



MY BOYFRIEND IS NOT OUT TO ANYBODY BUT ME

▶ DEAR JOE ▶

I have been seeing my boyfriend for the last nine months and I have never felt so happy or excited by a man. He is handsome, considerate and kind. It seems churlish to find anything to complain about, but he is not out to any of his friends or family. I'm effectively the only person who knows he is gay. He says he can never come out, because of his religious background. I

have tried to persuade him to at least tell one other person, but he gets really upset and defensive about it, and I worry that by bringing it up, I risk losing him. At the same time, I just don't know what this means for the future of our relationship. We have never even been to a gay bar together. What should I do?

WAYNE, DURHAM ▶

DEAR WAYNE

Early in my career as a gay affirmative therapist, I would have told your boyfriend that he had to come out or lead a lifetime of depression, as this is what the research consistently shows. I have since learned that it is arrogant for me to claim that all gays and lesbians must be completely out and openly gay in every aspect of their lives – I do not believe that anymore. For those who have deep religious beliefs, coming out can be particularly hard and might equally lead to a lifetime of depression.

But still, those who choose not to come out face the emotional and psychological consequences of staying closeted. By not coming out as a couple to others, for whatever reasons – legitimate or not – you need to know you are sending negative messages to yourself. That is, you are saying to yourselves that there's something wrong with you or your relationship that you must keep secret.

You will need to safeguard against the negative messages you both send to yourselves by being and staying in a closeted relationship. Playing it straight – though important in your specific situation – is not good for your self-esteem. You will need to constantly remind yourselves why you are hiding and pretending, and do the least amount of lying possible.

It's easier to be gay and single than to be gay and partnered – particularly if you are not out or are in the early stages of the coming out process. When partnered, gay men and lesbians must take a stand on how they feel about going forward towards another level of coming out – a relational one. Whatever they might have done to keep their homosexuality less visible now becomes more problematic, involving hiding or removing one's partner from important social situations. If they choose to be honest and overt about their relationship, they face more obstacles partnered than single. It sounds like your boyfriend is not willing to do that. He is sparing his family, friends, and colleagues the experience of your existence as a partner, which would be evidence of his gayness,

This situation is stressful for both partners: The person who is fully out to family and friends may feel underappreciated, and the person who is not completely out may feel pressured and misunderstood

and may make them uncomfortable. Knowing in an abstract way that someone is gay or lesbian is one thing; seeing evidence of it is another. It is like another stage of coming out for both the family and the gay family member.

Partners being at different stages in the coming out process is a very common problem for gay and lesbian couples and is something heterosexual couples obviously never have to address. This situation is stressful for both partners: the person who is fully out to family and friends may feel underappreciated, and the person who is not completely out may feel pressured and misunderstood.

The different stages of 'outness' can feel threatening to partners. You, as the lesser out partner, may experience lack of sensitivity to your difficulty. You may feel a disloyalty by your partner for not wanting to be more out and open to others, thereby limiting your freedom to be a couple in public and perhaps even going to certain places together. In other words, it can look like your partner is simply going too slow, or fighting the coming out process for reasons which do not seem to make sense on the surface. Empathy for each other can get lost in an attempt to remain a couple with so much discrepancy.

Waiting for your partner to come around must be frustrating and remind you of the time you were closeted, and how painful that was. To your partner, it makes sense that he needs some time and doesn't want to feel rushed – he probably feels anxious about losing the support of his family and friends, and then potentially losing his relationship with you on top of that.

There are realities of not being an 'out' couple. Imagine the stress that would be put on a marriage if a husband or wife refused to tell his or her family about the marriage. The bottom line is that if you want to remain in a relationship together, then you may have to accept and live with being closeted in the way that your boyfriend wants, and the more he may have to decide to come out more fully and risk rejection.

Couples cannot thrive if they remain at two different stages. It is like settling for a machine operating on a lower performance level. I completely understand that there are valid reasons to not be out to one's employer, family, and various friends. That said, the closetedness still affects the couple even on a covert level. You need to know this and prepare for this.

If the relationship endures, the level of satisfaction will be poor in this area. I do not believe it is healthy for the relationship and it will certainly suffer in the long run. Every couple I have worked with and know who have become as out as they can be have told me that, looking back, they see how their lives were negatively affected by being closeted, even if the reasons were valid.

You will both have to navigate your personal integrity as well as each others relational integrity. You both must pace this according to the comfort of the partner, who is struggling the most with his status. Most of all it is essential for partners to be patient and express good will toward the other. Good luck to you both!



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