Dear Alice,

I am in a long distance relationship and my girlfriend recently admitted that she had cheated on me. She said, and I believe her, that she really loves me and that this was a mistake she regrets. However, I can't take it out of my mind and forget about it. I am angry that she ruined the purity of our love story. It feels like it's no longer "a dream come true" — merely a watered down version of it because it is no longer "flawless." I feel like a pushover for not doing anything about it. (I'm really in love with her and I can't bring myself to break up just for that.) How can I forgive her? Will I always keep these poisonous thought inside? How can I prevent this from shadowing every aspect of our relationship? Am I "selling short" and blind to her untrustworthiness? How can I trust her again?

A sad loverboy

Answer

Dear A sad loverboy,

It sounds like you’re torn between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, you love your girlfriend and want to forgive and trust her; on the other, your feelings were hurt, your perspective of your relationship has been changed, and you don't want to feel that your girlfriend has taken advantage of you. When it comes to forgiveness and how to move forward, you may find it useful to reflect on what expectations you both have for the relationship. By evaluating this, you can find out whether or not you and your girlfriend are on the same path and if you want to move forward together.

The way you describe your relationship prior to the cheating, as "flawless" and pure, might be a clue into your expectations of relationships in general. While it may sound wonderful, is a relationship going to ever be flawless? Cheating aside, did you ever notice other flaws or have concerns about your relationship? Flaws, concerns, problems, issues — whatever you call them — are common in relationships, maybe even universal. In a long distance relationship, it can be easy to ignore or overlook flaws for a while. Expecting or dwelling on relationship perfection of
the past may hinder your healing process. Instead, you might approach your situation as a chance to strengthen your bond. Perhaps you could sit down with your partner and each make a list of all of the qualities you love about each other and another list about aspects that don’t feel as satisfying in your relationship. You could discuss your expectations regarding fidelity (or being exclusive), open communication, and honesty, and listen to her expectations as well. How can you take steps to move forward together towards mutual satisfaction? Do the steps you both come up with feel reasonable? What are you willing to compromise on? What are you not willing to compromise on? Thinking about these concerns may help you figure out what you’re both looking for in a relationship and whether or not you can find that together.

Another possibility may be to explore your feelings by mutually agreeing to take a break from your relationship to see other people for a period of time. Dating helps pose two options: one option is that it may help you realize partners who are better suited for you, allowing you to cut your losses and move on. Another is that you may realize you truly love your partner and believe her regrets are sincere, thus enabling you both to work through your past problems and move forward as a couple.

Before you make your final decision, you can weigh out the pros and cons of staying with your partner. If the pros outweigh cons, your answer may be evident. If, however, the situation is reversed, you may want to take some time to figure out your options with a trusted friend, family member, or mental health professional.

Identifying your feelings and expressing them can be key to healing. It may be useful to be patient with yourself as your opinions and views may vary on a day-to-day basis. People and relationships aren’t perfect, so giving yourself time and space to consider your expectations and needs may be your first step towards determining a future that feels right for you.

Alice!
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