How might you best support her? You mention that you found out she’s a sexual assault survivor; while it’s possible this is having an effect on her behavior, it may also be completely unrelated. In fact, it may be that she is embracing the new changes in her life and is excited about the new opportunities that surround her. Additionally, both partners maintaining their independence and finding lives outside of a long-distance relationship is encouraged. With any new situation, it can take time to learn to balance priorities and figure out how it all fits into a schedule. In any case, it might be helpful to think about resources you can offer, if it turns out your speculation is correct and she asks for support accessing professional help.

It seems as though you’re willing to make compromises to help your partner work through everything going on in her life. Through this process, it’s also good to think about your own feelings and work out a balance between supporting your girlfriend and taking care of yourself. Is supporting her impacting your well-being? Does she make time to support you as well? If you do ask her to decide if you’re a key part of her life, how might you react if she chooses not to continue the relationship? Reflecting on the current state of your relationship and having open, honest dialogues with her that convey your feelings can hopefully help you both better understand one another and decide on the future and form of your relationship.

Alice!
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