Dear Alice,

I've never done this before so here it goes.

I've been dating my current boyfriend for about eight months, and we do love each other very much. However, I believe we both want very different things from our relationship, and we fight on a regular basis. We fight about everything from spending time with friends to how we feel we are being treated and so forth.

We have a lot of trouble identifying with each other and being considerate of each other’s needs. Should I move on and accept that we are incompatible, or should we try a new approach?

— confused

Answer

Dear confused,

It's not uncommon for couples to have conflicts and contemplate whether or not to stay in a relationship. It can be a big step to acknowledge that you're having relationship troubles, so it's brave of you to share. Hopefully having a conversation with your partner and reflecting on what each of you need from this relationship can help you decide how to move forward.

Have you discussed your concerns about the constant bickering with your boyfriend? If so, how did that conversation go? Were you able to understand each other a bit better following that talk? If you haven't brought this up with him, it might be good to think about why that may be the case. Are you worried that it might lead to another fight? Whether you're broaching this conversation for the first time or hoping to find a more productive angle on another try, it will be good for each of you to think about and share what you need and what you're willing to give to a relationship.

Understanding each other's perspectives may help ease some of the disagreements you two have been having. It might also bring to light whether you're on the same page about the problems in the relationship, whether you're both willing to put in the effort to work the kinks out, and most critically, whether you want to keep the relationship going.
If you’re both dedicated to making changes, you might start by practicing your listening and communication skills. You could try making time to listen to each other describe what’s meaningful in a relationship and a partner and what you value about the relationship you have when you aren’t in a time of conflict or argument. Instead of focusing only on your own feelings, you might try to understand what the other person thinks and feels. If you practice this skill when the topic is upbeat, it may help you be more empathetic and considerate when times get tough. Other communication strategies you may find helpful to keep in mind include:

- Express your feelings, but not when they’re fresh. Taking some time to process your feelings before sharing them with your partner will give you time to sort through what you’re feeling and why. Doing so may help you provide a clearer explanation of what you’re going through.
- Be specific about what you want and be willing to compromise. There are likely times when what you want is the opposite of what your partner wants. As with any relationship there are times you have to compromise, just as long as one partner isn’t always the one compromising.
- Stick to one topic at a time — it’s not fair or realistic to bombard your partner with a whole laundry list of complaints. Focusing on one issue at a time can also help you both work towards an effective solution.
- Avoid accusatory language, such as placing blame or assuming ill intentions. You might find the conversation is more productive if you share how you felt in response to their actions, especially if your partner had no idea their actions would impact you in that way.

If after trying these strategies you and your partner are continuing to fight, it might help to talk with a mental health professional. They may be able to provide a neutral perspective on the situation. It’s also good to keep in mind how invested each of you are in the relationship and if either of you are willing to make changes. Even if you both really care about each other, if you aren’t able to meet each other’s needs, you may decide to reevaluate what space and effort you want to continue giving to this relationship — including no longer being in it.

Good luck,

Alice!

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