

Still Single: Seven Bad Habits That Keep You That Way

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Still Single: Introduction

Bad Habit 1: Over Reliance on “Chemistry”

Bad Habit 2: Looking for Mr. Perfect

Bad Habit 3: Failing to Speak Up

Bad Habit 4: Failure to Tell Him What You Like about Him

Bad Habit 5: Being Unduly Influenced by Others

Bad Habit 6: Self Defeating Behavior

Bad Habit 7: Competing Instead of Connecting

Still Single: Conclusion

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Why do some women connect easily with men while others have so much trouble forming a committed relationship? Hairdressers and clothing designers, cosmetic surgeons and diet doctors work their magic, but making yourself more beautiful and thinner are only the obvious parts of the answer, and not the most important ones.

Are women who spend years searching for a mate unsuccessfully doing something wrong? Are they doing things that undermine their efforts? Is there something in their attitude that gets in the way? The answer is probably yes to all these questions.

Although people have long observed that some very attractive women—and men—find it hard to interest someone else in a long term romantic relationship, the popularity of internet dating dramatizes this because it has made finding dates much easier for people of all ages. While we describe seven bad habits common among women who are single not by choice, we believe they apply equally to men.

Bad Habit 1: Over Reliance on “Chemistry”

Leanna is thirty five and has a good job as a bank officer. She is attractive and has a good sense of humor. She’s always been an excellent athlete. Leanna has never been married, but she had a couple of relationships in her early and middle twenties. She hasn’t had a regular boyfriend since. She has been doing some internet dating lately, and she says that when she meets a man she knows within the first few minutes if she is wasting time with him.

How can you know everything important about someone over a one hour cup of coffee?

Leanna says she knows because of the chemistry, it’s either there or it’s not.

On first meetings, in the first few minutes people do pick up unspoken signals about what kind of person they are dealing with. That’s chemistry. Psychologically, chemistry is your attraction to good or bad characteristics in a potential partner which remind you of your parents, for a woman, usually your father.

Leanna told us that a few times in the last several years she has felt the right chemistry with a man, but each time she has gotten hurt pretty quickly. By relying solely on chemistry Leanna is repeatedly attracted to men who are successful and independent, but also critical, withholding and self involved. This type of man turns her on. The faces change, but as their personalities emerge, these men are surprisingly similar. Leanna tells us that her father does have some of the personality traits she finds attractive.

When Leanna feels the right chemistry, she makes the man too important. She acts needy and dependent. Even on the first date her thoughts race towards the possibility of marriage. Without even knowing the man, she gives him too much power in the relationship.

Leanna's neediness usually turns the man off and he becomes withholding, critical, insensitive and ultimately leaves her. If he doesn't pull away, he may be inclined to take greater and greater liberties with Leanna because he feels he can get away with it and because he loses respect for her. Over the years she's had the experience of men lying to her and cheating on her, being verbally demeaning, and then leaving her. This process of Leanna's being rejected by men she has the right chemistry with can happen within a few dates or over the course of a couple of months. By repeating this pattern Leanna is left feeling she has failed, and it proves to her that the men she likes never like her.

There's a saying that: "If you keep doing what you've always done, you'll keep getting what you've always gotten." Since relying solely on chemistry repeatedly attracts Leanna to the wrong men, she needs to be cautious. She needs to reserve judgment, and try to spend time with men she likes, without rejecting, nor fully accepting any man because of the level of her initial chemical attraction. Leanna even needs to recognize that when she feels powerful chemistry toward a man, it's a sign of danger, the opposite of her reaction,...the stronger the chemistry, the stronger the danger.

Bad Habit 2: Looking for Mr. Perfect

Rebecca is a 23 year recent college graduate and works as an in an advertising firm. Tall and slim, with long blond hair, Rebecca is a woman who you would never imagine has trouble getting into a relationship, but she does. She goes out once in a while, but it usually doesn't progress beyond a few dates.

A problem that interferes with Rebecca getting into a relationship is that she has too many requirements for men she will date. She prescreens internet profiles and the men she meets in other ways for education, age, ethnic and religious background, income, height, weight, sports interests, geographic desirability and other categories. Rebecca is 5 feet 7 inches tall, but she won't date anyone under 5 feet 11. What if the man of her dreams is 5 feet 8? She will never get to know him. Rebecca doesn't know how to recognize a good catch. She is too caught up in image.

When Rebecca thinks a man does meet her requirements, like Leanna, she puts him on a pedestal. When one of his imperfections becomes visible, as it inevitably does, Rebecca's disappointment is powerful. She shifts from seeing him as all good to all bad and she becomes angry and rejecting. She can't believe he's such a "loser". Recently Rebecca started going out with a man she thought was perfect. He is tall (of course!), handsome, successful, lively, fun, and he has a beautiful apartment. When they became sexually intimate, he was impotent on a couple of occasions. Rebecca tried to ignore it.

When it happened the second time, she began to wonder if it was her fault. Maybe she wasn't attractive enough to him. They talked about it, and he acknowledged that this had sometimes been a problem for him, especially when he liked a woman very much. When he admitted this vulnerability, as far as Rebecca was concerned, he fell off the pedestal. Now, nothing he does is right.

There can be no Mr. Right for Rebecca, at least in the way she is looking for him. For her to overcome this pattern she has to remind herself from the beginning that no one is perfect, not by a long shot. Maybe he has money, but he's self-involved, or he's a workaholic, or emotionally distant. Maybe he's loving, but he's not so great in bed. Maybe he's very social, but has problems with his career. Maybe he likes her a lot, but he's got two young children who make big demands on his time, his priorities, and his finances (and perhaps try her patience as well). Maybe he's great in bed, but he flirts openly with other women. Maybe he appears very self-confident, but his mother or his ex-wife is the third person in his relationships with girlfriends. Maybe he appears so self-confident that he doesn't even realize that there is anything wrong with him.

If you want to be in a relationship you need to accept that perfection is an illusion and that sooner or later everyone's baggage surfaces. So, if Rebecca wants to have a boyfriend, and if she feels this man has enough of the qualities she appreciates, she has to try to be understanding about his sexual difficulties in this early phase of their

relationship. She needs to be supportive of him, and hang in there, at least for a while, long enough to see if, with her support, and a little time, they can work it out. We would never encourage her to accept destructive behavior like violence, or infidelity, or someone who repeatedly lies or is disrespectful or demeaning.

Part of what keeps Leanna and Rebecca single is that each is looking for a man who conforms to a predetermined set of requirements. Any man that doesn't they exclude; no second chances. Leanna tends to exclude the nicer guys, the ones she could possibly make a satisfying relationship with. Rebecca tends to exclude almost everyone. Each time it doesn't work out with a new man each of them reacts by saying, "I just haven't found the right one yet."

What we have in mind is taking a second look, even if the person doesn't have the ideal job, or he's a little older or younger than you wish he was, or doesn't work out at the gym as much as you'd like. It may be better for you to accept some of these less than ideal qualities, and pay more attention to the things you do like about him. At the very least, you'll have a better time.

Bad Habit 3: Failing to Speak Up

If after several dates you feel he's a nice guy, but you feel he doesn't call reliably or wants to monopolize you, or keeps correcting you, or he smokes too much pot, or drinks too much, or he's cheap, instead of heading for the hills, hang in there a little. Try to remember what you liked about him in the first place, and be courageous-- try talking to him. Tell him *one* thing that distresses you, and see if you can work it out with him. It's important to take the risk. If he pulls away, he's not the right kind of person anyway, and you're better off without him. If it's off to a good start you should feel you can be honest and can be yourself, and that you are not walking on eggshells.

Plato said: "We get the behavior from other people that we accept." If someone demeans you from the beginning, and you don't speak up, he'll be disrespectful repeatedly. If he's making you uncomfortable because he cuts you off, interrupting you often, and you refuse to speak up about it, he'll keep cutting you off. You may have to tell him more than once; even though you're afraid he may dump you. Don't get discouraged too easily. A relationship is a work in progress from the beginning. Speaking up may produce some disagreements, but some disagreement is not a bad thing. Many people who remain single don't know you have to do this work, and that it takes persistence. People don't change easily, but with patience you may help this relationship get underway and even make it into a match for you, especially if you can also make him feel accepted and secure.

Bad Habit 4: Failure to Tell Him What You Like about Him

When Petra age 35 went out with Don for the first time, she had a good time, and she thought he did too. When the evening was ending, she felt too nervous to say that the evening was fun, and that she would like to see him again. He went to give her a kiss on the lips, but she turned her cheek to him instead. He wanted to linger in the hallway outside her apartment, but she rushed to say goodnight and go inside because she thought he wanted to come in. When he didn't call for a couple of days, she was upset. He, on the other hand, had gotten little encouragement from her. He felt almost brushed off, and was somewhat reluctant to risk rejection and call her. Even though he eventually did, there was a similar miscommunication on the second date. Again, they had a good time. On the way to her apartment Don held her hand. She let him, but was passive, again giving him no encouragement. When they got to her apartment, he asked if she wanted to go to a movie the next day. She actually was free, but she didn't want to seem too available, so she declined. She didn't offer any alternative suggestion, and she never heard from him again.

Everyone needs encouragement. Petra didn't need to respond to Don's early sexual advances, if she felt they were premature, but she needed to make him feel accepted. She needed to say what she liked about Don. She needed to take a chance and tell him that he was funny, that the conversation was interesting, that he was easy to talk to, or that she liked the way he dressed. Petra was afraid Don would read too much into a compliment. She was afraid that he might come on too strong, or that she would seem needy and he

would take her for granted. The idea that men like women who play “hard to get,” is left over from a time when women married at twenty and virginity was a requirement. We live in a very different era. If you’ve been playing hard to get, and you’re still single, consider a more encouraging approach.

Bad Habit 5: Being Unduly Influenced by Others

It's common for many women to talk about their social lives with women friends, and sometimes with men friends as well. This can provide some comfort, but it can also have real disadvantages. When Hillary, a divorced 42 year old, told her women friends that the man she was starting to date was also seeing another woman, they said "don't stand for it, dump him." Hillary was very attracted to him, and she hadn't been in a relationship for several years. Hillary resisted her friends' advice on the recommendation of her therapist. He pointed out that if she dumped this man, she'd never see where the relationship could go, that it was very early in the relationship, and that the man had not agreed to being exclusive. Over the next several months Hillary felt humiliated and embarrassed when the "dump him" crowd pumped her for information and referred to her boyfriend with thinly veiled hostility. She kept wondering if she was a fool to keep seeing him. Hillary's hanging in there eventually paid off; they are now in an exclusive relationship.

We also know adult women whose families are overly protective and make romance difficult. These families convey that men are not to be trusted, and, at best, approached with extreme caution. Some families are excessively intrusive. They may talk to their adult daughter frequently and question her about her social life and offer strong opinions about the choices she makes. The daughter may feel obliged to relate many of the details every time she meets a man. The mother and/or father may be quite withholding of approval, or even actively disapproving of her choices. This creates conflict and

uncertainty in the daughter's mind about her ability to make the right decisions. She learns to doubt herself and her judgment.

To start a relationship you need the privacy to decide if the other person is someone you could be interested in. For some women repeated intrusions by a mother or father rob them of this privacy. For other women, a friend can sometimes play this intrusive role.

Hillary might be better off keeping her initial concerns about a man to herself. It's too easy for an outsider, a friend, a parent, a sister or brother, to feel protective and, although they are well-meaning, project their fears, envy or possessiveness into a situation that they are not personally involved in. Don't encourage others to put doubts in your mind. You need to decide whether this is a decent man, and whether you like him enough. It's tough to get into a relationship if decisions have to be made by committee.

Bad Habit 6: Self Defeating Behavior

Lydia is a fifty three year old wedding photographer. On first meeting Lydia seems to be adventurous, outgoing and warm. She has been divorced for twenty years. She is a little overweight, but pretty and extroverted. For ten of those years Lydia was in a platonic friendship with a divorced man. She hoped a romance would flower, but it never did.

When that relationship ended Lydia decided to try internet dating. She reported that she had had several nice phone conversations with a man she met on line and they were preparing to meet for dinner at a local restaurant the following weekend. In one phone conversation they touched briefly on the topic of sex. Lydia, who is pretty candid, told him she had not had sex in ten years because of the platonic relationship. She didn't hear from the man again. She was really surprised. We weren't.

Lydia thought she was communicating her openness, honesty and even her ability to trust. She may have been, but what she was communicating even more is her deep mixed feelings towards sex and to being in an intimate relationship with a man. There is such a thing as too much openness too soon. It would be fine for Lydia to communicate these feelings to the man, just not so soon, in this case, before they even met!

We believe a fair number of people who don't form relationships, but say they want to, do things that are bound to push the potential partner away. One single woman we know makes it clear from day one that she has to go everywhere with her Labrador retriever

who, it turns out, is not reliably house broken. Another woman makes it immediately clear that if she married again, or even lived with a man, she would have to sell her beautiful home and give her ex-husband half the proceeds, and that she is unprepared to do that for anyone. Another woman we know invited her best friend, and that woman's husband, to join her when she went on her second date (and what turned out to be her last) with a nice guy. She proceeded to sit her attractive, flirtatious friend across from the date, while she acted like a clown throughout the dinner.

We hear again and again from people who say they are single not by choice, that they put devotion to their gym workouts, devotion to visiting their parents, or excessive devotion to their careers before any other human being. Some women push men away by being negative and pessimistic. They express dissatisfaction about almost everything, from the weather to their jobs, from the government to the food in the restaurant they are in. The people who engage all these, and other self defeating behaviors are betraying mixed feelings about being in a relationship, or a lack of self-confidence that they are worthy of love.

Some people express these mixed feelings by only being attracted to people who are unavailable to them. Vivian, a sales woman in a fashionable clothing store, goes out constantly. She is 48, friendly, and very attractive. Vivian is frustrated because she keeps falling for men who only ask her out on one or two dates. The ones who call her repeatedly don't interest her at all. She says it's because they seem needy. Vivian doesn't realize it, but she sets herself up for rejection by setting her sights on men who are

unlikely to respond to her. What Vivian's behavior suggests is that she really doesn't want to be in any relationship. By choosing the ones who don't want her, and rejecting the ones who do, she assures that she will remain alone. These self defeating behaviors work every time.

Bad Habit 7: Competing Instead of Connecting

Carol, who is a 42 year old business woman says her goal is to find a committed relationship, but for the past eight years, since her divorce, most of her relationships have ended within a month or two. Carol is good looking, has a good figure and has many interests. Why can't she find someone? From our observations Carol has a problem competing instead of connecting. When you talk to Carol, after you have gotten to know her, you have the feeling that she is thinking about what she is going to say next, and how she can impress you. You feel she is not listening to you. If you tell her you sprained your ankle, she tells you about the two times she has had broken bones, and more importantly, she won't ask you anything about your ankle. If you tell her you just came back from Florida, one sentence later she will tell you in detail about her trip to the Bahamas. At bottom Carol is highly competitive with everyone, men and women. She doesn't reveal herself, and she doesn't encourage other people to feel comfortable enough to reveal themselves. Making conversation doesn't equate with establishing contact. This has served her well enough in business, but not in her personal relationships. She is trying to stage manage relationships rather than taking the risk of being spontaneous and not always in control.

Men love women who allow themselves to be somewhat vulnerable. The woman can be admirable and a tower of strength, but also needs to be human and capable of feeling. Maybe presenting a strong, exciting package gets you a couple of dates, but really being yourself, open and sometimes vulnerable, is more likely to sustain a man's interest.

If Carol could talk realistically about her job, or her children, or her thoughts about her future, instead of painting everything in her life as ideal, she might seem more approachable.

Lately Carol says she feels very anxious every time she meets someone new, that she's lost her self confidence. This is progress for her. She probably will benefit from replacing her superficial self assurance with some healthy self doubt, genuineness and spontaneity.

There is no one perfect man for Carol, for Leanna, Rebecca, Petra, Hillary, Lydia or Vivian, or for anyone else, but there are hundreds of potential, although imperfect mates. You can't find him if you already know exactly who you are looking for. The right man may surprise you with who he is. He won't be precisely the person you expected. You have to be willing to give him a chance. That may be very difficult for some people without the help of a trained therapist. To paraphrase the Rolling Stones: You can't always get exactly what you want, but if you try, try, and try, somehow, you can get what you need. Isn't that what you should be looking for if you are still single?