

Twelve Things Women Should Avoid in Men

Ryan's Story

When Ryan began therapy, she was 28 years old. She had been married at 21 for a brief two years when her husband declared that they married too young. Ryan felt enormous pain and embarrassment when he ended their marriage—one that barely got started. She used to trust her feelings and judgment but with this breakup, she began questioning everything about herself and her marriage.

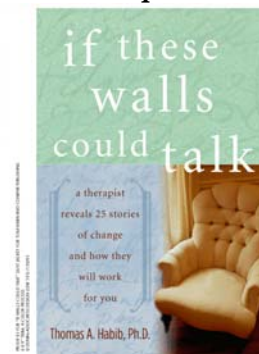
After the breakup, Ryan noticed what had become a familiar pattern in her relationships with men including her ex-husband. This is what she wanted to work on in therapy. She was attracted to men who were sensitive, easy going, warm, and cooperative. So far, this sounds good. However, the common pattern was this: Their lives would be going nowhere. These men were chronic underachievers who rarely took a stand on anything, whether it was a statement about themselves or a determination to go after a career or a passionate interest in life. Although these men were non-confrontational and relatively easy to live with, Ryan always felt she carried a greater part of the load than they did, both emotionally and financially. She felt like she was a magnet for “little boys” who wanted to be mothered.

We began to explore how she felt about more traditional men who were more assertive, powerful, and confident. At first, she said these men would be great but as we talked, she realized she didn't feel safe with them. “Assertive” unconsciously meant “controlling” to Ryan. “Powerful” felt “dominating.” And having a clear, determined direction meant she would be left behind.

Discussions about her family revealed a mother who, she observed, was dominated by her father. “This wasn't going to happen to me,” she told herself prior to puberty. The path was set. However, Ryan went too far in the safe direction. As part of her therapy, she was given an assignment to meet men she normally wouldn't be attracted to. These men would be more outspoken, less ingratiating toward women, and significantly more forward about what they wanted. Men whose lives were going somewhere.

Ryan was encouraged to tolerate her initial reaction to them until she gained a deeper understanding of who they were. In preparation, we listed several things for her to observe and we planned to assess them jointly during her therapy.

From Chapter 20



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Below is a commentary on the kind of men women can be attracted to. They grew out of Ryan's initial list and are written from a woman's perspective. I call this list The Twelve Things Women Should Avoid in Men.

1. Men Who Have Not Spent Enough Time Being Single
2. Men Who Are Little Boys Looking For Mommy
3. Men Who Are Rigid and Controlling
4. Men Who Have a Poor Work Ethic
5. Men Whose Mothers Still Dominate Their Lives
6. Men Who Do Not Want Children (And You Do)
7. Men Who Can't Co-parent
8. Men Who Can't Ask for What They Want Without Melting
9. Men You're Not Physically Attracted To
10. Men with Whom You Can't Successfully Engage in Problem-Solving
11. Men Who Tell You Feeling is Something You Do With Your Hands
12. Men You Never Feel Accepted or OK With

Here is a description of each of them.

1. Men Who Have Not Spent Enough Time Being Single

It's imperative that the man you select for your lifelong mate has invested enough time being single. This is true for both men and women for a number of reasons. But at this time, I want to focus on a man's capacity to commit.

What does being single have to do with one's ability to commit, you may ask? A lot - especially in the ability to give up the fantasy of a bachelor's lifestyle. A man's fantasy of the bachelor's lifestyle involves an unending supply of physically gorgeous women he can date casually while having a sexual relationship. It's not that men are animals; it's more complicated than that.

Two factors predispose men to the fantasy of the bachelor's lifestyle. First, on average, men experience their sexual drive at a higher intensity than women. A study shows that men think about sex (depending on their age) anywhere from every four to eleven minutes!¹ (Of course there are exceptions to this trend when a woman's libido matches any man's.) Secondly, men are not socialized to express as wide a range of feelings as women. This renders them more dependent on sexualized forms of intimacy than other kinds.

After a series of relationships, men begin to understand and appreciate the more comprehensive agenda women have. They discover, to their continued astonishment, that having sex with multiple partners isn't even on her list of desires. The reality that the bachelor's fantasy will never happen can only be fully accepted by dating and experiencing a good number of

Shanor, Karen. The Shanor Study: The Sexual Sensitivity of the American Male. New

York, Dial Press. 1978.

relationships. When men can conclude that “I’ve been there and done that” and experience a woman as a person with hopes and dreams, then they could be ready for commitment and marriage.

Women, be careful of the man who hasn’t been single long enough. He’s more prone to have a mid-life crisis if he hasn’t fully reality tested his bachelor’s fantasy. This was an early sign overlooked by Ryan that exacted its toll long before mid-life.

2. Men Who Are Little Boys Looking For Mommy

A certain number of powerful, accomplished women have a tendency to pick men who are little boys looking for mommy. From the outside looking in, these women are admired for their education, careers, vision, energy, purpose, and the strength of their personhood. However, inside they still doubt themselves. To ensure the power and control they’ve fought so hard to attain, they fall in love with the gentle teddy bear—a teddy bear who will never challenge or threaten them.

These kind of men are often created by their mothers—“the prince” raised in an environment where they wanted for nothing and were indulged at every turn. Their mothers likely had a marriage only in name with fathers who were absent or distant. These teddy bears never got to see any man relate to a woman other than through their mother’s role; they expect the same treatment for the rest of their lives. Look out if they continue to have excessive involvement with their mothers. Although you may be the recipient of their generosity, you’ll find they often allow others to use them. Rather than operating on the principle of give and take, they indulge everyone’s expectations in a series of appeasements. (We’ll discuss this more in *Men Whose Mothers Still Dominate Their Lives*).

The problem with these men is almost identical to challenges described for men in “*Women Without Power*.” That is, you become bored with them as the years pass and your responsibilities grow. As your burden builds, your respect for them slides. Repeatedly, you will look at them with a clear feeling of needing help and conclude they’re not strong enough to lend you any credible assistance. This realization will seep out in critical remarks that will further deteriorate their confidence and their scant ability to muster strength at the most crucial junctures. Meanwhile, your frustration will grow at a time when children and mortgages weigh in as part of the equation.

If you recognize yourself in this relationship, you need professional help. If you are unmarried but recognize your attraction to these men who want to relate to you as mommy, deal with your discomfort of being with a stronger man who can fully be your partner. In the long run, you have much more to gain by marrying your peer rather than your dependent. Ryan was already beginning to understand this lesson before entering therapy.

3. Men Who Are Rigid and Controlling

Marriage and parenting will constantly challenge anyone with a strong need to make changes. Growth is the euphemism we use to describe this painful process. These challenges can ultimately be rewarding but they are difficult. One of the surest ways to make this process nearly impossible is to marry a rigid and controlling man.

The rigid and controlling man is anxious and afraid, yet he doesn’t know it. This makes life with him especially difficult. He’s too afraid to construct a partnership in which the natural strengths of each partner, by virtue of their merit, has a chance of making the best contribution to the

marriage. In an authoritative style and driven by his anxiety, he tightly controls the marital and family process to the detriment of everyone.

Often (but not necessarily) the rigid and controlling man cloaks himself in tradition. As part of his dedication to tradition, he expects his wife and children to practice obedience and fulfill predefined roles. He does this because he's looking for a life path without risk. And you've probably guessed it by now—the more trying times become, the more rigid and difficult he becomes at the worse possible times. This controlling man likely shows an inability to ask for what he wants without melting (described under Men Who Can't Ask for What They Want Without Melting).

If your dating history suggests you are attracted to rigid and controlling men, you need to find out why. It can be anything from too strong of a need to feel protected, insufficient development of your own life goals, or a history of childhood abuse. Time spent in therapy with a psychologist would be well spent before you marry this man.

4. Men Who Have A Poor Work Ethic

Men who have a poor work ethic and men who are little boys looking for mommy likely go hand in hand. In either instance, you need to be careful before you sign up for a life of heavy responsibility with little support. If he also rings the bell for men whose mother still dominates their life (see Men Whose Mothers Still Dominate Their Lives), you have what I call the teddy bear triad. The man who fits the teddy bear triad initially shows up as soft and cuddly. He's not a threat to you. He can be warm and ingratiating, a skill he honed with his mother who rewarded compliance with her agenda and thus controlled him. Most women are not attracted to this man without real power and thus successfully avoid his charms. If you are attracted to this guy and marry him, he'll frustrate you before your fifth year of marriage, guaranteed. Ryan's ex-husband fits the teddy bear triad.

5. Men Whose Mothers Still Dominate Their Lives

The final leg of the teddy bear triad is unique and easily identifiable. It will rear its telltale signs around holidays, birthdays, and family gatherings. It will even show up in his apartment. His mother will continue to expect involvement in his life. If he should decline or modify her wishes, she will react with anger and invoke guilt. He will do everything possible to avoid feelings of guilt and will juggle your wishes along with his mother's in an attempt to appease the two most important women in his life. What's missing in this dance when the music never stops is what he wants. Without this vital source of inner connection, nothing he agrees to is sustainable or consistent. He will drift into any number of commitments that will ultimately polarize you as the evil witch. This role will be assigned to you by his mother and ratified by other family members.

6. Men Who Do Not Want Children (And You Do)

It's frightening how often women marry a man who expresses doubt about wanting children. But what's a woman to do? A very large proportion of men feel ambiguous around wanting children and only discover after the fact that it's worth it. Thus, the strategy of taking one step at a time works more often than not. It's indeed wise not to scare away a guy you love by introducing this

blockbuster issue too early.

This said, still be cautious about this strategy. If a guy is adamant around not wanting children and you marry him with the hope that you can change his mind, you're taking a big risk. Moreover, I have found that these men's commitment to parenting isn't all that strong, which means you'll have the opportunity to be superwoman by taking on tasks you'll have to accomplish alone. Early on in the relationship, casually ask him how he feels about children. Be careful of men whose childhood was troubled or chaotic; they seem most hesitant about having children of their own.

7. Men Who Can't Co-Parent

There is a difference between men who won't co-parent and men who can't co-parent. If they won't co-parent, they either didn't want children in the first place or they are stuck in a time warp five decades old. If they can't co-parent yet agreed to have children, you and your unborn are in major trouble.

Men (or women) who can't co-parent should never have children. Their capacity to love children is limited; they frequently lack tolerance; they don't want to make the necessary investment and sacrifice. At best, they'll be an absent parent and model for your children on how not to build a marriage. The worst has almost no limit; let it be said they'll be hostile and angry. To screen out the man who can't co-parent, volunteer to baby sit children with your significant other to see how he reacts. If possible, take the kids for a ride in his car or, better yet, take them to his condo. If he stresses out over a child acting like a child, and seems to overlook the joy of caring for a little one, you may have a man who can't co-parent.

8. Men Who Can't Ask For What They Want Without Melting

The vulnerability we feel in intimate relationships causes us to be hypersensitive. It's why we can fight over the most inane issues, such as failing to pick up one's socks, neglecting to put the cap on the tooth paste tube, forgetting something at the grocery store, arriving later than planned, omitting a phone call, not providing the right look, the right response, the right touch. Anyone in a relationship for longer than one year could add to this list of seeming atrocities. Why are we so sensitive to disappointment in our intimate relationships? How do we better tolerate the slights and indignities and out-right abuse in almost every other relationship?

It's because there's an unspoken expectation of perfect responsiveness in every intimate relationship. This expectation, inevitably doomed for disappointment, causes many relationships to become painful battlegrounds. Behind this expectation is the fantasy of a perfect love (discussed in "Romantic Ideals that Hurt"). It's an expectation well beyond what any real person could possibly meet. Coming to terms with this discrepancy—that is, the wish for perfect responsiveness and the reality that no one has the perfect spouse—is critical to the long-term stability and viability of any marriage.

A man who can't ask for what he wants without melting hasn't accepted that love isn't perfect. Many issues that could be resolved through communication and cooperation will unnecessarily ignite quarrels and chaos. These men frequently cannot problem-solve with you

(see Men with Whom You Can't Successfully Engage in Problem-Solving). If they are also rigid and controlling (see Men Who Are Rigid and Controlling) and have little or no ability to express feelings (see Men Who Tell You Feeling is Something You Do With Your Hands), then you're voluntarily signing up for decades of problems with an angry and verbally abusive guy.

9. Men You're Not Physically Attracted To

This is rarely a problem for men, but sometimes a problem for women. It's important to be physically attracted to the man you're thinking of marrying. It's not enough that he's taller than you and provides well. You'll have to sexualize this relationship throughout the years because physical attraction plays an important role. Although attractiveness may not seem as important to you in the beginning, it helps sustain the necessary passion and connection. In time, it will prove more important to you and especially to your future husband. If he becomes conscious of your lukewarm connection, then trouble lies ahead. Either way, both of you lose the chance to relate in a way successfully married couples do.

10. Men You Cannot Successfully Engage in Problem-Solving

It's hard to find a more important couple skill than problem-solving. On the surface, it seems like it should be relatively easy, but it isn't. Too many people don't even know what they want when they enter a problem-solving discussion. They begin with angry feelings and expect their mates to comb through it and help them figure out what they want. Expecting the issue to be self-evident is usually lost in a frequent blizzard of anger and put-downs.

The initial rule in problem-solving is this: If you can't answer the question "what do I want," then you're not ready to begin a discussion. It's time to bite your tongue and say nothing until you know.

Other important rules for problem-solving are:

- He can ask for what he wants but is he able to accept 'no.'
- He attempts to find consensus but realizes it isn't always possible. Sometimes plain old horse-trading is necessary (e.g., "Okay, I'll go to your nephew's birthday party if you'll trade me a baseball game.").
- He raises only one issue at a time.
- He's appreciative and content when given something.
- He accepts that every problem is not immediately solvable and you can agree to disagree.

Of course, these rules apply to you as well. In my experience, a couple who can produce an agreement in one out of every four problem-solving attempts is going to be okay! What destroys a relationship is the hopelessness of traversing the same old ground with no solution in sight. I suggest you avoid the guy who cannot problem-solve.

11. Men Who Tell You “Feeling” is Something You Do With Your Hands

How much do I need to say about this? If you're actually attracted to this guy—and plenty of women are—get into therapy now. Look past any semblance of strength or accomplishment and see how immature and underdeveloped these men are. Typically, they have an authoritarian style and dismiss sentimentality. However, they could evidence the teddy bear triad. To a greater degree than others, these concrete-thinking men enter occupations that heavily rely on logic (e.g., engineering and computer programming).

12. Men You Never Feel Accepted or OK With

Ask yourself this simple question, “How do I feel about myself when I'm around him?” If you don't feel occasionally loved, almost always accepted and affirmed, appreciated, admired, comfortable and relaxed, there's a problem.

For the sake of discussion, I'm assuming you like who you are and the problem is with him (although some women don't like who they are and neither do their partners.) If you're in a situation in which you never feel loved and accepted, ask a girlfriend who has seen you with him to comment. It's usually fairly easy for others to see if there's acceptance. You need to feel accepted and OK with the man you love.

Prologue

Ryan eventually fell in love with a guy who was both sensitive and powerful. She married a business executive a year after she finished her therapy. He was career-focused; he could tell her no when he didn't want to do something; he enjoyed sports, cars, and water rafting. She felt safe with him even though he was more powerful than what she'd been accustomed to. Ryan finally had the true partner she always wanted—someone who could give as much as she could. I knew Ryan would be fine when she began to see the little boy still existing behind the facade of accomplishments and power. She found a better way of being safe than marrying a man who hadn't matured.

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