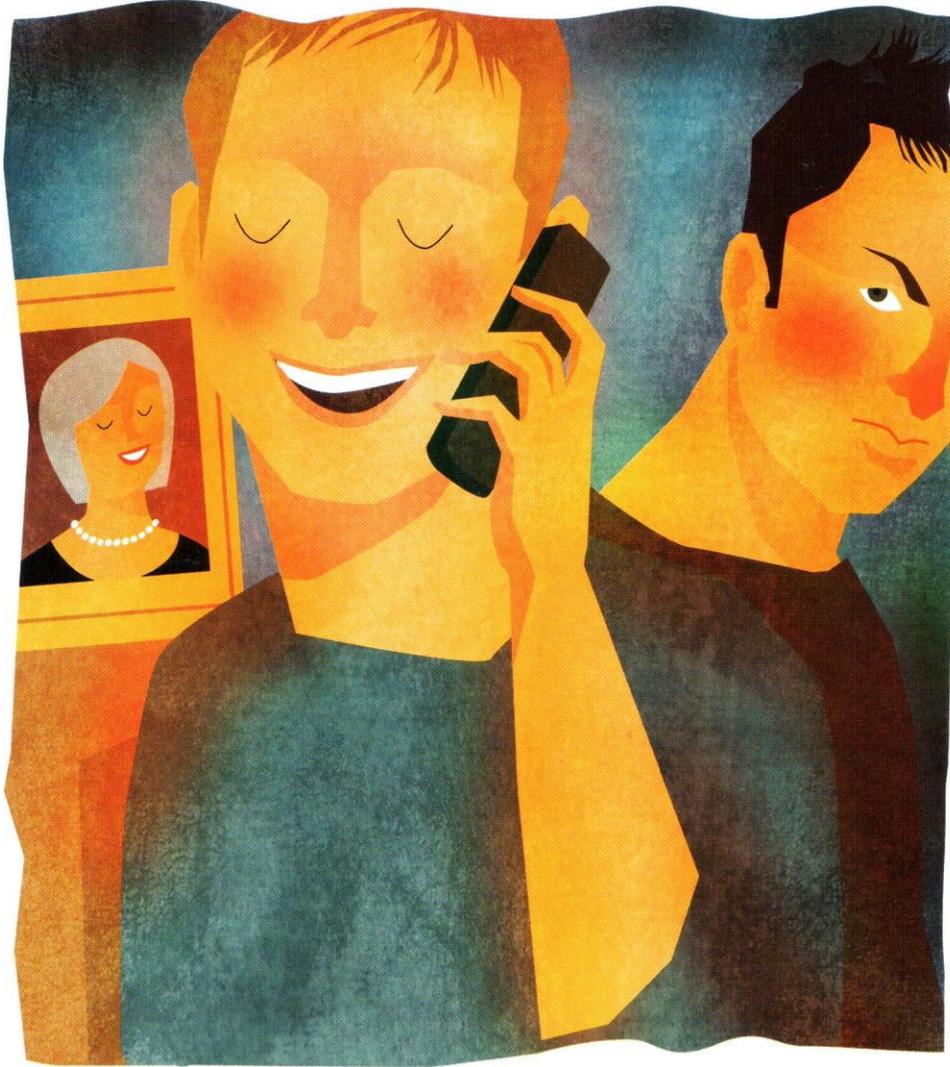


GAY RELATIONSHIP EXPERTS ALAN DOWNS & JOE KORT ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS

MY BOYFRIEND IS TOO CLOSE TO HIS MOTHER



THIS MONTH: JOE ON MOMMIE DEAREST

DEAR JOE

My boyfriend is bothered by my relationship with my mother. She and I are very close, and I consider it to be healthy. My father is not very nice to her so she confides in me and we talk on the phone every day. My boyfriend says he feels like I am in a relationship with her and there

is no room for him. When he is around my mother he feels she is cold towards him and she refers to him as my 'friend' rather than my boyfriend. I think she is sweet and doing her best but he feels second best to her. What should I do?

JAMES, ABERDEEN

DEAR JAMES

If your boyfriend feels second to your mother, you need to pay attention. While this may turn out to be mostly his issue, our partner's frustrations are often based on some truth. If you have a relationship with your mother that is blocking your ability to engage fully with your boyfriend, then you need to do something about it.

We gay men often have very tight bonds with our mothers, who protect us from the homophobia out there. She's there for us from the beginning. If our dads distance themselves from their 'queer son', Mum's arms are there ready to protect us. Mothers are usually the first to protect their children, and even when their children have committed crimes will proclaim their innocence. We're often her favoured child and have a special relationship with her.

It is taboo to speak ill of mothers in most cultures, so we either keep silent or silence others who might criticise her. It makes sense not to disparage her - or let anyone else for that matter - because usually she has protected us and made us feel safe.

You say you talk to your mother every day and that she confides in you. While it can be healthy to be friends with a parent once you become an adult, I wonder if this has been going on since your childhood. If your father isn't very nice to your mother, did you feel as though you needed to protect her when you were young? If she leaned on you and confided in you as a child, she may have turned you into a surrogate husband.

The surrogate spouse syndrome typically begins when the mother's relationship with her son's father grows conflicted or distant. She may turn to her son if things don't work out with her husband, or if she doesn't find another adult to meet her needs. Because the gay son is often more emotional, sensitive and connected to her than his father, that's the easy way for her to go. The gay son, needing the secure base of his mother's protection, feels he's in a privileged position and complies. But while this dynamic relieves the mother's anxiety of dealing with the relationship with her husband, it causes many problems for her gay son.

It's a mother's responsibility to block her son from taking on the role of surrogate husband. Therapists teach mothers who have lost a partner to be sure to tell her sons they need not step into their father's shoes, and to let their children know they don't need to protect their mother. Her response should be, 'I can take care of myself, and I'm glad you want to do this. That's nice of you but

IF YOUR MOTHER CONFIDED

IN YOU AS A CHILD. YOU MAY BE A SURROGATE HUSBAND

just know, I'll be taking care of myself and you'. But many mothers don't say this, don't know how, or are so preoccupied that they don't see that the son is stepping into a partner's role.

If this is the case in your situation, your partner doesn't stand a chance of being number one to you. His complaints may be coming from an awareness that your priority is your mother and not him.

It is odd that your mother refers to your boyfriend as your friend. You say that it is sweet, but is it? How hard is it to acknowledge that your son has a boyfriend? If you were straight and your mother called your girlfriend your friend, would you still think that was sweet? As gay males we often give others too much room to not acknowledge our gayness, whereas if we were straight we would not tolerate the same things.

How do you separate from a mother who relied on you, her gay son, as a surrogate husband? When a mother makes a son - gay or straight - her partner in emotional ways, she prevents him from being able to attach appropriately to future partners. There can be a psychological marriage to Mum, typified by the understanding gay son in whom she might confide. It vandalises his ability to create loving romantic relationships. In fact, serious negative effects from this prevent healthy relationships.

IT MAY BE TIME THAT YOU GO FROM GAY BOY TO GAY MAN WITH YOUR MOTHER AND SET NEW GUIDELINES AND BOUNDARIES. HERE IS WHAT I SUGGEST:

1. TELL YOUR MOTHER THAT YOU WANT HER TO STOP REFERRING TO YOUR BOYFRIEND AS A FRIEND

Let your mother know that it hurts you as much as it hurts your boyfriend to refer to him in this way. Tell her she may not mean it to be hurtful but that it is.

2. TALK TO YOUR MOTHER LESS FREQUENTLY

Do you make contact with your boyfriend as much as you talk to your mother? If not, I would increase your contact with him and decrease your contact with her.

3. TELL YOUR PARTNER YOU ARE GOING TO CHOOSE HIM FIRST

Validate your partner's feelings and tell him that you are going to work on making him a priority over your mother.

4. SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS WITH YOUR MOTHER ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE DOING

You don't have to stop being close to your mother. You do, however, need to make it clear to her that you have a loving adult relationship and that you hope she can acknowledge it and allow it to grow by giving up a bit of time and contact with you.

By taking these actions you will find that not only will you and your boyfriend benefit, so will your mother. She may find someone with whom she can be close and get the intimate relationship she deserves as well.



Dr Joe Kort is a licensed clinical social worker and board-

certified of 10 Smart
sexologist. Things Gay Men Can Do to Improve their Lives.
He is also joekort.com
the author