Dear Alice,

I'm a teenage gal in a great relationship with another girl who goes to my school. We're both out to our parents and some friends, with okay reactions. The problem is, our school is pretty homophobic, and word is getting out that we're dating. My parents worry we might be physically or verbally assaulted at school. My neighbor, who owns guns, has already asked me about it, and I'm scared for our safety. What can two girls in a homophobic suburban school do? We don't have the same support system some college students do. We don't have a GSA and I don't trust any of the school staff much. Please help!

? Worried about Gay-Bashing

Answer

Dear Worried about Gay-Bashing,

How frustrating, angering, and discouraging it can feel to be true to yourself and find a great relationship, yet be faced with homophobia, scrutiny, and the fear of violence. Your concerns are unfortunately not uncommon, and are warranted. You deserve and have the right to a safe, peaceful, and fulfilling life. Coming out to yourself and to the people you care about is a courageous and self-affirming act. It can be very daunting because you never know how people will react and yet it can also be very rewarding as it can help you build a team of allies and support.

Your situation has many levels of complexity and no clear-cut resolution. You do, however, have options. It might help to divide up some of the different topics in thinking through your feelings and course of action. Included here are a number of resources and strategies that you can consider. Sometimes thinking about all of the options at once can seem overwhelming, and that's okay. You may choose to act on only some now, putting the rest of the information in your back pocket to refer to later on, if you need to.

Your Parents

You mention in your question that your parents are worried about your safety. Talking with them might be hard, but it'll likely also be a relief for both you and them to put the issues out on the table. It can be painful for parents to acknowledge that they can?t completely ensure that their child will not come to harm. Even when there's no immediate threat, it's common for parents of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) teens to feel
anxiety and sometimes even guilt. It might be helpful for your parents to have the opportunity to speak with other parents in similar situations. Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is a national organization with local chapters — a place for you, your family, and your friends to get support. PFLAG's web site has a wealth of information that you can look at on your own, or with your parents, as well as contact info for chapter meetings and a focus area on safety in schools.

In addition to discussing you and your parent's feelings, it can be helpful to talk specifically about what you would do if an incident requiring attention were to occur. Who would you tell? How would you react in the moment? Who do you and your parents feel comfortable having and calling on as allies? What do you need from your parents? What kind of assurances do your parents need? You could even come up with scenarios and play them out in your conversation.

Your Girlfriend

You and your girlfriend have a great relationship, but the fear of harm is certain to be a stressor. You might start by being honest with each other about your ideals and how you are going to balance these with protecting yourselves. Some of your decisions may be political and others may be about your gut instincts. For example, how do you feel about holding hands in public? Do you talk about your relationship openly with people at school? What would it mean if you decided not to? There are no right or wrong decisions here — it's just a matter of what makes you feel safe and comfortable.

Make sure that while taking time to focus on the challenges, you also pencil in plenty of fun. It's not uncommon for a romance such as yours to become overly dependent in the face of outside worries. Remember to build and keep up new connections and friends beyond the relationship. One question to ask yourselves is whether or not you want to talk with your parents together, with her parents too, or if each of you will decide to discuss with your own families. How does her family feel about your relationship? Do you want to get your families together to strategize? Can you identify your respective sources of support outside of your relationship?

Your Friends

Your friends are critical in building comfort and safety at your school and in your community. Whether you know other young people who are gay or not, most people have experienced feeling judged or unaccepted, maybe even threatened, at some point in their lives. On the other hand, it can be difficult in school to "go against the grain." Some people might be too worried about creating tension or being noticed if they were to openly support you and your girlfriend. You can start by approaching friends whom you feel will support you. Then, you might extend your reach to friends and peers who will empathize with your experience, maybe due to something else about them that caused them to experience prejudice from close-minded people in your community. Try the rebellious crowd, who might be up for a little "action." The idea here is to energize people so that if homophobia were to flare up, you'd be prepared with a group of allies and supporters.

Your School

Chances are, just on the basis of statistics, there are LGBTQ or LGBTQ-friendly teachers and administrators at your school who may be able to provide support. They too, though, may be
worried about homophobia and, therefore, remain closeted. Unfortunately, too few schools actively and visibly support and embrace their LGBTQ identified students and staff. But this doesn't necessarily mean that they allow violence or harassment. You and your parents might start by doing some research into anti-harassment, anti-prejudice, or anti-violence statutes in your area or school. You may decide to approach your school administrators in advance of anything specific happening, just to start the conversation and feel out their opinions and approach. That way, if something were to happen that would require their assistance, you already have a contact and an "in."

Another option is to suggest to the administration, student government, peer counseling program (if your school is lucky enough to have one), or another student activist group that the entire student body might benefit from an anti-prejudice workshop or program. Numerous organizations that provide this type of programming for schools all over the country are available, sometimes at very minimal cost. For example, the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) [3] is a non-profit group that does just this; another is the Anti-Defamation League [4]. Your action may wind up not only serving you, but also inspiring others around you to be open about themselves as well.

Other Resources

You can also use some of these previously mentioned strategies to reach out in advance to other helpful people in your community. For example, if your neighbors say or do something threatening, you can contact the local crime victims division of your police department and put them on notice. Just in case, you might also want to research what kinds of services are available for crime victims in your area, as well as what the hate crimes legislation is in your state.

Many other national and local organizations exist that can provide strategizing help, emotional support, legal advice, and socializing opportunities, including:

- GLBT National Help Center [5]: A website, peer counseling, information, and referral line that can direct you to other organizations nearby.
- GLSEN: Student Pride USA [6]: A for youth, by youth project working to support and help network Gay/Straight Alliances, and similar youth/student groups, across the nation. Student Pride USA has worked to support multiple groups by providing resources, materials, support, education, trainings, and connections on a daily basis.
- Outproud [7]: This is the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth, which has some great information, including a school resources library that can help you make your school a more welcoming place for all students.
- Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund (LLDEF) [8]: This is the nation’s oldest and largest legal organization working for the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, and people with HIV/AIDS has a special section on school-related issues on their web site.

At the end of the day, one of the hardest things to come to terms with is that you can’t control anyone’s behavior or beliefs other than your own. While the burden of creating an LGBTQ inclusive space should not be on you and your girlfriend alone, addressing your fears and concerns with leaders in your community may help enact change. In addition, developing allies and planning how you would respond in advance, may give you access to more options. It can also help reduce your parents’ fears by giving them an active role in your safety. Plus, you might make some new friends, and gain some information and confidence in the process as well. Also, know that when the time comes, you can use some of these same skills to find
and contribute to one of the many communities out there where you'll be accepted and valued for who you are.

Best of luck,

Alice!

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Related questions

How do I know if I'm gay? [14]
Resources for LGBTQ+ young adults in New Jersey... and everywhere else [15]
My girlfriend can't get over that I experimented with men [16]

Resources

Gay Health Advocacy Project (GHAP) (Morningside) [17]
Alice! Health Promotion (Morningside) [18]
Center for Student Wellness (CUMC) [19]
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Links