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Parents don't approve of interracial relationship ^[1]

Alice,

My question is about interracial relationships. I came here from a really small town, very conservative — well, you get the idea. Now, my second week in, I met the most wonderful man. Only he is black. We have been dating now for over a year. He treats me wonderfully but I still get odd looks from people and my parents really don't approve.

I told them it shouldn't matter what color his skin is if I love him, but their small town values seem to say otherwise. How can I cope with the odd looks and my parents without losing my man?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's great that you've found a partner who you love and treats you well! Unfortunately, in today's world discrimination based on skin color, religion, class, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and race still exists (and that's just naming a few). Sometimes, even people who are generally open-minded show their biases when they're faced with issues of diversity in their own family. This can certainly be frustrating and hurtful when the judgment is directed toward you and someone you care about. Having open and honest conversations with your loved ones about your feelings may open the door to a better relationship moving forward.

You mentioned that the man you've been dating treats you well. Have you spoken to him about your concerns? Part of any healthy relationship is communicating about the things you find challenging in your lives — both together and apart. You might start by saying what you said here, that it shouldn't matter what color his skin is, because you love him, but that sometimes you feel like people react strangely when you're together. Likely he has noticed this, and the two of you can strategize, together, how you want to deal with it. On the other hand, maybe you need to discuss your own concerns about being in an interracial relationship. It's possible that you're sensing negativity coming from other people because you have some level of discomfort yourself. Having an honest discussion with your boyfriend can help you become more aware of your own feelings in this area. If you're not ready to have that conversation with him, consider talking through these issues with a trusted friend, clergy member, mentor, or you might even consider seeking support from a mental health provider.

Of course, approval and support from families can mean a lot, too. Talking with your partner might help you formulate some ways to broach the subject with your parents. In strategizing on how to start the conversation with your parents, you might think about any friends that you've had who were initially uncomfortable with your relationship. How did you address the issue with them? How did your partner's parents respond when they found out you were together? You may also consider talking with your parents about why you think your man's a great guy, emphasizing to them that you care for him and value the relationship. If you do decide to talk with your parents, pick a private place and a time when you're all feeling calm. Approaching the subject right after they've made a heated comment might lead you to respond in an angry, defensive way. You may also want to talk, at least at first, without your boyfriend present. This can help you and your parents to be honest and really understand each other's views. Remember to clearly let them know how their opinions and comments make you and your man feel. You might try saying, "You know, I really care for him, and I wish you'd trust my judgment. Some of the great things in our relationship are (fill in the blanks). His race/ethnicity is just a part of what makes him who he is." If your parents persist, it might help to find out why they have the notions they do. Exploring their past experiences with people from different races/ethnicities could help; they'll have a chance to share their ideas, and you'll gain insight into their motivations.

In the end, though, what really matters is how you feel about your partner, and how he feels about you. If your parents and others don't budge in their views, they're missing out on sharing in your life and the richness of your relationship. At that point you and your partner will have to decide whether or not you can ignore the negative reactions and focus instead on finding friends and family who will support your relationship.

Alice!

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