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JOYCE BROTHERS

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Freshman worries about long-distance relationship

By DR. JOYCE BROTHERS

DEAR DR. BROTHERS: I am a freshman in college, and my high school boyfriend is at another school about six hours away. It's not really practical for us to drive back and forth to see each other, but we are counting the days until vacations when we can see one another. It is really hard being away from him. I worry all the time about all the cute girls he must be meeting, and I want to make sure he doesn't date anybody else. He says he won't, but how would I even know? -- M.N.

DEAR M.N.: College is a big change for most students. It's the first time you've lived away from home with no rules -- and that also can apply to your relationships. All of a sudden, the idea that you and your boyfriend are a couple becomes less written in stone. It's a whole new ballgame when your dating is confined to a few days during college vacations and you have no way to check up on the behavior of the other. What it boils down to is trust, and it doesn't sound like that's one of your strong suits. So, you need to figure out why that's the case.

If your boyfriend didn't cheat during your time together in high school, it's still understandable that you worry about what will happen when you are out of sight. That's natural. But you don't mention if your boyfriend is equally uncomfortable. Does he perhaps trust you more than you trust him? Or is he a little more relaxed and realistic about social life in college? You probably should have a little talk next time you are together to see if you have the same expectations about your relationship. If you are sure you want to rule out seeing other people, then you should say so and make certain he agrees. It is a difficult path to maintain unless you both have the same goal. If you don't want to be his girlfriend should he feel dating ought to be allowed, now is the time to let him know. In any case, it's time to lay all your cards on the table.

DEAR DR. BROTHERS: I'm sure you will think we are hateful people when you hear our problem, but I have to tell you what we have been through and see if you think we will all be OK. My husband and I were married for six years before we had a child. We were great together. We both loved and wanted our son very much, but he has been such a difficult child (recently diagnosed with various learning and emotional difficulties) that we just couldn't make it as a family. We are divorcing, and wonder how we can convince our 5-year-old child that it isn't his fault. -- F.V.

DEAR F.V.: It sounds more like you need to convince yourselves that your child's difficulties haven't led directly to the breakup of your family, when you both probably harbor the awful feeling that you're really not so sure. In fact, on the face of it -- and the way you have chosen to explain the situation -- it would be hard to find a cause for this divorce that doesn't blame your child. I don't think you are hateful, but insightful for realizing that it would be devastating for your son to eventually realize that you actually do hold him responsible for your inability to cope with family stress -- the worst nightmare of every child of divorce! As you know, he may blame himself, regardless.

First, you are not alone. A study by psychologists at the State University of New York-Buffalo, found that children with certain hyperactivity disorders had a divorce rate 10 percent higher than other parents by the child's 8th birthday. Parents who stuck it out until the child was older were not as likely to divorce. So, the most traumatic time for parents in trying to cope with children's behavior difficulties was early childhood. In any case, your son is going to need extra doses of love and reassurance. Some family counseling also might be helpful to handle your anger and sorrow.

Write to Dr. Joyce Brothers via King Features, 888 Seventh Ave., New York, NY 10019.

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