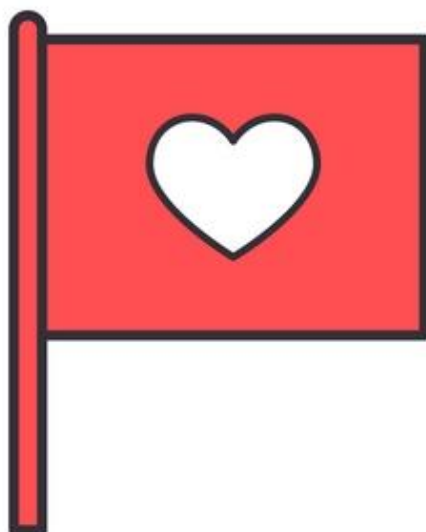


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12 Dating Red Flags and What They Mean

by Steph Sterner

Introduction

It's happened to all of us. We thought we'd found "the one" – until we realized things weren't what they seemed. Why didn't we notice those red flags until it was too late?

Some warning signs are obvious and cannot be ignored. If you're being abused, get out while you still can. The longer you stay, the harder it will be to leave. And if you discover that your new love is addicted to alcohol or other drugs, end the romance **now**. He (or she) needs to deal with the addiction – and at least some of the issues that led to it – before starting a new relationship.

Of course, these are the dramatic signs. There are many others, most of which are a bit subtle. I'm going to share my top 12 to look out for. If you notice even one of them, it's time to consider your options carefully. And if you recognize several – head for the hills! Your relationship (and probably your partner) is toxic, and no good is likely to come from continuing it

I'm going to refer to whoever you're in relationship with as "he" because ... well, it's just easier. But everything here refers to both men and women.

So let's dive right in. Here are my top 12, in no particular order:

1. Ownership

This can take several forms. Let's look at each of them.

- a. **He doesn't like your family and friends.** If you come from a difficult family, it's not fair to expect him to like them. In fact, you might worry if he did. But if everyone else thinks they're fine, what's going on? And we choose our friends. If you believe you chose well, you should be concerned about his negative feelings toward them. He may be trying to isolate you from the people who give you emotional support – and tell you when you're making a big mistake.
- b. **He's moving too fast for you.** He wants to become exclusive right away. And while it's easy to get swept up in the moment, you wonder whether it's such a good idea. If you're already exclusive, he may be pushing you to move in together – or apply for a marriage license during your lunch break. Talking about the next step is one thing, but pressuring you to take it before you're ready is a sure sign of trouble. Pay attention to that feeling in the pit of your stomach and refuse to be rushed.
- c. **Now that you're together, it's couples only.** Things have gotten serious, so you'll be spending less time with your friends. That's normal. The two of you need time together, and it has to come from somewhere. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't have a life of your own. Everyone needs some time apart, and your friends matter – whether they're in relationships or not. Don't give up your one-on-one time with your besties for someone who's trying to control you. Insist on your own life. Anyone who doesn't want you to have one is trying to own you.

2. Love Bombing

Love bombing is the psychotic version of ownership. Its sole purpose is to make you easy to control by creating an addiction. When it's successful, you **need** his affection and approval – and when it's gone, you'll do just about anything to get it back.

Here's how it works.

Stage 1: From the very beginning, he appears infatuated with you. (In reality, he's grooming you to do his bidding.) He showers you with affection, gifts, flattery and maybe even over-the-top romantic gestures. He talks about the wonderful future you'll have together – in detail. He's focused on you day and night – as evidenced by the sheer volume of calls and messages you receive.

He gets you. Everything you say or do makes perfect sense; if there's a problem in your life, it's obviously someone else's fault. He's probably a great listener, too. But while you're feeling loved and appreciated, he's making a list of your hopes, dreams and insecurities for later use.

Stage 2: Suddenly, without warning, everything changes. Maybe you needed some time to reconnect with friends – or just some time to yourself. Or maybe not. Maybe he's succeeded, and you've come to depend on him for all of your emotional needs. In the first case, he's furious. He's supposed to be your entire world! In the second case, he's bored and ready to reap the benefits of the addiction he's created. Either way, things are about to get ugly.

He may become verbally (or physically) aggressive, give you the silent treatment (another form of aggression) or simply withdraw all that affection and approval. This continues until he gets what he wants – or he senses that you've had enough and might end the relationship. Then he returns to the first stage for as long as it takes.

But that “return to love” won't last long. Its only purpose is to rekindle the addiction and get you back under control.

If your relationship fits this pattern, walk away and never look back. Don't try to soften the blow by staying friends. He's not interested in friendship, and he'll use the opportunity to try to suck you back in. Remember, his goal was to create an addiction, not a relationship.

If you can't bring yourself to leave, get some professional help. He's good at what he does, and you may need support to break free.

3. Toxic Relationships

- a. **You don't like his friends** – or the way he acts around them. What don't you like? Are they a bit too loud? Do they drink too much? Do they make fun of people? It's one thing not to like his family – maybe he doesn't either. But, as I've already mentioned, we choose our friends. If they're a little loud, where's the harm? But if they spend most of their free time drinking and putting people down, it's time to ask some serious questions. Why did he choose them? And why does he stay with them? If this gets serious, you could be stuck with his unhealthy choices for years to come. Stop looking the other way.
- b. **His exes are all crazy, mean or stupid.** This is a huge red flag. Are you the first normal woman he's dated – or the next crazy ex? When someone has a string of bad relationships, there are only two possible explanations. Either he's a magnet for abuse ... or he's the problem. Neither of these options lends itself to a bright future.

4. Conflicting Values

You don't seem to want the same things. You value security and he just wants to have fun – or money seems more important to him than his family and friends, while relationships are everything to you. Maybe he wants a big family, and right now your career comes first. And what if one of you is religious and the other isn't?

If this is a casual relationship, it may work. But if you're hoping to make it permanent some day, it's important to talk about what matters to both of you – maybe not on your first date, but before things go too far.

5. Lack of Communication

He doesn't talk about his feelings, even when it's obvious that something's wrong. When you ask, he says it's not you – but he doesn't sound like he means it. And when he's mad at you, he gives you the silent treatment. It's up to you to guess what you did wrong and make it up to him.

Many people find it hard to talk about their feelings, and everyone communicates differently. The important thing is that they can open up when it really matters. If you're with someone who can't do that, imagine what your relationship will be like in 20 years. If you think you'll have accepted it by then, or that he'll have learned to trust you with his feelings, think again. Either of those things **could** happen, but they're both about as likely as winning the lottery. Don't bet your future on it.

6. Assumptions and Control

On your first date, he ordered for you. You thought it was charming – even though there were things on the menu you would have liked better. Or maybe he just chose the wine. You told him it was as good as he promised, but was it? He likes the expensive stuff, while you prefer a nice sangria. But it's only your first date. There's plenty of time for him to get to know you better ... right?

Once you become exclusive, he started making plans for the two of you. You'll love this band. Everyone raves about this new restaurant. His brother's invited you to dinner, and you've just got to meet him – tonight. You sigh and cancel your plans. Again.

He likes to buy you gifts, which is great. But now he's shopping for an evening dress – without you. Do you see the pattern here? He's deciding what you eat or drink, how you spend your time and what you wear. If that's not a control freak, I don't know what is.

7. Guilt Trips and More

He uses guilt trips and other manipulative tactics to get his way. Maybe he has a couple of favorites – or maybe he knows them all and switches them up. In any case, guilt is just the beginning. Watch out for these:

- Refusing to take “no” for an answer;
- Playing on your sympathy;
- Withholding approval, affection or support until you give in;
- Personal attacks;
- Intimidation (including using anger as a weapon);
- Demanding an answer **now**; and
- The silent treatment.

If you've come to expect any of these tactics, you're in a toxic relationship.

8. Judgment and Superiority

He talks down to people who are less educated or sophisticated than he is; he has a habit of rolling his eyes or making sarcastic remarks behind their backs. He often uses humor to put people down. He may be so good at it that others laugh along without even realizing what's happening.

You may think you're safe because he only does this to others. How long do you think it will be before he starts on you? Does he think he knows what's best for you? Is he telling you how you should think, feel or dress? Then guess what ... he's already established his superiority. You just haven't noticed.

9. Lack of Interest

Wanting you and being interested in you are **not** the same thing. If you're wondering whether he really cares, ask yourself these questions:

1. When you're together, does he pay attention to you – or are his eyes and ears all over the room?
 2. When he buys you gifts, does he choose things you'll enjoy – or does he expect you to like what he likes? Not everyone knows how to choose “the perfect gift”– especially in the beginning. But he should at least try.
 3. What or whom does he talk about the most? If the answer is his accomplishments, his problems or any other details of his life, he may be too self-centered to be genuinely interested in you.
 4. Is he trying to make the relationship work, or is most of the effort coming from you? He may even be sabotaging it. If he's not willing to own up to what he's doing and work on his issues, it's time to move on.
 5. He's “benching” you. This charming tactic is on the rise because online dating makes it so easy. (It used to be called “leading you on”.) Its purpose is to keep you around for convenience without having to invest physically, mentally or emotionally in the relationship”. If there's been no movement, either forward or backward, in a while – and you thought you'd be moving forward by now – he might just be looking around to see if he can find something better. If not, he figures he can always fall back on you.
- If you're thinking about getting serious, make sure he's really interested. You want someone who's looking for a partner, not a pet.

10. No Accountability

Does he acknowledge his mistakes and learn from them, or is he surrounded by people who screw things up at his expense? If he can't see how his own choices contribute to his problems, how do you think he'll handle your first fight – or the ones after that?

Chances are his emotional pain isn't his fault, either. And the closer you become, the more likely he is to blame that (and just about anything else) on you. And watch out for the temper tantrums – they wouldn't be happening if you hadn't "pushed" him!

People who don't see their own mistakes can never learn from them – that's why they're always blaming bad luck or the "idiots" around them. Stick around long enough and you'll become one of them.

11. Lack of Trust

It's nice to be asked how your evening was or whether you liked the new restaurant. Questions show that we're interested – until we ask too many. That's when a friendly conversation turns into an interrogation!

If he's constantly checking on you, asking where you are and who you're with, either he's not much of a conversationalist or he doesn't trust you. If you think his conversational skills are the issue, try making it easy for him. Ask about his family and friends. How did he spend the weekend while you were away? What are the folks at the office like?

If he avoids giving you details, watch out. Anyone who asks you questions that he won't answer himself has issues. Most likely he doesn't trust you. And, yes, I suppose you could be the one he finally opens up to – but that's about as likely as winning the jackpot at the casino. It's nice to dream about, but it is worth the risk?

12. Your Feelings

When things are good, they're oh-so-good! But when you disagree, or it's time to set a boundary, you feel insecure. If you've been that way in all your relationships, you may need to develop your confidence. But if this isn't how you usually feel (or if those other relationships turned out to be toxic), you need to take this seriously.

Here are some other danger signs:

- You feel like you're walking on eggshells around him, and you don't even know why.
- His needs seem more important than yours, regardless of the situation.
- You dress or act differently around him; you can't quite be yourself.
- You've stopped sharing your opinion with him because you're afraid he'll disagree.
- You feel alone, trapped or mentally exhausted.
- You no longer feel good about yourself; you had more confidence before the two of you got together.

What to do?

New relationships can be a challenge, especially in today's digital world. If you suspect that your new relationship may be unhealthy, toxic or even abusive – or you just want to want to make that far less likely to happen – there are some simple steps you can take. Here are a few tips to help you keep yourself, and your relationships, healthy:

1. **Keep your friends and family close.** Even if you've found your soulmate (for real), you still need your friends and family. It's natural to spend less time with them at the start of a relationship, so make the effort to stay connected.
2. **Take things slowly.** Make sure you have some time apart – even if that's not what you want. Time away can give you perspective; both the good and the bad will become clearer. Don't get intimate right away; there's nothing like lots of hot sex to shut down your brain! Don't get sucked into detailed conversations about your future together on the second date. Don't let him pressure you into becoming exclusive before you're ready. And if you want to leave your place for his after a few weeks, resist the urge. If the relationship is a good one, there's plenty of time.
3. **Pay attention.** Review the red flags in this article and notice what you relate to. If you notice signs of possessiveness, superiority or manipulation, something's wrong. Stop making excuses and find out what it is.

4. **Listen to your gut.** Do his needs seem more important than yours? Do you feel alone or trapped – even though that seems crazy? Are you walking on eggshells or pretending (even a little) to be someone you're not? If something about this person or relationship doesn't feel right, stop telling yourself you're crazy. You're not. Manipulators and abusers know how to distract you from what's right in front of your nose. They're also experts at making you doubt yourself. If something doesn't feel right, find out what it is. Don't stop until you can name it – or the relationship is completely over.
5. **If you don't trust your gut, get a second opinion.** If you have a history of bad relationships, or you lack confidence for other reasons, you may not be ready to trust your instincts. That's OK. Consider confiding in a friend whose judgment you trust. And if no one close to you qualifies, think about hiring a therapist. A professional can help you to see what's really going on,

If you can relate to a few too many of these red flags, you have nothing to be ashamed of. These problems are common ones, and they're easy to miss – especially when you're involved with someone who knows how to cover them up. Now that you're aware, take a deep breath and pay attention to how that relationship is going. Think about what you can accept and what you can't. No partner is perfect, but you deserve someone who treats you with respect. If he's not doing that, then it's time to move on.

What Next?

If you'd like more information on setting boundaries and free resources like this one, consider joining my Facebook group [Boundaries and Bridges](#). You can ask questions, share ideas and even get review copies of my latest books before they're published.

If groups aren't your thing, check out my Facebook page [Stand Up for Yourself](#). It's full of inspirational quotes to remind you that it's OK to put yourself first sometimes.

And if you'd like something more substantial, like a private mentoring session, then drop me a line at steph@stephsterner.com. I'd love to hear from you.

Many thanks,
Steph