Now that your partner knows you have herpes... [1]

Dear Alice,

I recently told my girlfriend I have herpes. Since that night I can feel her moving emotionally away from me. What can I tell her to comfort her and continue moving forward in our relationship?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Having open communication with your partner is key to a healthy relationship, so kudos to you for having that conversation with her. Just because your girlfriend seems a little emotionally distant now doesn’t necessarily mean that it will last forever. To gain some perspective about what she’s going through, it could be helpful to think back when you learned of your herpes diagnosis and try to recall the following: How did you react? How long did it take for you to accept and feel comfortable with the news? Just as it may have been difficult for you at first, your girlfriend may be having a difficult time with the news as well. To help clear up the air and potential misinformation, you may consider following up with her to see how she’s feeling. You could also ask what, if any, questions you can answer. Continuing to have open and honest dialogue about what this means for her and your relationship could yield solutions that work for you both and ultimately strengthen your partnership.

After reflecting on your own experience and deciding that you’re ready to chat with your gal, you might try opening the conversation by asking how she feels following your recent disclosure. Perhaps you can share how you reacted to the diagnosis to help normalize any reactions she’s having. Opening the door to explore the source of any concern, fear, or apprehension could help her process this information. Some of her reactions may be rooted in limited knowledge or understanding of herpes, which contributes to her fear and emotional distance. This could also be an opportunity for you to explain what you’ve learned about the virus, its risks, and how its transmitted. Emphasizing that with appropriate treatment and safer sex practices, it’s possible to reduce the risk of transmission may also put her at ease.

If your girlfriend would like to learn more about the virus and effective prevention strategies, you could offer some resources for additional support. Was there a book or website that you found particularly useful? Is there a support group she could join? Perhaps she could call in to a herpes...
or sexually transmitted infection (STI) hotline? If there are resources that helped you work through your initial feelings, they might also help your girlfriend. Another option is for you to both visit a health care provider to discuss how you can work together to keep her risk of contracting herpes low. For information on herpes, you can check out the Herpes category in the Go Ask Alice! Sexual & Reproductive Health archives.

Hopefully having these conversations and talking through strategies to practice safer sex if and when you decide to do so will help you and your girlfriend reconnect. If that’s not the case, you could consider talking to a mental health professional together. This could also be an opportunity for you to reflect on your relationship and what you need from it. Someone who isn’t able to accept you and your diagnosis may not be the most supportive partner in the long-run. For additional considerations for navigating this situation with your girlfriend, you may find the Go Ask Alice! Relationships archives to be helpful.

Alice!
Category:
Relationships
Relationship Stuff
Relating & Communicating
Sexual & Reproductive Health
Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)
Herpes

Related questions
What is herpes?
How to use a condom properly — Avoid breakage and slippage!
How to ask a partner if they have any STIs
Better information about dental dams

Resources
Safer Sex Map (Morningside/ Barnard)
Medical Services (Morningside)
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
Medical Services (CUIMC)
Mental Health Services (CUIMC)
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