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Floormate leads reckless life ^[1]

Dear Alice:

There is a woman living on my floor who I think is living a reckless life. Within the first couple of weeks of school, she has already had two one-night stands with two different men — one of whom she met at a fraternity party and who was ten years older than she is and who has children. Now you ask how I know all of this? Well, she told me along with all my other floormates. The disturbing thing is that she brags about these sexual encounters and acts so nonchalant about them. In fact, she had to use PCC (post-coital contraception or emergency contraception) when she had sex last time because the condom broke on her and "her friend." I'm beginning to think that she is insecure with herself and that she uses sex as a means to overcome her insecurities. The sad thing is that my floor is disgusted with her and her behavior. She is not only putting herself in danger, but also all the other unsuspecting people who have sex with her or her partners.

Somebody needs to speak with this woman and tell her that she is being stupid and reckless with her health. By the way, if she is reading this, I want her to know that our floor doesn't consider her more mature than us just because she's had more sex than us. Rather, we consider her stupid, insecure, and whorelike.

— Affected

Answer

Dear Affected,

Sometimes people make choices that are dissimilar from what's "normal" or "expected" of them, especially if they come from a background different than those who are witnessing the choices being made. Your question contains many nods to you and your floormates having an idea of how somebody, specifically somebody presenting as femme or feminine, "should" act. While you may not make the same choices, so long as these encounters are consensual, she may simply be enjoying exploring her sexuality. College is a time to not only grow your mind in terms of educational experiences, but also in terms of life experiences. Additionally, there is a lot of information that you may not know about the situation, and it's really only the business of the people having sex. Her beliefs and values around sex are just as valid as yours, and there is no

right or wrong when it comes to those values. Trying to reflect on why you feel that way is a great way to broaden your mind.

Words like “slut” and “whore” have implications that someone is less than, inferior, or contaminated in some way. This slut-shaming doesn’t only affect what people say behind a woman’s back — it has the ability to affect how others view the woman (through gossip, potentially lowering her social support [2]) and how the woman feels about herself. Further, it has the potential to lower somebody’s self-esteem through lowering self-acceptance [3] and increasing self-doubt about the actions they choose to take. You may want to ask yourself why you feel so strongly that your floormate not engage in sexual activity with multiple partners, and even more so, if and how her behavior affects you. There are many reasons people choose to have sex — and it may not be safe to assume you know those reasons unless you’ve asked and if you have the type of relationship in which the other person wishes to share those reasons.

You may find it helpful to reflect on your own values and beliefs about sexuality. Where did you form your own ideas about sex and what constitutes healthy sexuality? What does it mean to have healthy sex, and more specifically, what does it mean for you? Who helped inform some of these ideas? It can also be helpful to think about the historical and current role of gender roles [4] and what place they had and currently have in society. In many contexts, acceptable sexuality for those presenting as femme or feminine was more limited than it was for those presenting as masculine. What does it mean to push back against gender roles and expectations by engaging in behavior that is normally only deemed acceptable for those who present as masculine? Thinking about these may be helpful in understanding how you formed your understanding about the ways in which it’s appropriate for people presenting as femme or feminine to behave. After all, values don’t form in a vacuum; they’re formed with information and influences from the people and places that you encounter throughout your life.

In addition to thinking about your use of judgmental words for those presenting as femme or feminine who actively pursue sex, you may want to examine why you believe she is putting herself and others in at risk. For example, as you’ve already pointed out, she was using condoms. While sexually transmitted infections [5] are no joke, she knew to take emergency contraception [6] when her first round of pregnancy protection broke. Ultimately, while you may not agree with your floormate and her decisions around sex, it can be helpful to understand where your own beliefs come from as you’ll meet many people in college and beyond that hold different values than yourself on a number of different topics. Taking the time to reflect can help you better respond and engage with these people in the future.

So what do you do in this situation? If you (and others on your floor) are worried about “reckless” sexual encounters in general, you could perhaps speak with your resident advisor about hosting a floor-wide health educator-led event, during which everyone can have their questions answered. This can include information about human anatomy and increase awareness of safer sex practices for all of the people living on your floor. The health promotion office on your campus may have more information and may be able to provide some resources for this type of event. You may also reach out to any offices on campus that deal with sexual violence to find out if they have resources or information on healthy sexuality. However, be careful not to single anybody out if you decide to go this route. To reiterate, people have different expectations, experiences, and values with respect to many aspects of their lives, including sex [7] and her

decisions aren't any more right or wrong than anyone else's. College is often a time for trying new experiences, and for some, that can mean exploring their sexuality in new ways with different partners

Alice!

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Published date:

Oct 01, 1994

Last reviewed on:

Sep 21, 2018

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