

Girlfriend's ex-boyfriend won't go away ^[1]

Dear Alice,

What should I do about my girlfriend's ex-boyfriend? Their friendship is getting out of hand. He is consistently telling her how regretful it is for him and he wants her back badly. He would go out of his way to see and to talk to her. This is affecting my relationship. It is affecting my girlfriend emotionally. This has been going on for four years. I met my girlfriend two years after their break up. He is now more persistent than ever.

— Miserable one

Answer

Dear Miserable one,

This sounds like a difficult situation for all involved. It could be a wonderful thing when ex-lovers become friends after they break up, but it's not always possible. You say it's starting to affect your girlfriend emotionally. It could be good to parse out in which ways this is affecting her — is this behavior from her ex consensual? You note that it's a friendship, but if this behavior is unwanted from your girlfriend (such as the going out of his way to talk to her and see her), it may be worth considering taking some stronger steps. If she does want to continue to have a friendship with her ex, it could be helpful to set some boundaries with her and her ex that can allow you to feel comfortable in your relationship with her.

You may find it helpful to ask yourself some questions first to frame your discussion. For example, what are the particular reasons that his relationship with your girlfriend bothers you? Are you concerned that she will leave and go back to him? Do you feel as though your relationship isn't being respected? Are you concerned that his behavior isn't respecting her wishes and is violating her sense of safety? Having some of the answers to these questions may frame the approach that you take during a discussion with your girlfriend.

If your girlfriend's relationship with her ex is a genuine friendship that she'd like to maintain, it may be helpful for you to have a conversation where you can discuss how both of your needs can be met. Making time to talk to her when neither of you is upset and when the ex-boyfriend has been out of the picture for a few days may provide a calmer backdrop for your discussion.

Here's one way you could structure your conversation:

- **Let her know what's bothering you:** Naming the situation is helpful to ensure that you're both on the same page. Using "I" statements can signal that you're sharing your own perspectives and seeking to avoid putting blame on her. For example, "I feel uncomfortable when you share with me the comments your ex-boyfriend makes about wanting to get back together with you."
- **Then tell her how you're feeling:** Sharing how this situation makes you feel allows you an opportunity to express your emotions. One way to do this could be, "I feel as though he doesn't respect our relationship, and when you continually hang out with him when he does this, it feels as though you don't care as much about our relationship either."
- **Work on some boundaries together:** You can discuss the boundaries that feel comfortable to both of you so that she can maintain the relationships in her life that are valuable to her and you can feel confident and respected in your relationship. Not only do these include boundaries in the relationship between you and your girlfriend, but it also includes boundaries that are set between your relationship and her ex-boyfriend. Discussing how the boundaries between your girlfriend's ex will be set can help you get a better understanding of how your girlfriend is willing to navigate through this, too. Additionally, you can discuss how you will move forward if those boundaries are violated. One example of a boundary may include spending time together, but telling the ex-boyfriend that he needs to stop making those types of comments to the ex-girlfriend.

You may not choose to use these exact words — you can use whatever language feels most comfortable for you and what feels most relevant to your experience. Having notes when it's time for the conversation may also help you both stay on track, especially given the emotions linked to the topic.

If this is emotionally affecting your girlfriend because she doesn't want him to be contacting her in this way, it may be worth setting firmer boundaries with the ex-boyfriend. If he isn't abiding by these boundaries and he's continuing to go out of his way to see her and talk to her, this could be considered stalking. Your girlfriend may consider recording instances of setting boundaries with the ex-boyfriend and when he violates them as evidence if your girlfriend seeks to get an order of protection, which is an order from the courts to stop violence or harrassment. You may find the [Q&A Girlfriend broke it off – Am I stalking?](#) ^[2] to be helpful, as it details stalking, resources, and the rights of the person who is being stalked.

You may also find it helpful to talk your concerns out with a mental health professional beforehand. When speaking with your girlfriend, it may even take a few conversations to come up with a solution that works for both of you. You may also find that you aren't able to come to an agreement if your girlfriend isn't willing to set boundaries with her ex-boyfriend. In that case, you may want to think about how this relationship is meeting your needs and if continuing a relationship with your girlfriend is a scenario that will be fulfilling for you. Difficult conversations are, as the descriptor implies, potentially difficult. Despite the challenge, these conversations often help bring people to the same place on an issue and enable both to focus on a solution.

Best of luck to you as you open the doors of communication,

Alice!

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