Dear Alice,

I'm in a long distance relationship and my boyfriend always wants to try "sexting" or have "phone sex." I'm just not comfortable doing so, and don't even know how. Any pointers?

Answer

Dear Reader,

For people in long distance relationships, or even those who are simply tantalized by technology, sexting (sending erotically charged messages or photos via cell phone) or phone sex may be an ideal way to satisfy their sexual desires. Whereas incorporating new ways of being intimate may help dial up the passion, listening to yourself and knowing what gets you ringing off the hook is a vital component of your ever-evolving sexual identity.

You might start by considering the following questions: What about sexting and phone sex makes you uncomfortable? Are you feeling pressured to send racy text messages or photos or have phone sex? As with any consensual sexual act, the ultimate goal is pleasure and ensuring that all players are enthusiastic about being a part of it. If you or your partner aren't enjoying it, no need to leave each other on read — it's an opportunity to figure out what else dials up the desire for you both. You could consider telling your partner how you feel and maybe just talking about what turns you on to get the ball rolling. The bottom line is that healthy relationships are built on mutual trust and understanding, so bringing up your concerns may offer a prime opportunity to evaluate your relationship.

What makes sexting different from phone sex (and part of what makes it so exciting for some people) is the semi-public aspect of it. While most sexual activity occurs behind closed doors, sexts may be sent or received in the presence of other people who are oblivious to the naughtiness heralded by your ringtone. This risqué play is a creative way to amp up arousal but the same risk that makes it fun for some could lead to it to be less so for others. For instance, one reason you feel ambivalent about sexting could be the worry that others may be privy to what you share. It's a valid concern and good to keep in mind that once you hit "Send," you may not be able to control who has access to the pictures or messages that you had intended for your partner's eyes only. Sexts or photos being seen more publicly or going viral may be a real risk.
What's more: if either you or your partner are under the age of 18 and you snap or share nude or sexual photos, it’s illegal in the US regardless of consent. If you both are over the age of 18, swapping sexy sentiments doesn't have to be a no-go for you. Before you do though, you may ask yourself:

- Who else might see this sext?
- How would I feel if someone besides my partner saw it?
- Do I trust my partner to keep this private?

If you're comfortable with the potential risks, sexting and phone sex can be great ways to explore new and unique ways to sexual satisfaction. If you're not comfortable with the privacy concerns, you may want to let this sexual adaptation of technology slide. If you're in between these and want to give it a try, easing into it may help. Keep in mind some qualities of SMS (short message service):

- **Character limits.** Sexting a Shakespearean sonnet may callous your fingers and require 30 texts before you even get "there," so you may want to keep it short and sweet.
- **Different sense of time.** If one or both sexters are multitasking, response times may vary from seconds to days. If you're looking for more instant gratification from a distance, phone sex or a sexy online chat may be quicker. If you're looking for bits of intimacy that fit into a busy schedule, this may be your sexual medium while you're physically away.
- **Beep beep!** If you're expecting a heavy flow of incoming sexts, you may want to switch your mobile device to vibrate or silent to not gather a crowd's attention or disturb bystanders.
- **Keep it discreet.** If you're in a public space, consider stepping aside as your face blushes, heart races, or breaths get deeper. Having a concerned stranger ask if you're okay may create some awkward moments.
- **Secure the messages.** Consider setting up the security and privacy features of your phone to minimize curious friends, family members, and strangers from accessing your sexts.

If you choose to engage in "safer" sexting, some additional tips to help you get started may include:

- **A racy recollection.** "Remember that one time when..." Conjuring the memory of a shared romantic romp may bring you back to an opportunity to relive and reignite the fires of desire via text.
- **A gentle start.** "Hot weather out! Too bad you're at home. I'm heading to catch some rays!" Like in-person sexual relationships, good times often start with simple conversations to get to know each other. Say what you would feel comfortable saying in person.
- **Sexting as flirting or foreplay.** "I know you're thinking about me, so I thought I'd say Hi!" "Can't wait for tonight..." Sexts may help create sexual tensions for your next in-person relief. Exclamation points, ellipses, onomatopoeias (oohs and aahs), emojis, and a simple "I want you" may help spice it up. Like the greatest suspense novels, allusions and lead ups whet readers' appetites for more...
- **Reinforcers.** "Last night was AWESOME! I still owe you a cupcake!" "Miss me yet?" Since your last conversation or interaction, texts may serve as a sweet P.S. note. Keeping the lines of communication open with timely texts may help boost your relationship.
• **A check in about interests and boundaries.** “What about that turns you on?” If your partner sends out a scintillating missive that doesn’t jive with you, you might lead with curiosity to learn more. Knowing the “why” behind their share might pull you back into the pillow talk and help you respond with what sounds good, redirect the chat, or share some feedback. You can encourage your partner to do the same.

Trying "safer" sexting may get the job done while respecting your comfort level and your privacy concerns. Being aware of the flow of the messaging back and forth can be key as well. If any one person does more of the initiating and follow up while the other is dialing down the communication, it’s a good sign that it’s time for a check-in. It’s also the case that even if you do decide to engage in sexting, it isn’t the same as consenting to sexual activities or contact in person. On that note: it's not okay to engage in sending sexual messages or sharing of explicit images if the folks involved haven't consented to sending or receiving. In the majority of US states, various laws prohibit the sharing of sexual images of a person without their consent [2] (commonly referred to as revenge porn or nonconsensual porn laws). If at any time the messaging goes unfavorably and you feel violated, you experience bullying, or get blackmailed, you have every right to take back control of the situation by contacting the appropriate authorities.

Keeping the potential risks in mind with these tips may help you decide if and how sexting would work for you. So, instead of just plain old cell service, you could be cell-serviced.

Alice!

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