Dear Alice,

I know this might sound a little vain, but I am smarter than my boyfriend and it's starting to get to me! We have been dating for about eight months, and our relationship was great when we lived together in our hometown. However, in August I moved here for grad school, and since then I have been getting more and more annoyed and resentful of the differences between us — I have to walk him through stuff that makes perfect sense to me, he doesn't read the newspaper or care about politics, and frankly I always thought I would marry a man that could be my equal. Is this really important? Should I ignore the nagging feelings and get over myself? He has a lot of other good qualities and I do care for him deeply, but the more I think about my future, and having to be the leader in the relationship, the less sure I am about our compatibility. HELP!

— Grad Student

Answer

Dear Grad Student,

It's great that you aren't ignoring those nagging feelings. Doubt and confusion are usually there for a reason, and a little honesty and detective work could help you figure out what's irking you and why. Only you can decide whether or not his lack of general knowledge and political engagement is reflective of characteristics that you value in a partner and whether or not you see him as part of your future. Reflecting on this independently and with your partner may give you a better sense of what next steps you'd like to take.

A good relationship is as much about differences as it is about similarities, but everyone has a bottom line. It may help you to sit down and write a list of which qualities and characteristics you absolutely must have in a partner. No one person can meet all your needs — that's why good friendships can be crucial to the survival of a romantic relationship. If you think hard and add in a bit of creativity, you might be surprised about what you feel are key components in a relationship. You also mention that he is less intelligent than you are; it may be helpful to think about how you define intelligence and whether or not this definition is reflective of what you're looking for in a partner. For example, do you define intelligence as formal academic achievement? Life experience? Knowledge about specific topics? Interest in national and global affairs? Critical
thinking skills? Common sense? What types of knowledge does he have that you're less familiar with? Once you have a list, you can start thinking about how your boyfriend fits into the picture.

It can also be helpful to remember that you've just begun a new phase in your life! Starting grad school or any other major endeavor can create a huge stress on a relationship, as each person’s needs, focuses, and experiences change and grow in new directions. For instance, if you and your boyfriend are dating long distance, this can put an added strain on your relationship. In addition, your boyfriend may feel left out of your new adventure, and intelligent or not, may have trouble expressing his feelings about your move to grad school.

After you've spent some time reflecting, one approach could be to talk to your boyfriend honestly, gently, and respectfully about what's on your mind and what you need and want. Rather than telling your boyfriend you're frustrated that he's not the sharpest knife in the kitchen, you could begin by expressing your concern that he doesn't seem interested in similar topics, such as school and politics. Who knows, maybe by talking you will find out he is frustrated that you don't understand an interest that is valuable to him.

In the end, the best test of whether you two are compatible might not be your I.Q.s but how successfully you communicate and support each other through the changes and bumps in the road of your lives and relationship. Whether you decide to stick with your boyfriend or move on, you may need to be prepared to do some serious thinking and consideration — either on your own, with your close friends, or with your boyfriend. You may also find it helpful to parse it out with a mental health professional. Although good relationships are a lot of work, it's ultimately up to you to decide what qualities you need to have and what effort you're willing to put forth in both a relationship and a partner.

Good luck!

Alice!

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