Hi Alice!

My boyfriend, who I have been dating for a while now, says that he is fat and I don't think he is. He is built, but he isn't fat. And he talks about it all the time, and I just don't know what to say to him. He said that when he used to talk with his other girlfriend about it, that she would say, "well, go on a diet," and he said that made him feel like he was fat. And I don't want to hurt his feelings, but I know that by losing weight, he would feel better about himself. But I like him for who he is and how he looks. But what should I say to him when he says things like he is fat, do you think I'm fat, etc.?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's difficult, challenging, and potentially straining to be in a relationship with someone who has a weight complex. Your boyfriend's consistent remarks about being fat indicate that he feels uneasy about himself and may be looking for validation to feel better about himself, at least temporarily. You want him to like himself as much as you "like him for who he is and how he looks," as you've written to Alice here.

It sounds as though your boyfriend has been struggling with his body image and self-esteem for some time now, and being in a relationship with a previous girlfriend who told him to diet most likely triggered or reinforced his insecurity with how he looks and feels about himself. People who have low self-esteem often have a thwarted sense of reality. Your boyfriend appears to be so focused on his appearance that his persistent self-criticism ends up hurting him, and likely the people who care about him, even more.

You want to know how to respond to your boyfriend whenever he becomes self-critical. Focus on telling him why you like him as he is, including that you like his body. For instance, if he says something like, "I am so fat I feel like a beached whale," you can reply with, "You are not a beached whale, you're my boyfriend and I think you're fantastic the way you are." Or, if he makes comments about himself in relation to clothes or being out of shape, for example, maybe you can divert the conversation away from "fat" and towards fitness, strength, and/or energy. Perhaps he
says, "I don't like the way my pants fit me. I am fat and ugly." You can respond with something like, "The clothes are supposed to fit you, not the other way around. And besides, I love how strong and sexy you look in jeans."

Be careful, though, not to make it your responsibility to change your boyfriend's self-esteem. You can remind him of the reasons why you’re with him, and tell him that you find him attractive, but avoid trying to control or change his attitudes and behaviors. Meaning, he needs to be comfortable with his body first before the fat comments can begin to dwindle. Also, be aware of comments or judgments you may make about your or others’ appearance in his presence, as they could affect how seriously he’ll take your affirmations of himself.

If these suggested responses are ineffective, you may need to react with "tough love" and say something like, "I love you and you know that it upsets me to hear you talk about this constantly. I don't know what else to say. You need to deal with this and learn to accept yourself. You are worth so much more than your looks to me and to others."

Your boyfriend may want to consider speaking with a counselor or therapist to begin learning to accept and appreciate the body he's in. Check out some of these resources to learn more about body image:

- About-Face [2]
- Body Positive [3]
- National Eating Disorders Association [4]

Alice!

Related questions

Fat or built? [7]
Struggling with low self-esteem [8]
Personal grooming — Can I tell my date to spiff up? [9]

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [10]
Mental Health Services (CUIMC) [11]
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