

The Tactical Guide to Women

*How Men Can Manage Risk
in Dating and Marriage*



Shawn T. Smith, PsyD

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MARRIAGE

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INTRODUCTION

The good life isn't complicated. Financial experts say a person of modest income can retire a millionaire with a bit of planning and execution. Medical experts say a modicum of discipline can add years to your life. Career coaches say you'll never work a day if you follow your calling.

Personally, I think the good life is largely a matter of avoiding the biggest blunders. You've won half the battle the moment you resolve to live within your means and use tequila as a treat rather than a requirement.

But no matter how attentive a man is toward his finances, his body, and his soul, there's one mistake that can shatter his hopes and dreams. One single error that can drain his wallet, decimate his faith in humanity, and haunt him for the rest of his days.

That granddaddy of all blunders is partnering with the wrong woman.

Romance carries particular hazards for men. For example, men fare poorly in family court, where child custody and alimony are disproportionately awarded to women. We lose out on reproductive rights when women disregard our wishes about pregnancy or abortion. Men on college campuses are presumed guilty until proven innocent when they are accused of sexual harassment. In contentious divorces, men are forced to spend huge sums of money simply to gain equal access to their children.

Let's not forget the cost of *not* leaving a bad relationship. There's increasing attention in the media of women who intimidate, manipulate, and abuse their men. We've all met men who reached the painful realization that leaving their miserable relationships would be costlier than staying. They run out the clock while writing off their dreams and solemnly chanting

“yes, dear.”

Yet, despite its uncertainty and danger, marriage also brings the possibility of benefit almost beyond measure. One line of research has found that men in stable marriages earn 10% to 24% more money, have more assets, enjoy more and better sex than their single or cohabiting counterparts, are healthier, and live longer (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2017).

Marriage can offer the best return on investment of any decision you can make, or it can be the costliest mistake of your life. Partnering with a woman is one helluva gamble. Without the proper skills and knowledge, you may have better luck with a roulette wheel.

Despite the seemingly endless strategies and risk-management techniques available to men for the betterment of our careers, our finances, and our health, the question of choosing the right woman is mostly ignored. I don't know about you, but I got more advice on shaving than on choosing my wife. This is foolishness. This lack of information has ruined many men.

It doesn't have to be this way. With a bit of knowledge we can enjoy sane relationships with great women, and we can save the gambling for the casino. It simply involves a few key bits of practical knowledge concerning:

- The invisible forces that steer men in the wrong direction
- The subtle signs of maturity, sanity, and stability in women
- The most common mistakes men make in choosing a partner

Women don't exist to make us miserable. Every woman with whom I discuss romance wants the same things: happiness and harmony. For every single romantic horror story, there are scores of successes, but they don't hit the rumor mill for the same reason we don't discuss every airplane that lands safely. It's common enough to be unremarkable.

Let me tell you about Kevin, who married Janette nearly thirty years ago. They have an adult child who developed severe mental illness. Over the last decade, they have endured money shortages, sleep deprivation, self-doubt, uncooperative relatives, and far too many midnight emergencies. It was precisely the sort of situation life can throw at a person at any given time.

Did it break their relationship? Hardly. They're stronger for it. Kevin explains, “We have been in hospitals, psych wards, rehab centers, and disastrous, filthy apartments. All have been terrible, but they are much worse any time either of us has had to try to deal with such a situation alone.

Knowing we have each other's back has made the intolerable somehow survivable."

He's being modest. They haven't merely survived. Kevin is in peak health and at the top of his profession. Their child still struggles but is doing well. Their other children are successful and thriving in life, and Kevin and Janette have taken to traveling the world together.

"We really are two halves of a whole, working together," Kevin says. "We have been through brutal battles—not with each other, but against an invisible, swirling enemy that we can never quite see or get a hold on."

Every relationship is going to face hurdles. The quality of the partnership can make the difference between success and failure.

I once asked Kevin how he knew, all those years ago, that Janette was the right woman for him. "I knew she was the right person for me to marry because she told me so."

He was joking. Kevin is not one to be coerced.

"In reality, we talked as we were dating about what mattered, about what we wanted the relationship to be. About creating an 'us' that was bigger than the two individuals."

Like so many successful men, Kevin can't fully explain the details that collectively led him to a wise decision. It certainly wasn't because his elders provided good role models; his parents' relationship was defined by substance abuse and hostility. There was something else that drove his decision, some bit of wisdom he has difficulty describing. I've found that successful men often have difficulty articulating the finer points of their outstanding romantic choices.

The cost of choosing poorly can be insidious. The slow erosion of potential that comes with the daily grind of a bad relationship can rob a man of the professional and personal success of the type Kevin enjoys.

I think financial poverty is the closest approximation to the draining effect of a bad relationship. In an economic study titled "The Psychological Lives of the Poor," three researchers described how the strains of poverty decrease effectiveness, productivity, and good decision-making (Schilbach, Schofield, and Mullainathan 2016).

Every person has a cognitive capacity, just as every truck has a carrying capacity. If you exceed it, the truck (or the person) will perform poorly and break down. Poverty strains human cognitive capacity because it forces a person to waste energy on financial decisions other people don't need to

worry about.

I can remember being in my early 20s and trying to juggle the cost of groceries and gas. I would ask myself, *Should I fill the tank halfway today or should I eat something more nutritious than ramen?* I certainly wasn't writing books back when I was obsessing over how to invest the thirteen dollars remaining at the end of the week.

Poverty also increases worry and anxiety over financial surprises. If you're financially comfortable and your transmission burns out, it's an inconvenience. If you're poor when it happens, you've got a serious problem on your hands—the sort of problem that can snowball into larger troubles like missing important opportunities or taking on added debt. The aforementioned study on the lives of the poor suggests that poverty's extra cognitive load translates directly into lost productivity and poor decisions.

If poverty can have that effect, what about a bad romantic partnership? What is the opportunity cost paid by a man hitched to a woman who is ill tempered, addicted, or unbalanced? What about the man married to a woman who refuses happiness, or who wastes money, or who denies him sex and affection?

I've noticed that bad relationships exact a subtle yet profound cost, just like poverty. The distraction from goals, the constant drive to avoid making things worse, the snowballing of problems—it all adds up to lost potential. But there's one difference between poverty and a bad romantic partnership: A poor man can still be happy.

By now, you might be wondering who I am to write a book like this. How can a guy who once subsisted on ramen offer anything useful about finding the right woman? Truthfully, my talent lies in gathering wisdom from people much smarter than I. I've tried to aggregate that wisdom here, and I also try to apply it in my own life.

I've enjoyed some success in the romance department. Eighteen years ago, I married the kind of woman who has prompted friends to ask, "How did you trick *her* into marrying *you*?" (I choose to take this question as a compliment.)

I've also been a student of human affairs since childhood. I was lucky enough to spend my formative years working in my family's bar. While my classmates were playing football after school, I was stocking beer, washing dishes, and witnessing some spectacularly misguided romantic efforts among the adults around me.

I vowed at an early age to learn from other people's errors. Mistakes are a great way to learn, but those mistakes don't have to be your own.

Fast forward a few decades. I clawed my way up to a doctorate, and I've worked as a clinical psychologist for more than a decade. I spend much of my time working with couples, where I get to see hundreds of good and bad relationships from the inside.

I can assure you there are good women out there. I meet them all the time. They love life, and they adore men. They know how to laugh, how to resolve disagreements constructively, and how to cherish the people in their lives.

Here's the challenge: just like all the airplanes that land safely, these women don't necessarily stand out from the crowd, especially since the crowd is full of spectacularly attractive women who are spectacularly wrong for you. Some of the most captivating creatures are wolves in sheep's clothing. They are destined to bring utter misery to some poor victim. That's not the sort of thing you want to discover after she's sharing your underwear drawer.

Are You a High-Value Man?

This book is for high-value men. Sometimes that term refers to a man's income, or to the bounty on his head. Here it refers to the kind of man, rich or poor, whom women seek out for long-term commitment.

I didn't invent the term. I'm not that clever. It comes from evolutionary psychology, a field of study explaining the behavior that helped humanity thrive. We have an amazing number of mental and behavioral predispositions that evolutionary psychologists refer to as adaptations. They keep us alive.

For example, worrying about the future is an adaptation that compels us to store food for lean times. A sense of humor is an adaptation that helps men attract women. Even pessimism appears to be adaptive. It's a variety of error-management, a mental calculus that helps us prevent unpleasant surprises. It can be useful so long as it doesn't get out of hand.

The high-value man, according to evolutionary psychologists, is one who possesses what women look for. In an outstanding review of evolutionary research, David Schmitt (2005) described the most basic, animalistic traits men and women seek in each other.

“Men place a greater premium on signals of fertility and reproductive

value such as a woman's youth and physical appearance," he wrote. No surprise there.

"In contrast, women place a greater premium on a man's status, resources, ambition, and maturity—cues relevant to his *ability* for long-term provisioning—and to his kindness, generosity, and emotional openness—cues to his *willingness* to provision women and their children." Again, no surprises.

I know what some of you are thinking: we are all complex individuals with unique motivations. I agree, but beneath our individual complexities are ancient predispositions driving our desires. Men, in general, prefer a nice hip-to-waist ratio. Women, in general, prefer a nice debt-to-asset ratio.

So what constitutes a high-value man in the modern world? It appears little has changed since our ancestors were hunting and gathering. A man's value to women boils down to those two words Dr. Schmitt italicized: *ability* and *willingness*.

High-value men have the *ability* to be long-term providers. That doesn't necessarily mean they're wealthy. It simply means they possess certain qualities like foresight, discipline, a social network, resourcefulness, intelligence, and humor.

High-value men also have the *willingness* to stick around. Willingness is evident in qualities like generosity, emotional stability, and the ability to maintain emotional bonds. Maybe that's why so many young couples end up with dogs. Puppies were probably invented so women could test men's willingness to commit to a noisy, hungry creature with poor bowel control.

Essentially, the high-value man is open to commitment and professionally squared away—or at least he's headed in that direction. I'd like to add one more trait to the list: *masculinity*. The high-value man doesn't relinquish his testicles or apologize for possessing them. He cultivates those male qualities that benefit himself and the people he loves. In our society there is a small, noisy contingent of women (and a few men) who insist that masculinity is destructive and outdated, but I can assure you they are the minority.

When I surveyed women a few years ago for a different project, I asked them what they liked most about men. Most of the women were quite vocal about the qualities they appreciate in a man:

- "Humor. Protectiveness. Strength."
- "Their sense of humor, their masculinity and strength."

- “Their confidence, strength, and tendency to be easy-going.”

Strength and level-headedness were a major theme. They expressed adoration for masculine traits like independence and competitiveness. In my decade as a psychologist, I’ve heard plenty of complaints about husbands and boyfriends, but I have never heard a woman wish that her man was more like a girl.

Ability, willingness, and a masculine nature. If you possess these traits, then you possess what most women seek in a husband or partner. Congratulations. You’re a high-value man. It’s good to be wanted, isn’t it?

Before we throw a parade, there’s a downside. Being a desirable commodity makes you vulnerable to women who are a wrong fit for you, not to mention those women who are a wrong fit for *any* man. Throughout this book, we’ll focus on screening out women who don’t belong in your life, and making room for women who are safe, sane, and stable. These are vital skills for any man who’s wrestling with issues like these:

- **You are being pressured to “take the relationship to the next level.”** You’re not sure if she has what it takes to succeed in a relationship. You’d rather not treat your future like a crapshoot. You’re looking for solid risk-management strategy.
- **You are divorced or separated and considering dating again.** You’ve been burned once and you’d prefer to avoid being burned again.
- **You’ve heard the horror stories and want no part of an ugly, expensive breakup.** You’re looking for tools to help recognize women of reliable character.
- **You have money or high earning potential, and you’ve noticed that your resources attract the wrong kind of woman.** You want the ability to recognize women who are trustworthy.
- **You are contemplating ending a relationship.** Things are going poorly, or you’ve felt trapped so long that your judgment is becoming cloudy. You’re looking for empirically based criteria to determine whether she has what it takes for the long haul.
- **You have a male friend who you fear is about to make the mistake of a lifetime.** You’re offering him this information in the hopes of helping him avoid a costly error.

- **You were never taught what to expect from good women.** Maybe your role models were unskilled or immature. Maybe your family didn't discuss matters of romance and you're looking for the education they should have offered. Meeting women is easier than ever in this electronic age, and you'd like to know what kind of woman is worth pursuing.

Whatever brought you here, we're going to discuss managing the uncertainty involved in choosing a woman to marry or partner with. We'll rely on the science of good partnerships along with some of my clinical experiences (names and details have been changed, naturally).

We'll skip the fluff and platitudes, and you'll find no apology for masculinity in these pages. Nor will you find blanket criticisms of femininity. I like women. A lot. If you do too, then this book is for you.

I've divided our subject into three sections, starting with *you*, and working our way toward *her*. Here's what to expect.

- **Part One: Risk Management.** Almost every man whose life has been devastated by the wrong woman can find the roots of his error within himself. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 will fortify the borders of your kingdom so the wrong women stay safely beyond your perimeter. Attracting the right ones means scrutinizing your own decision-making and possibly shedding some old habits.
- **Part Two: The Bright Triad.** Good women who succeed in relationships possess certain foundational skills and traits. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will help you recognize women who possess the bare essentials—and how to avoid those who are likely to become mired in drama and conflict.
- **Part Three: How to Avoid Completely F*cking Up Your Life.** Chapters 8 and 9 expose the costliest mistakes men make when choosing women. You'll find detailed and straightforward strategies for avoiding disastrous relationships.

This is not another book about getting laid. This book is about finding joy and companionship without getting screwed. Too many successful men have shown us we can have it all—health, wealth, and happiness—until we partner

with the wrong woman. If you want the good life, and if the good life includes the right woman by your side, then let's get to work.

PART I

RISK MANAGEMENT

If a man isn't careful, he can wake up one day and realize the woman next to him was chosen by a stranger, a younger version of himself who didn't know what the hell he was getting into.

The best protection against that kind of mistake is a good crystal ball, but you don't really need one if you have a solid risk management strategy.

You can reduce uncertainty and risk by understanding what makes you tick and why you choose certain women. Without that knowledge, *you* are the most uncertain variable in your romantic life.

Luckily, this breed of uncertainty is simple to reduce. It's not always easy, but the recipe is straightforward: know where you came from, where you're going, and what gets you out of bed each morning. A little insight can eliminate the cosmic crapshoot and help keep the wrong women at a safe distance.

WHERE YOU CAME FROM

SUPERVISING YOUR MIND, FLIPPING NATURE'S SCRIPT, AND ALTERING THE
FUTURE TO YOUR BENEFIT

Have you ever visited the back end of a bowling alley, behind the lanes where the pinsetter machines do their thing? It's a beautiful sight, all those motors and mechanisms turning chaos into order.

I had no money for college when I graduated from high school, so I somehow talked my way into a job as a mechanic at a bowling alley near my house. To this day, I've never seen anything so pointlessly impressive as 44 machines perfectly placed along a 260-foot corridor, each chugging along flawlessly. Each time a bowler made a mess of the pins, a machine would tidy up and politely return the ball as if to say, "Thank you, sir, may I have another?"

The longer I watch people, the more it seems the task of self-mastery is an endless process of creating order out of the chaos within. We enter the world as screaming, demanding messes. We're smelly little bundles of need and insecurity. If all goes well, we eventually replace insecurity with resourcefulness. We begin tidying up our little corners of the world, and the people in our lives are hopefully better off for having known us.

By the time I turned 20, I could disassemble an AMF 8230 pinsetter and rebuild it (correctly). That skill hasn't been useful for a while, but one never knows when an arcane talent will come in handy. As for my personal life back when I was wrenching on those machines, it was a mess. I knew nothing of my own inner workings, and my relationships reflected it.

For example, I didn't understand that there's something of a mechanical quality to human interactions. If you push a person, they often push back. If you run from someone, they frequently pursue. Romantic choices can be

troublingly mechanical and impulsive for those who haven't studied themselves. Here's the impulse that's going to kick off our discussion: people tend to find partners who soothe their deepest insecurities.

It's not unusual to find an insecure, clingy person pairing off with a loner who prizes space and privacy, for instance. You might not think they would go together, but in a strange way they scratch each other's itch. The clingy partner gets an ever-receding target to pursue, while the loner gets a smothering presence to run from. It sounds odd, I know. We'll dissect that little bit of human weirdness in our first case study about a man named Mike.

As a mechanic, I was only as effective as my skills and knowledge. Sufficiently armed, I could keep a fleet of machines humming along. Before I gained mastery over the machines, I was flailing, confused, and wasting energy.

That's how I started my short career as a pinsetter mechanic. It's also how I started my dating career, thanks to a spectacular lack of insight. My own inner workings eluded me. We'll skip the details of my defective relationship choices because they weren't that interesting. As for Mike... Well, you need to hear his story.

Why Mike Chose an Unappeasable Woman

Mike and Sarah were a power couple with the world at their feet. They had run a successful bookkeeping business together for three years by the time I met them. Defying the odds, Mike and Sarah had turned a profit after their first year and now had four employees, largely thanks to Sarah's driving ambition.

Though their shop was lucrative, it wasn't necessarily happy. Mike once confided that their employees regarded Sarah as a humorless taskmaster prone to angry outbursts. This was nothing new to him. He had dealt with her complaints and eruptions from the beginning.

One random Wednesday afternoon, Mike went to the local deli to pick up lunch. He returned with a sandwich on wheat bread for Sarah. Big mistake. She preferred her sandwiches on white bread. His error launched an argument that lasted for days, during which he apologized repeatedly while she alternately criticized and snubbed him.

Sarah explained to me that she had felt injured that apparently he hadn't

cared enough to track her most basic preferences. (In truth, he had become hyper-aware of her preferences in the hope of avoiding her anger.) She demanded to know how he could claim to love her when he couldn't even remember what kind of bread she liked. His every attempt to mollify her only seemed to make her angrier.

Sarah told me this cycle—her pain followed by his apology—was typical of their arguments. She had come to resent what she saw as his insincere attempts at placating her. She wanted a *real* gesture of love. She wanted something, one might argue, that would have been difficult for Mike to provide while he was under such scrutiny.

At first glance, Sarah might sound like a battle-axe. Personally, I found her to be charming and clever. I liked her forthright sensibility. But she was clearly the wrong woman for Mike, and he was the wrong man for her. Sarah found fault in just about everything Mike did. Since he couldn't make her happy, he sometimes resorted to passively resisting her demands, which only angered her further. They were making each other miserable.

How did these wildly incompatible people end up together? Ironically, as is the case with so many poorly functioning couples, they initially found comfort in their incompatibilities. Hold that thought, if you would, while we look at some background that explains their apparent lack of judgment. We'll start with Mike's story.

Mike describes his parents' marriage as miserable. They couldn't see past their own pain long enough to care for their only child. Mike's mother drowned her sorrows in alcohol. She typically started drinking cheap wine around 3:00 in the afternoon, probably to cushion the discomfort of Mike's father returning home from work later in the day.

Mike's father used work the same way his mother used alcohol. It was his escape from a miserable home life. As an auto mechanic, he found comfort and camaraderie at the shop. He would sometimes return home at around 5:00. Sometimes he worked as late as 9:00.

Between his mother's drinking and his father's unpredictable schedule, not to mention the inevitable arguments each evening, dinners were unreliable at best. Young Mike often had to fend for himself, relying on peanut butter sandwiches he would eat alone in his bedroom.

As Mike entered his teen years, an uncle and his family moved to town. He started eating meals with them and spending as much time as possible at their house. "Anything to avoid the freak show at home," he told me.

Though his uncle's family was mostly welcoming, Mike always felt like an outsider who needed to earn his place. He became service oriented, almost obsequious, in a bid to remain in their good graces. He remembers washing dishes after meals, buying video games to play with his cousins, and helping his uncle with yard work. He began to believe people would only want him around if he was working to please them.

In college, Mike was the guy who always cleaned up after roommates and always brought the pony keg to the party. With women, he spent most of his time in the "friend zone" because he was so overly attentive that they viewed him as needy and spineless. Mike was easily taken advantage of by men and women alike.

Enter Sarah, who had a similar history. She was also neglected by her parents, but for a different reason. They were preoccupied with chronic money problems and low-grade drama amongst friends and coworkers. Sarah also had to compete with her sister for their parent's meager time and resources.

Sarah was in a kind of limbo—too young to be taken seriously by her sisters, too old to be attended by her parents. Unlike Mike, who learned to attract affection through acts of service, Sarah learned how to gain her parent's attention by way of tantrums.

Her parents would resist the tantrums for a while, but they were usually too exhausted and preoccupied to hold out for long. Every time her parents gave in to one of Sarah's fits of anger, her habit became that much stronger.

In college, Sarah was known as the demanding student, the difficult girlfriend, the dramatic roommate. While Mike was working hard to appease people, Sarah was whipping them into line. Mike believed people would leave him unless he earned their affection. Sarah believed people would fail her unless she bullied them into obedience.

Mike and Sarah met in an accounting class during their senior year. They were a match made in... well, not heaven. Maybe it was made in some netherworld where demons attach people who have interlocking insecurities. Mike needed to please, and Sarah needed to be pleased. Throw in a little sexual attraction, and they were the perfect imperfect match.

There's a basic behavioral principle that comes into play here: Random rewards are some of the most powerful reinforcers. It's why people pump money into slot machines. They usually lose, but when they win... *oh baby!* The brain likes it, and it sends us back again and again.

Sarah became something of an insecurity slot machine for Mike. He craved approval and acceptance, though his mind told him it would never be freely given to him. He had to earn it. That was his eternal quest. Sarah made it just hard enough to keep Mike coming back. He spent his days trying to fix her problems, attend to her emotions, and side with her in every dispute.

She usually judged his efforts to be insufficient, but every once in a while she was pleased with his performance. When he felt her hard-earned acceptance... *oh baby!* She scratched that itch like no one ever had, and he always went back for more.

The Backward Power of Core Beliefs

Mike and Sarah were bound to fail, like some of my relationships and, I'll wager, like some of yours. The culprit was their beliefs about themselves. His beliefs led him to a girlfriend who left him feeling beaten down; hers led her to a boyfriend who left her feeling let down. They had become flat-out contemptuous of each other by the time they realized what was happening. Contempt is a bad omen for any relationship. Mike and Sarah eventually broke up, but their joint business interests made for a drawn-out, complicated, and contentious uncoupling.

By the way, Mike was as much a slot machine to Sarah's insecurities as she was to his. She needed to see people working to please her. The harder she could get him to try, the more accepted she felt. Mike typically left her disappointed, but when he really came through for her... *oh baby!*

They were the targets of their own internal, invisible forces. We all are, but we don't have to fall victim to them. The trick is to bring those forces out into the open. It isn't your fault if you're attracted to the wrong people, but it is your responsibility to alter your sensibilities—or endure the consequences like Mike did. The practical takeaway here: Don't let your own mind drive you off a cliff.

Psychologists have a term for our most basic thoughts about ourselves and others: *core beliefs*. Some are useful, some aren't. Either way, they're usually invisible until we drag them into the light of day. Until we do that, we tend to find people and create situations that reinforce our core beliefs, just like Mike and Sarah did.

Here's what you need to know about your own core beliefs:

1. Even though they might sabotage you, they probably evolved to help you.
2. You don't *have* to listen to them.

Mike didn't develop his core beliefs in some orgy of self-flagellation. He simply drew a conclusion that possessed a certain logic. *It seems I'm unworthy of attention or devotion. My own parents don't even have time for me. Guess I better work my way into people's hearts. Pass the dishtowel, please.*

Some people call that kind of thinking "maladaptive." I don't. We wouldn't survive very long if our minds invented maladaptive solutions. Instead, I think it's more useful to think of them as shortsighted attempts at solving problems. When Mike was little, he was able to find the support he needed, even if it was tenuous and conditional, by putting himself in the service of others. The strategy worked for him back then.

By the way, I hope you'll pardon me for speaking about the mind as if it's a separate entity. It isn't, but most people will tell you it feels like a separate entity, with its constant jabber and odd motives. That's probably because the brain is a modular organ with different parts attending to different tasks. We can walk and chew gum at the same time, while holding a conversation and observing the landscape. There's a lot going on under the thin layer of conscious awareness. We're conscious of very little of what our minds are doing at any given time.

For example, there's a condition called cortical blindness in which a person can see nothing, but can still navigate around obstacles. Their eyes work, but they experience no vision because the visual cortex, located at the back of the brain, is damaged. However, another structure called the superior colliculus is still functioning, acting as an interchange for visual information.

The superior colliculus sends information to the broken visual cortex, which can't use it, and it also sends information to parts of the brain that direct movement. Even though the cortically blind person can't "see" objects by way of his visual cortex, other parts of the brain are still receiving visual information to work with.

There's a huge advantage in processing information at different levels and in different parts of the brain. Can you imagine how long it would take us to catch a ball or dodge a car if our brains had to process information one item at a time, like a 1980s-era computer? Decisions go more smoothly if

information isn't bottlenecked in one area.

The point? Cortical blindness is a great example of the mind directing our decisions without our conscious knowledge. There's a hell of a lot of information processing going on of which we're mostly unaware. It gives us experiences like empathy, intuition, anxiety, and all manner of motivations we're hard pressed to understand. It tracks history and creates our core beliefs.

Sometimes those core beliefs point us in the wrong direction, but never with the intent of self-harm. The brain of someone with cortical blindness doesn't hurl him down a flight of stairs. It helps him avoid injury.

So why does the mind point us toward hazards like the wrong women? The answer lies in the mind's absolute and unending love for short-term solutions. The brain is in the business of immediate gratification, and for very good reason. It evolved in environments where resources were scarce and life was tenuous. Our brains learned to act quickly and voraciously if there was a chance to gorge on fat, sugar, sex, or any other windfall opportunity. The impulses that serve us well in an environment of austerity can be our downfall in an environment of plenty.

Instant gratification and core beliefs go together like peas and carrots. They can lead to seemingly irrational behavior like trying to appease an unappeasable woman. In fact, that makes perfect sense to a survival-driven mind.

The mind is an odds-laying machine, always striving to reduce discomfort by reducing immediate uncertainty. Mike's mind was hedging its bets by assuming he was unworthy of love. That was the safe bet: *If I try too hard, at least I'll break even.* Compare that to the sucker's bet: *If I wait for others to accept me, I'll be alone forever.* The safe bet avoids loss at worst, and wins at best. The sucker's bet loses at worst, and avoids gain at best.

The safe bet compelled him to work hard for acceptance. The only way to lose was not to try, according to the data his mind had collected. He had lost the battle for acceptance with his parents, and his mind was simply generalizing about the world from that outdated experience. The mind's logic isn't airtight, but it certainly isn't unreasonable.

This is why I don't like to label core beliefs "maladaptive." They are simply conclusions born of a certain survival logic. The only time they can hurt us is when they're operating without our knowledge or consent, as they did with Mike. His core belief was functioning too well. Not only did it keep

people in his life, it kept the *wrong* people in his life.

That's the price of unsupervised core beliefs. They have a way of delivering precisely what we fear the most. Mike was driven by a fear of rejection, and he experienced almost constant rejection with Sarah. Thanks a lot, mind.

Unfortunately, the worst parts of our core beliefs tend to flare up when we're most vulnerable—when we're hungry, angry, lonely, or tired, as they say in substance abuse recovery circles. Fortunately, there's a way to detect when our minds are steering us toward disaster.

Our beliefs will often show up in our behaviors before they appear in our conscious thoughts. Our own actions can be like dummy lights on a car dashboard. The little red “check engine” light doesn't identify the specific problem, but it does give us fair warning: *Hey, dummy, there's a problem. Pull over.*

Mike learned to supervise his mind by studying his own dummy-light behaviors. He knew there was a problem if he heard himself saying things like “let me take care of that for you” or saw himself putting other people's responsibilities before his own. One day, he noticed he was fixing a female friend's bathroom sink on the day he should have been filing his own quarterly taxes. *Hey, dummy, there's a problem. Pull over.*

The trick is to identify the choices that work out poorly, and work backward to identify the first signs of errant decision-making, like Mike's “let me take care of that for you.” In his case, he noticed an emotional surge that preceded those inauspicious words. He described it as an anxiety that welled up from his gut, a compulsion to put the world in order. Here's the recipe he followed at the first signs of trouble:

1. Stop what you're doing, even if it's uncomfortable to do so.
2. Thank your mind. It's only watching out for you.
3. Disobey your mind. When it says *jump*, you don't have to say *how high*? You can choose another option.

Mike first began disobeying his mind by changing the subject of conversation whenever someone started talking about their troubles and aroused his need to fix. It wasn't comfortable for him to do so.

The mind has a mind of its own, so to speak. It won't tolerate disobedience happily. It may hit you with a shot of anxiety, self-doubt,

despair, or maybe even the urge to get drunk or overeat. You might feel the world isn't right and be powerfully compelled to put it in order. Mike said that trusting other people to solve their own problems felt like he was hurting them. He got over that with time.

The mind can be quite a drama machine, but we don't have to buy into any of it. Discomfort never killed anyone. Besides, there's a funny thing about minds: Our thoughts and feelings eventually catch up to our behaviors. Mike built up a little more confidence every time he disobeyed his mind's desperate bid for acceptance. Ignoring the mind gets easier with practice, and core beliefs lose power with every act of defiance.

There's one inconvenient feature of core beliefs that always seems to rise to the surface in romantic relationships: They can have a paradoxical way of generating precisely the types of relationships our minds are trying to avoid.

Mike is a great example. The harder he worked for acceptance, the more rejection he got. Sarah raised glaring red flags that he happily overlooked. Her operating principle with Mike was something like this: *If you loved me, you would try harder*. He should have run for the hills, but it was too alluring.

The harder he tried, the higher she raised the bar. Neither of them realized how ridiculous it was getting. Her standards were so high he couldn't meet her needs, which left her feeling unloved, which increased his desire to comfort her, which brought more failure... good God, somebody stop this ride!

Some people who can't land a partner with interlocking core beliefs will go the extra mile and convert an unsuspecting target. In Sarah, Mike found someone who was as desperate to be served as he was to serve others. Had he found someone less needy, he probably would have trained them to depend on him. Inevitably, that woman would eventually have felt disappointed when he couldn't rise to the level of service he had trained her to expect.

Here's another common example of the mind conjuring its worst fear: A person who is insecure about being abandoned can drive their partner crazy seeking reassurance. Eventually the other person will need a break from the intensity, which fulfills the abandonment requirement the insecure partner's mind expects.

For the mind, it's all about finding short-term relief, sometimes at the cost of long-term pain. That's why the mind of an insecure partner, for example, demands reassurance. It gets short-term relief even as it's creating a long-term problem. This is the same mind that will gorge on an entire bag of chips

because fat and salt were scarce for our ancestors.

For Mike, the long-term costs were nothing to sneeze at. He was overly self-critical (*I'm unworthy*) while idealizing others (*they are to be served*). That particular combination of beliefs correlates with high degrees of distress, loneliness, and depression (Simard, Moss, and Pascuzzo 2011). Feeling crappy about himself added to his confusion. It's hard to succeed at any task when your self-confidence is in the garbage.

The task is not to suppress core beliefs because that approach can backfire, but simply to identify them and create choices and freedom. Sometimes our beliefs are useful, so why throw them out? If we understand when and why our minds step in and protect us, then we can choose our own path rather than allowing our minds to take control.

So what are your core beliefs concerning women? That their attention is conditional? That they always leave, or that their emotions are unpredictable? Do you believe you're a nice guy and women always go for the jerk? Or maybe you've found women to be reliable and trustworthy, or you feel they've always seemed to like you. Core beliefs can lean in a positive direction, too.

Identifying core beliefs requires work. You can start by getting curious about your history and relationship patterns. Begin with questions like this: What did my parents teach me about women? Is there a pattern in the type of women I've brought into my life? Am I attracted to healthy, fully-functioning women, or am I drawn to hot messes and drama queens?

Write about it. Talk about it with a buddy over a beer. If none of your male friends are in search of enlightenment, female friends are often happy to oblige and can have great insight.

If you really want to get to the core of things, spend a few sessions with a good shrink. Shop around. Get one who assigns homework and pushes you to grow. Tell him or her you want to understand what drives your behavior. A good psychologist is impartial, won't BS you, and understands how people operate. Therapy is a small investment that can pay big dividends. For the price of a few sessions, Mike might have skipped the entire "Sarah" chapter of his life and saved them both a mountain of trouble.

What the Old Man Taught Us

I've known many "Mikes" whose problems began with challenging childhoods. When parents are distant or cruel, their children tend to find distance and cruelty in their adult, romantic relationships. (Schimmenti & Bifulco 2015). This idea isn't rocket science; we generally do what our role models did, even if it serves us poorly.

There's also another wrinkle. We tend to repeat the types of relationships we saw our parents create, and their level of happiness appears to directly affect our relationship happiness. (Unless we are self-possessed enough make different choices. That's *always* caveat number one.)

May I throw some five-dollar words your way? One group of researchers looked at "intergenerational transmission of marital quality" to see if adult, married children mirrored their parents' level of happiness (Dennison, Koerner, and Segrin 2014). They noticed that conflict-management skills strongly predict marital satisfaction and—no surprise here—kids grow up to emulate their parents' conflict-management skills. If our parents were cool like Fonzie during arguments, then we're likelier to be cool like Fonzie. If they screamed and threw dishes, then our partners are in for a similar treat (barring caveat number one).

The way we engage in conflict is even influenced by our partner's family of origin. If her parents had good conflict-management skills, then she carries a high expectation and her partner will tend to rise to her expectations. My clinical experience matches this line of research. I've met many couples in which one person stated they never knew conflict could be handled constructively until they met their partner. This is just one of many reasons it pays to choose wisely. Plus, you'll end up buying fewer dishes.

Our relationships can be an echo of our parents even when we think we are doing things differently than them. Our fathers were teaching us about women even when they weren't using words. There isn't much research on fathers and sons in the professional literature, but there is quite a bit on mothers and daughters that is useful for our purposes.

One study (Kilmann et al. 2009) looked at 90 young women with married parents and discovered the positive and negative experiences of one generation, especially the mother's, affected the experiences of their daughters. Mothers who were dismissive, insecure, or uncertain about relationships tended to have daughters who were—you guessed it—also dismissive, fearful, or insecure.

On the other hand, mothers who felt they could trust their husbands raised

daughters who were more secure. Trusting mothers were also more accepting of their daughters' individuality. They were less controlling, had better parenting skills, were more involved, and were more affectionate with their daughters. Apparently, a secure mom is a more effective mom.

The ability to feel relaxed and secure in a relationship is one of the most efficiently transmitted experiences from one generation to the next. It's true for men, too. If the old man was unhappy or unsatisfied, then we're inclined to end up in a similar predicament thanks to subtle means of passing on the misery.

A common childhood experience that affects adult relationships is known as "parentification." That's when a child is expected to fulfill a parental role within the family. It can be instrumental in nature, like requiring children to provide actual care of siblings or adults. It can also be emotional in nature, like when a child is responsible for maintaining calmness in the house. That's supposed to be the parents' job. Any child of an addict or alcoholic who felt he or she had to protect one parent from the other's drunken anger knows what it's like to assume the duties of ineffectual adults.

A little bit of instrumental parentification, especially during crisis, can be useful because it teaches responsibility. It takes a destructive turn when a child is forced to compensate for parents who are emotionally unstable, unpredictable, or otherwise falling down on the job. The burden of compensating for underperforming parents leads to poor communication as an adult, as well as difficulty trusting romantic partners (Madden and Shaffer 2016). If there's one thing healthy women don't dig, it's an insecure man who cannot express himself.

Parentification also strongly predicts depression in adulthood (Schier et al. 2015). Men are particularly at risk for being more manipulative when their parents were asleep at the switch. They operate as though they must use trickery in order to get their needs met or their efforts acknowledged (Láng 2016).

Women don't like to be manipulated (who does?), but being manipulative can sometimes be just one more example of the mind looking out for us. The mind can learn at an early age to compensate for unpredictable and neglectful parents by influencing people and events to get needs met, and that mindset just keeps going into adulthood.

Most people come by their counterproductive habits honestly. If we were shortchanged in the parent department, then there's a fair chance our parents

were themselves shortchanged. Patterns get handed down like the family china, except that china is easier to break. Luckily, not all patterns are disadvantageous. Believe it or not, families are actually more inclined to pass down healthy patterns than unhealthy ones (Kilmann et al 2009).

One of the most important positive patterns is arguing constructively, which unsurprisingly correlated with successful marriages in one study (Mackey, Diemer, and O'Brien 2000). These researchers found that prosperous couples are willing to tackle difficult discussions when necessary, though women are generally better at initiating tough conversations. These couples don't deny that a problem exists, hide in a bottle, or get lost in a rabbit hole of trivial, unrelated disagreements.

According to the study, couples who argued constructively typically do three things. First, they spend a fair bit of time talking about how they communicate. It's an ongoing negotiation of the ground rules that bridges the gap even when the conversation goes poorly.

Second, they look for the good in each other even when it's difficult to find. They make a point of remembering positive qualities that could easily be obscured by negative interaction. For example, a wife might remind herself during an argument that her husband's stubborn streak, annoying though it may be, is less important to her than the things she loves about him, like his sense of humor or his compassion.

Finally, they recognize that they balance each other, and they capitalize on each other's strengths. One partner may be better at initiating difficult conversations, while the other may be better at bringing humor and levity.

Fathers in particular play an important role in teaching their sons how to manage conflict. For example, successful fathers teach plain old self-maintenance, especially about being proactive with problems like depression. One study of 345 fathers and sons living together found that fathers with moderate to severe depression had less contact with their sons, were more distant, offered less supervision, and had more frequent conflict with their sons (Davis et al. 2009).

By neglecting the father-son relationships, these fathers were teaching their sons how to neglect themselves. The more conscientious and productive approach is to teach sons how to put words to problems rather than remaining silent and becoming immobilized. The lessons often show up in small snippets. "Hey son, I'm sorry I've been preoccupied. It's nothing you've done wrong. Just a little work stress. Let's go for a bike ride."

Fathers also teach sons about dealing effectively with marital strain. This is important because the father-son bond is especially vulnerable to father-mother discord. Even in couples who function relatively well, marital strain affects father-son relationships much more than father-daughter relationships (Bernier, Jarry-Boileau and Lacharité 2014). Marital strain can push fathers away from their sons as early as toddlerhood.

A third relationship skill our fathers give us is the ability to trust. They model this by being present and consistent, and it's no small consideration. A skilled father teaches his son, usually by way of example, that disagreements have solutions. The kid in a healthy household observes that disagreements occur with some regularity, but constructive solutions are equally predictable.

Children whose parents are unpredictable—affectionate one minute and critical the next, for example—can become what we shrinkers refer to as *anxiously attached*. They crave their parent's love and approval while simultaneously being distrustful of it. This internal conflict can show up in later relationships as needing partner's approval while simultaneously looking for signs of abandonment. This can get really annoying in relationships when it puts partners in untenable binds. "Tell me you love me... You don't really mean it."

For reasons that aren't entirely clear, men are more likely than women to carry anxious attachment from their parental relationships to their romantic partnerships (Jarnecke and South 2013). If they didn't trust their parents to be present and reliable, they probably won't trust their wives.

If those invisible relationship dynamics aren't enough, the old man also taught us a tremendous amount about women simply through his behavior around them. For example, sons whose fathers abandoned their wives and families are themselves statistically likelier to abandon their own families.

All things being equal, we emulate our role models for good or ill. Our fathers taught us what kind of women to choose and how to behave toward them. We're not bound to imitate our fathers, and plenty of men don't, but I have yet to meet someone whose decisions weren't influenced by their parents' choices and behaviors.

Luckily, none of us have to settle for what our parents taught us. We can take what's effective and leave the rest. The easiest way to do this is to surround yourself with men you want to emulate. They're everywhere. You can find them in networking groups, church groups, dojos, or wherever men congregate.

A teacher once told me, “He who walks through turds gets turds stuck to him.” It was a warning to be careful who we associate with because bad habits are contagious. The opposite is equally true. It’s impossible not to grow if you walk among giants. If your old man failed at fatherhood, then your goal should be to bring good men and mentors into your life.

Whatever you do, don’t let your mind run the show. It may mean well, but if your history is less than ideal, it’s working with tainted data that is likely to lead you to the wrong women.

The Real Numbers Game

Patterns are a mixed bag. They’re a brilliant survival adaptation that spares us from wasting effort solving the same problem over and over. Can you imagine if you had to figure out how to button your shirt every day, let alone how to relate to people? Patterns are quite a timesaver. On the other hand, they get pretty destructive when they compel us to sacrifice long-term gain for short-term comfort.

There’s an old metaphor in psychology about horses returning to burning barns. For a horse, a barn is a place of refuge, a place that provides food, warmth, and shelter. When the barn is burning, says the metaphor, the stressed-out, frightened horse will seek safety in it anyway. The horse doesn’t realize it’s running headlong toward its own demise. Moving *away* from the barn, the safest thing to do, happens to be the least comfortable.

Things can get mighty uncomfortable when a guy decides to break patterns and stop obeying his overprotective mind. For Mike, women like Sarah were the burning barn. His weakness for instant gratification and his survival-driven calculus drove him toward harm. Had he not broken this pattern, he would have spent the rest of his life striving for that elusive glimmer of approval to get him through the night.

Mike eventually realized *he* was the common denominator in his painful relationships. *He* was choosing the same kind of woman repeatedly. They were the only women he was willing to pursue because he assumed healthy, stable women were out of his league. When he abandoned that mindset, as uncomfortable as it was to do so, a whole new world of possibilities was revealed. There were green pastures and high-functioning women as far as the eye could see.

The mind wants to play a certain kind of numbers game: *Happiness be damned. How much discomfort can I avoid?* Success involves a different numbers game: *Discomfort be damned. How many healthy, inspiring people can I surround myself with?* That involves doing things a bit differently than nature intended.

Flipping Nature's Script

Relationship experiences have a cumulative effect. The more good ones you have, the greater the knowledge base to draw in choosing future relationships. In the absence of that knowledge base, the mind approaches relationship choices the same way a child approaches nutrition: Pretty candy is more appealing than a nutritious meal. All those bad choices compound over time, eventually leaving you a wreck.

In Mike's case, "attractiveness" involved more than a pretty face. His mind's version of attractiveness included that slot-machine interaction style in which he occasionally hit the approval jackpot.

Of course, a nice hip-to-waist ratio and a symmetrical face don't hurt. Like every other guy, Mike had his proclivities for physical appearance, and Sarah fit the bill. Like just about every other guy on the planet, Mike's mind was in a hurry to get laid, so it pointed him toward its assessment of the best and most available candidates.

You can count on this: The unsupervised mind pushes us toward good short-term mates. It's not thinking, *What will it be like to live with her in twenty years?* It's thinking, *Nice body. Pretty words.* Here's how we make decisions if we leave the mind in charge:

1. First, we notice her attractiveness.
2. At a distant second, we assess her goodness of fit for us.

This is like buying a car you've never driven, yet none of us are immune to that prehistoric logic. Women are just as bad about chasing short-term mating satisfaction, possibly worse. Women's minds are more prone to "audition" men for relationships that apparently aren't meant to last beyond breakfast the next day (Buss & Schmidt 1993). Evolutionary psychology suggests women who are in the mood for connection and sex are drawn to

men who have the outward appearance of good genetics, but whose potential for long-term commitment may leave something to be desired.

The fact that they repeat their mistakes just like us is an especially compelling reason to use the risk-management strategies we'll cover in later chapters. This unfortunate tendency to repeat mistakes shows up in divorce statistics. Each time a person divorces, the odds increase that they will divorce again because people who don't resolve their destructive patterns carry them into the next marriage for a repeat performance (Kreider and Ellis 2011).

Repetition is one of the brain's blunt tools for short-term comfort. *If it isn't working, try harder, but don't stray from what you know.* Heartbroken people often run headlong into new, familiar-feeling relationships to reduce their pain and loneliness, but their old patterns create more pain and loneliness. That sounds like a burning barn to me.

You can avoid a world of hurt by following a simple strategy that flips the mind's natural inclination on its head. Instead of prioritizing fine form over goodness of fit, do the opposite:

1. Check her goodness of fit first.
2. Find an attractive woman among the field of great candidates.

I'm not suggesting men should pursue women they find unattractive. That can be just as disastrous as choosing a hot woman with a mismatched or unhealthy personality. I'm simply suggesting a small but consequential shift in thinking: finding attractive women among those who are most eligible.

If there's one strategy that will help minimize your exposure to bad relationships, this is it. Another way to avoid bad relationships is to peer into your future, which is simpler than it sounds.

The Do-It-Yourself Time Machine

Would you like to know what your future relationships will look like? It's easy. Just look at your history. What you've done in the past is what your mind intends to serve up for you in the future. But you can choose a different path. That's precisely what Jim Florentine did.

Jim is an actor and comedian who you might know from *That Metal Show*

and *Crank Yankers*. In 2015 he did a one-man show called *I'm Your Savior* in which he described his lengthy history of trying to rescue troubled women. He opened the show with this confession:

Hi, my name is Jim, and I'm an addict. I'm not an alcoholic... I'm not a drug addict... No, I'm addicted to saving troubled women. Every girl I've dated in my life is really hot, almost like a mansion on the outside. You walk by like, "Damn, I wish I had that." But then on the inside, a complete mess. A disaster.

He described a string of unhealthy girlfriends. The first set her house on fire at the age of twelve, got caught selling pot in the seventh grade, and "blew half of the football team."

"Me, I didn't care," he said in the show. "I was just looking for any kind of companionship."

A different girlfriend had two DUIs and was arrested for assaulting a cop. Another was a kleptomaniac who stabbed an ex-husband. Unbeknownst to Jim, she was still married during the year he dated her. "I've dated so many troubled women in my life," he said, "I actually get a hard-on when a girl cries."

Jim eventually decided to try dating nice, stable women. "The problem is," he said, "They're f*cking boring." One girl asked him if he enjoyed brunch. "Yech." Another suggested they join a book club. "Yech!"

Jim wasn't ready to date healthy women because he hadn't yet figured out why he was attracted to unhealthy women, so he returned to "the dark side" and moved in with a woman who had a longstanding history of depression. After a valiant attempt to help her recover from the illness, Jim found her body after she committed suicide. He was devastated. His dating resume was becoming a tale of tragedy.

Then Jim decided to make a real change. He started by coming to grips with the roots of his dating habits. He said his motivation to rescue women was born of his religious upbringing and a desire to connect with his emotionally distant father.

Studying your own history is sort of like owning a time machine. Examining the past is virtually the same as glancing into the future—unless you start making different choices. By excavating the reasons for his previous

decisions, Jim was able to bring healthier women into his life.

I asked Jim how he did it. He told me, “After dating so many troubled women, and the last one ending in a tragedy, I realized I needed to seek professional help. I was in and out of therapy for years and decided I needed to go back this time and really stick with it.”

Jim told me a bit about his past. “When I hit my early 20s and moved out of my parents’ house, I was out of control. I had the mindset that I was going to hell anyway, so I might as well have some fun. That’s where the crazy and wild women started coming into my life. To me, if a girl wasn’t crazy then she was no fun.

“It took until my early 40s to realize that a nice, normal, drama-free life is what I really wanted. I was so tired of dealing with troubled women. I finally realized I’m not their savior and they need to fix themselves.

“I still hate brunch, though,” he added.

Since Jim is clearly a master of change, I asked him what advice he might have for men who want to meet a different kind of woman. Here’s what he said:

“Look for the red flags early in the relationship. If anything pops up early on, don’t let that slide. Most people are on their best behavior in the beginning. They hide it well until around the six-month mark. For example, if she gets drunk and is screaming at you for no reason within the first month, run as fast as you can. Don’t let something like that slide. There are underlying issues there.”

Wise words. Your story may be different from Jim’s, but the ability to spot hidden problems in a woman is a skill that pays off immensely. The last two-thirds of this book are devoted to recognizing those underlying issues as early as possible. However, it’s difficult to see her clearly until we’ve identified our own vulnerabilities. That means:

- Understanding what your mind is trying to accomplish (usually short-term safety and satisfaction) so you can choose whether or not to obey it
- Studying your personal history, the forces that have shaped your choices, and your default strategies for navigating the world
- Placing fit before form, flipping the biologically driven script so you’re choosing the most attractive women among the pool of best contenders rather than settling for adequate prospects among

the most physically attractive

It's all about using intention and discernment to reduce risk. The work I'm suggesting in this chapter isn't easy. It takes time and effort, just like building a proper foundation for any endeavor.

The goal is to invest time at the beginning that will pay untold dividends, and I use the word "untold" advisedly. Nobody notices when a building *doesn't* fall down thanks to a proper foundation, and nobody notices when a relationship *doesn't* end in a hideous, flaming wreck. You may never know just how much trouble you will have saved yourself by doing the hard work of scrutinizing your history and your motivations.

In this chapter, I've essentially given you one simple question: What makes you tick? Most of this book will be about identifying woman who are worthy of your attention, but for these next two chapters let's continue examining what's under *your* hood.

Here's the next question: What will guide your choices if not your history and your mind's impulses? Let's look at what arguably should be the single most important factor in selecting the women you allow into your life.

WHERE YOU'RE GOING

USING CLEAR VALUES TO SCREEN WOMEN, AVOIDING THE NICE-GUY PROBLEM, AND PREVENTING UGLY SURPRISES AFTER THE HONEYMOON PHASE

One of the main causes of divorce, especially among couples under 30, is what I call the bill-of-goods problem. People occasionally wake up next to spouses or partners they hardly know. It's like they got married and then somehow developed... how to put this... a set of *values* or something. They matured, they came into their own, and now their life is moving in a direction their partners don't like.

It pays to find out where your ship is headed before you start taking on passengers. The problem is that values are tough to pin down. I think there would be far fewer ugly divorces if values were easy to define. In this chapter, I'm going to give you some straightforward, reliable tools for sorting them out, beginning with this question: What kind of man do you want to be?

Some of you may be thinking, *I want to be the kind of man who gets laid three times a day*. I admire the initiative, but this particular question concerns the qualities you want to bring to a partnership and what kind of woman will fit within your world.

That might seem a counterintuitive place to begin in a book about women. Wouldn't it make more sense to ask what kind of woman you'd like to be with?

Nope, that question has to come second. No man can know what kind of woman will best fit into his life until he knows what his life is about. Being unclear on personal values may be one of the costliest relationship mistakes men make.

Consider the causes of divorce. Aside from the obvious factors like substance abuse and sexual incompatibility, some of the top factors are

related to incompatible values.

The chances of divorce rise among couples who marry too young, while they're still getting their lives together, or when they are of markedly dissimilar age, education, or religion. Couples who spend less positive time with each other are also at higher risk for divorce (Lowenstein 2005). Divorce rates effectively double for couples who marry in their early 20's compared to those who marry in their early 30s (Aughinbaugh, Chrisles, and Sun 2013).

Those demographic differences just happen to correspond with wide gulfs in values. An atheistic 40-year-old with a Master's degree in computer science probably won't have much to talk about with a Catholic 25-year-old who has a GED and a dead-end job. They might hump like rabbits during the honeymoon phase, but it probably won't last. (We'll discuss the neurobiology and dangers of the honeymoon phase in Chapter 7.)

Relationships with widely contrasting values can certainly work, but they require extra effort—especially during tough times when values can lead them to opposing solutions to problems. The bottom line is that research shows shared values are a powerful predictor of marital satisfaction (Mckinley 1997).

For example, one of the most common sources of conflict among couples is money. But do couples really fight about money? In my clinical experience, couples fight about what money represents. It might represent security to one partner and freedom to another. Money is a solid proxy for big universal questions about life priorities, appetite for risk, tolerance for deferred gratification, and even how to express love. (Yet, instead of discussing the core value differences money may represent, many couples simply end up shouting ineffectually about the Visa bill.)

Shared values are so important that one researcher even noticed they outweigh the power of communication, which is the one thing I'm sure we've all been told is the be-all and end-all in relationships (Archuleta 2011). Sexy comes and goes, but shared values endure and will see you through those times when your mate isn't at her peak of allure.

Let me tell you about Chris. He made a serious and entirely avoidable tactical error by marrying Sofia without scrutinizing his values, or hers. At first, it looked like their values were perfectly aligned. That turned out to be a costly illusion.

How Chris Lost Lost His Shirt In Family Court

Chris and Sofia met in college. She was studying biology because she didn't know what else to do. Chris was studying political science with all the passion Sofia lacked for her major. He was president of the student senate by his junior year, at which point he was already interning at a grassroots political organization. He was well on his way to a career in politics.

Chris and Sofia had an instant physical attraction and a short courtship. Sofia may have had difficulty declaring a major, but she had no trouble declaring herself exclusive to Chris within a couple of weeks. They spent every spare moment together.

Sofia described herself as a political agnostic but she admired Chris's activism, and she was always willing to lend a hand in his causes. He offered what she felt was missing from her life: a sense of direction. Chris was always fired up about something, sometimes joyfully, and sometimes with anger, but always with a fervor that was new to her. Add to that his charisma and humor, and Sofia's new boyfriend was like an exciting amusement park ride.

Chris liked Sofia because she offered what so many people didn't. She went along for the ride, and she didn't tire of his opinions or his pace. Plus, she was hot. With her dark hair and graceful features, he certainly didn't mind being seen with her at his side during political functions.

As their relationship matured, he also began to enjoy her relaxed nature. She was intelligent and down to earth. Chris got a bit manic sometimes, and she helped him stay grounded when his excitement ran uncomfortably high. He was adventurous, she was serene. It felt like they were made for each other.

After college, Chris's political internship evolved into a job. Sofia took work as a materials tester at a quiet industrial lab on the outskirts of the city. They married shortly after and moved into a small bungalow near the center of town. Sofia preferred the suburbs, but she followed Chris's passion as usual. He wanted to be close to the action.

Their evenings and weekends were filled with political fundraisers, community meetings, and social events to advance political causes. Barely 25 years old, Chris was making a name in the world of politics and activism. He loved the excitement, and he was rarely home. Sofia still enjoyed tagging along and meeting people, but she was beginning to see the value of

moderation. She was starting to prefer the comfort of their new home to the social demands of Chris's political world.

She also began to crave moderation in their conversation. Though she still admired his passion, she wished they would discuss something other than politics.

A few years of marriage lumbered by. Chris was as animated as ever but Sofia increasingly spent evenings alone while he was out, and she began to want children. Sensing their emotional distance, Chris resisted the idea of bringing children into the marriage. Sofia began to drown her dissatisfaction in alcohol, and Chris often came home to find her passed out in bed.

More than ever, Chris felt he was on a mission with his work, and he couldn't understand why the woman who was once so accommodating was now withdrawing her support. Though they hadn't taken time to articulate it, there was a widening gulf in what mattered most to each of them.

By their fifth anniversary, their differing values had devolved into disappointment and bitterness. Chris spent increasing amounts of time with his colleagues while Sofia retreated to the comfort of her small circle of close friends. They rarely spent evenings or weekends together, and they argued bitterly.

Sofia felt controlled and disrespected. Where Chris had once been kind to her, he now he shouted her down during their worst arguments, which were typically over trivial distractions like home repair or work schedules rather than the feelings of loneliness they each felt. She saw him as narrow-minded and rigid. She diverged from his political ideology, possibly out of spite, and he felt betrayed. In her angriest moments, she disparagingly called him "Chris the Politician."

For his part, Chris felt completely abandoned. He thought he had been honest about himself and his lifestyle, and he couldn't understand why she no longer participated. In his worst moments, he called her self-centered and cold. He pressured her to stand by his side again, and he hated her new friends for, as he saw it, taking her from him. He too began drinking to dull the pain.

Ready for a shocker? Their relationship ended poorly. Their divorce was legally contentious and very expensive. They attempted mediation, but Sofia hired a divorce attorney when she felt Chris was steamrolling her. That, in turn, forced him to hire an attorney. They had to sell the house just to pay the lawyers. They emptied their coffers fighting each other, and they each left the

relationship feeling jaded and entirely defeated.

Study the Terms Before You Sign the Contract

Chris had an advantage over many guys his age. Even in his 20s, his values were clear. Unfortunately, he hadn't examined them closely enough to understand what kind of woman would be compatible. Even with clear values, his mind still managed to screw him over. It pushed him toward the wonderful short-term girlfriend who made a miserable long-term wife. It seems the mind always needs a bit of supervision.

Let's do a little thought experiment and peek at the list of qualities Chris's mind searched for in women. We'll skip the physical attributes, though that's mightily important. His ideal woman, according to his mind, would:

- Willingly let him lead
- Generally defer to him when they had a disagreement
- Never tire of his idealism
- Prioritize his schedule over her own

His mind would be drawn to someone just like Sofia. More precisely, it would select a young version of Sofia, before she grew into a more seasoned version of herself. Now let's look at a couple of tools that might have helped Chris make a better prediction about his future with Sofia.

Social psychologist Shalom Schwartz (2012) studied cultures across the globe and found ten universal values that motivate people. You could find people in Japan, Zimbabwe, or any other location who could find their primary motivators somewhere in Schwartz's list.

Think of each of these values as a spectrum. You could feel strongly about one and lukewarm about another. Schwartz's values are:

- **Self-Direction:** characterized by self-reliance and independent thought
- **Stimulation:** variety, adventure, and risk-taking
- **Hedonism:** gratification and comfort
- **Achievement:** personal success and competence

- **Power:** social status and prestige; dominance over people and resources
- **Security:** Safety and harmony in society and relationships
- **Conformity:** compliance and self-restraint; placing the group's needs above those of the individual
- **Tradition:** adherence to customs handed down by family, culture, or religion
- **Benevolence:** loyalty and kindness to friends and family
- **Universalism:** providing equal treatment for different people and groups

Using Schwartz' list, Chris's higher order values probably included:

- Power
- Achievement
- Conformity
- Stimulation

Chris's daily activities revolved around becoming powerful and influencing the system. He was remarkably loyal to his values.

Sofia, on the other hand, had a different set of values that didn't really show up until later in the relationship. Hers included:

- Security
- Benevolence
- Tradition
- Gratification

She wanted her day-to-day life to be quite different from Chris's. She was interested in tranquility and personal connection.

Nothing says these two people couldn't live together peaceably. In fact, they might have continued to be a good fit for each other had they possessed the skill and devotion to overcome their differing priorities. As it was, Chris might have done better with someone who shared a bit more of his higher-order principles, someone who could embrace the frequent parties and rallies because she actually shared in his ambitions.

For Sofia's part, she might have done well to choose a man who wouldn't go bonkers staying home with a movie and take-out food. *Both* of them would have done well to reach their late 20s before investing in a dog, a mortgage, and a marriage license. Judging by Schwartz's higher-order values, Chris and Sofia get a big, fat F in long-term compatibility, no matter how horny they may have been at the start.

Let's see how they fared using another values tool. Whereas Schwartz's list was pretty philosophical, this list captures a more nuts-and-bolts snapshot of a person's ideal daily life. Let's call them the Big Ten since I'll be referring to them later.

The Big Ten comes out of behavioral psychology, and it was summarized nicely by clinical researcher JoAnne Dahl and her colleagues (2009). I like it because it is simple and to the point. Therapists all over the world use this list of values to help people discover what matters to them. They are:

- **Career:** the work that satisfies beliefs and activities you hold to be important
- **Leisure activity:** the activities you find rejuvenating; the hobbies that bring you joy
- **Caregiving:** the importance of inspiring and caring for others
- **Family:** the qualities you wish to possess as a father, son, brother, or father; the kinds of family relationships you wish to create
- **Intimate relationships:** the qualities you wish to bring to a romantic relationship
- **Community involvement:** the position you wish to occupy in your community; the importance you place on political, social, environmental, or other causes
- **Religion and spirituality:** the importance of spirituality and the role you want religion to play in your life
- **Education and personal development:** the knowledge or skills you find to be most important and the value you place on ongoing education
- **Health:** your approach to mental and physical fitness; the relationship you want to build with food, exercise, sleep, substances, and intellectual pursuits
- **Friendship:** the qualities you want to bring to the people in your life and the kind of relationships you wish to build

Since we are talking specifically about romantic relationships, I would add two more items that didn't make the cut in the behavioral literature. They happen to be two of the biggest sources of closeness and conflict in romance.

- **Finances:** what money represents to you, be it freedom, security, or something else entirely, and your philosophy about investments, debts, and fiscal responsibility
- **Physical intimacy:** the role of sex in a relationship; the meaning and importance of physical affection.

The Big Ten also shows the profound differences between Chris and Sofia. These two values were clearly at the top of his list:

1. Career
2. Community involvement

There's nothing wrong with a narrow focus and obsessive pursuit. It leads to mastery. The only snag here is the incompatibility with Sofia's values, which appear to have been:

1. Family
2. Leisure activity
3. Caregiving

These lists simply aren't very compatible. The end result was her desire to hang out on the couch while he hobnobbed with VIPs. Their incompatibility would have become apparent had they taken time to settle into their personalities before tying the knot.

Instead, they followed their impulses and prioritized attraction over goodness of fit. They each found an ideal short-term mate who later made them miserable.

When it was over, Chris was plenty bitter about having wasted his 20s in such an incompatible partnership. He spent a lot of time after the divorce blaming her for ruining his life. I think that's unfair because *he* chose to bring her into his world.

Defining values isn't always easy, but it's absolutely necessary if you

want to avoid Chris's fate. Here are some tips.

- **Pin 'em down.** Values can be elusive. For example, when people look at the Big Ten, they sometimes have a hard time deciding which ones are most important. They all can seem equally significant. If you have that problem, try dividing the list in half and keeping the five that are most important to you. Then see if you can reduce the remaining set of five to sets of two or three. Don't worry, you're not signing a contract. You're free to change your mind. This is simply an exercise in prioritizing.
- **Check your rearview mirror.** If you're having trouble pinning down your values, look at what you've done in the past. I knew one person who had been struggling mightily to discover what mattered to her until I asked her how she spent her spare time. It suddenly became apparent that children and family were her most important value. Even as a teenager, she had chosen to spend her time babysitting and tutoring. Her behavior indicated children were important to her. She'd had a hard time admitting it to herself because her family valued work and career and she had not wanted to disappoint them.
- **Be specific about the behaviors you associate with a value.** If you value your career, for example, what does that say about working nights and weekends? About networking events? About classes and professional development? How does an emphasis on work affect family and other items on the list? Be specific about the daily cost, especially if you're asking a woman to share the burden.
- **Explore your ideal world.** What would you do if time and money were no object? If no one were watching, judging, or praising you? What would hurt most if it were missing?
- **Separate goals from values.** Goals come and go. Values endure. For example, maybe you value health and want to run a marathon. The marathon is a goal. You either complete it or you don't, but there is no endpoint regarding health and fitness. You can always improve your knowledge, your endurance, your diet. There is no finish line, there is only the joy of the journey. That fact should feel comforting rather than discouraging for any value you truly

esteem.

- **Get comfortable with the discomfort of values.** Sooner or later, living a values-driven life gets uncomfortable. You'll have to defend them or make a difficult choice. You might even have to part ways with that gorgeous, alluring woman when you realize her values collide with yours. No one said values are easy.

There are a couple other things to remember here. First, a couple's values don't need to be identical. How boring would it be if they were? Variety is fun, and differing values can be wonderfully complementary as long as they don't collide. *Incompatibility* is the problem, not variety.

Secondly, exploring the topic of values is great fodder for getting-to-know-you conversations. As an added bonus, exploring her values shows her you're interested and truly want to understand her. What woman doesn't appreciate that?

How to Avoid the Nice-Guy Problem

Allow me to take a brief but important detour concerning a particular values trap that ensnares a lot of men. While working on a previous project, I surveyed men and women for their opinions and peeves about the opposite sex. One of the more common sources of friction between the genders is the topic of "nice guys" versus "bad boys."

Quite a few men complained about women preferring jerks over nice guys like themselves, and plenty of women complained about nice guys seeming so meek as to be pushovers, which is a big turn-off to most healthy women. If you've ever been on the wrong end of the nice-guy conundrum, you may be able to use your values to prevent it from happening again. Before we get to that, let's see if there's any truth to this "nice guy" business.

According to at least one study, there is some truth to men's complaint about women overlooking nice guys. Urbaniak and Kilmann (2006) found that women are attracted to men of lower agreeableness for casual flings. Women seeking one-night stands preferred good-looking cads to "nice guys" who were stable and kind.

That finding may not come as a shock, but the researchers also found something surprisingly similar regarding women's preferences for long-term

relationships. When women are seeking a long-term mate, agreeableness does *not* add to a man's attractiveness. Agreeableness may actually work against him.

It's important to note that the researchers were examining "agreeable" guys rather than the more loosely defined "nice" guys. *Agreeableness* is one of psychology's so-called big five personality traits that researchers can easily measure. (The others are openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and neuroticism.) A person who scores high in agreeableness is trusting, straightforward, altruistic, compliant, and tender minded (Costa and McCrae 1992).

The more instinctual parts of a woman's mind might find those qualities downright unappealing because they suggest a man might be easily taken advantage of by other men. He might not defend himself, his woman, or his offspring as effectively as a man who is less agreeable.

That mindset may be less relevant to modern society. However, our minds weren't built today. They evolved when resources were scarce and there was no rule of law. Ancient predispositions still steer our decisions.

In a classic study on the subject of initial attraction, Buss and Barnes (1986) found physical attractiveness to be one of the first qualities men look for in women. Shocking, I know. Women, by contrast, default to men who appear to have solid earning capacity. Again, who would have thunk it?

Of course, those aren't the only considerations. Both genders reported a need for qualities like kindness, understanding, and intelligence, but both genders also possess hasty minds with shortsighted tastes.

I don't believe these findings indicate shallowness in either gender, and I don't believe women are opportunistic hussies for seeking high-earning men. In fact, I believe quite the opposite. Though Buss and Barnes didn't say so, high earning capacity is a proxy for larger character traits our female ancestors would have found attractive and necessary.

Women long ago would have needed a man who could provide safety and provisions, and who was respected by the clan. Pregnancy and childrearing would have left her immobile and vulnerable, so she needed a powerful mate who was invested in their mutual offspring.

She would have been drawn to the kind of stand-up Cro-Magnon who could work with the team to slay the beast and who would have demanded his family's share of the meat. The "nice guy" who settled for leftover twigs and viscera would have been far less attractive than the assertive guy who

took care of his own.

Fast forward 200,000 years into the mind of a woman who is sizing up potential mates at the gym. Would those old instincts assess the high earner any differently than the good hunter of long ago? Research says no. Men who are highly agreeable (which is not the same as “nice”) make less money and are less frequently considered for advancement than men of low agreeableness (Judge, Livingston, and Hurst 2012). Life may be more comfortable today than it was for our ancestors, but the same basic social forces remain intact.

Here’s something else that may not surprise you. I’ve heard countless women complain about the “alpha” male who turned out to be a jerk, and I hear from men that the hot girl they fell for turned out to be a high-maintenance nightmare. I’m guessing not much has changed in this arena over the last 200,000 years, either.

Plenty of us are attracted to the worst possible long-term mates. Take narcissists, for example. They make a great first impression, but narcissists have difficulty maintaining relationships because they can’t attend to the needs of others.

They have a grandiose sense of importance. They are preoccupied with fantasies of their own brilliance, beauty, and success. They believe they are entitled to special treatment and obedience. While they make a great impression during the job interview or the first several dates, they are exploitative, arrogant, and unfeeling. (I’ll talk more about personality disorders like this one, and how to avoid them, in Chapter 6.)

Those are poor qualities in a partner, yet research has shown that men and women both judge narcissists of the opposite sex to be more attractive than non-narcissists (Dufner et al. 2013). Maybe that’s because narcissists put more effort into their first impressions and their physical appeal. They are certainly bold and engaging.

Here’s the intriguing discovery: The researchers found that even though we regard narcissists as good potential mates, we don’t regard them as adequate friend material. We see right through them, right up to the moment we’re looking for love. That’s when our minds let us down. Our own minds would have us hop into bed with someone we wouldn’t trust to walk our dog.

So where does this leave us? For one thing, it leaves us with minds in serious need of supervision. It also means we men need to not only recognize our own short-term biases, but those of women as well. We need to know that

unless she's done the work and research you're doing right now, she may not be using the most reliable criteria to size up men.

This kind of knowledge also gives you an advantage over other men. Women aren't ruling out *nice* guys, they're ruling out *unassertive* guys who show an overly compromising nature that suggests they're unwilling to defend what matters. If a sense of safety is something a woman seeks in a man, you can't blame her for relegating to the friend zone any man who doesn't openly define and defend his own values.

You don't need to be a disagreeable jerk to be attractive. As one astute reader of an early draft of this book pointed out, being an a-hole only attracts women who aren't really worth committing to. To attract healthy women, a man needs to possess a clear set of values he's willing to fight for. When she sees you defend what's important, she learns that you are capable of defending her.

You don't have to be a "nice guy" who finishes last, nor do you need to be a jerk. The third option is to be both sensitive and assertive—and to look for women who know their own minds well enough to look beneath the surface of men.

Values Traps

Yep, our short-term impulses can be our worst enemy. Our mind's job is to make sure we eat, sleep, and screw. *Our* job is to make sure we don't eat ourselves to death, sleep when we should be working, and screw ourselves into the poorhouse.

Here are three tips for keeping the hungry, horny, sleepy mind in check. They come from the same researchers who gave us the Big Ten values (Dahl et al. 2009). They're called values traps, and they can lead to precisely the outcome we're trying to avoid.

- **Avoiding unpleasant thoughts and feelings.** The more important a thing is to us is, the greater the risk it carries. We're bound to experience loss at some point, and the more you care, the worse it hurts. If you yearn for a certain career, for example, the fear of failing to succeed can interfere with taking risks to achieve it. The fear of experiencing pain or rejection can also keep us from

making tough decisions. For example, I knew a man whose lifestyle choice conflicted with the rules of his religion, preventing him from taking communion at his church. His clergy pressured him to relinquish his values. He had to choose, and either option was going to be painful. He dithered for years while he avoided taking a stance, and both his lifestyle and his faith suffered. (Eventually he chose to alter his religious practice to one that fit his lifestyle. He described it as a painful but joyously freeing decision.)

- **Pursuing secondary rewards like admiration, security, money, or position.** Following your values doesn't always come with a paycheck or parade. How many people have you known who took the easy path in order to feel comfortable—maybe marrying someone for wealth or taking a position of authority they didn't want. Meanwhile, their values withered away in the background. Defending values sometimes means giving up nice, shiny things.
- **Keeping up appearances.** Social pressure often provides a low-grade, consistent pull toward conformity and away from values. Maybe your values say you should minimize debt, but you feel the pressure to buy an ostentatious house in order to look like a great provider. Maybe it's time to break up with your girlfriend, but you don't want to look like the bad guy. Temptations are everywhere, and it's easy to set aside values for the sake of looking good.

Values are tough, no? Personally, I think they're worth the effort. One of my greatest values is self-reliance and freedom. I married a like-minded woman, and together we're living on our terms. Our freedom often comes at the cost of security and conformity, but nothing could be sweeter to us than piloting our own ship. Whatever your values may be, a like-minded partner can double the joy of living in service to her, and she can make the cost of doing so seem utterly trivial.

What If You're Already Committed to the Wrong Woman?

I'll wager a few readers are now thinking, *Crap. I've committed to the wrong woman and I can't get out of it.* Here are some pointers to share with her if

you choose to stay together, say for the sake of the children or some other higher cause.

- **Take the lead.** Set the tone of acceptance and gratitude for those parts of the relationship that work well.
- **Embrace the other side of the coin.** Remember that the quality which vexes you is probably the flip-side of a quality that was once endearing. Maybe she seemed confident at first, and now she seems bossy. Maybe you once adored her free spirit, but now you detest her flightiness. Remind yourself to appreciate what you once thought you couldn't live without.
- **Agree to disagree sometimes.** Some couples fall into the trap of believing they must be of one mind at all times. Even the healthiest couples don't rise to that standard. Give each other room to have your opinions and time to pursue your valued activities. Good people can disagree, and not every conversation needs a tidy conclusion.
- **Talk about it, up to the point of diminishing returns, and focus on common ground.** Don't let your differences fester. Opposing values can lead to disrespect when people retreat into their own private interpretations of their partner's choices. Maybe, for example, you each voted for a candidate neither of you can respect. Don't let those decisions damage your respect for each other. Good people can disagree. Make a mutual plan to step away from negative conversations when you sense that it's going down the same old angry path and instead return to your common ground. That common ground might be the children, or your company, or whatever is keeping you two together.
- **Don't let your mind tell you horror stories.** When two people are on different paths, everything a partner does can begin to seem like an act of disrespect. *She's texting her ex-boyfriend and she knows I can't stand that dude. She's obviously stepping out on me.* Don't buy into your mind's emotional explanations. Be cool and inquisitive. Check the facts. There may be a good reason for her behavior. There is no end to the nonsensical horror stories a human mind can tell its owner.

Finally, if you find that you cannot pursue your values without harsh judgment and rejection, then the relationship probably needs outside help. A few sessions with a good therapist can prevent years of repetitive, wasted effort. Shop around and make sure it's someone you both like and trust.

Values that Endure Beyond the Honeymoon

It doesn't matter how hot she is now, or how vigorous your sex life. Relationships that last beyond the infatuation phase have a few basic characteristics. Even if a relationship has a few challenges in the beginning, you can make choices along the way that increase the long-term chances of success.

- **Similar appetite for excitement versus calmness.** If you value relaxation, calmness, and peace, you possess what researchers call the *affiliative motive*. Its counterpart is the *power motive*, which is the desire to feel stimulated, active, and enthusiastic. Couples who are similar in affiliated or power motives enjoy their time together more than those who have opposing appetites for stimulation (Job, Bernecker, and Dweck 2012). They waste a lot less time arguing about how to spend their evenings and weekends.
- **Common goals.** Researchers have noticed that happiness and well-being suffer when we see ourselves pursuing goals that are incompatible with our values (Brunstein, Schultheiss, and Grässmann 1998). It's easier for both partners to pursue values when their partners are supportive or of a similar mindset. This is yet another reason Chris's relationship fell apart earlier in this chapter. He couldn't pursue his goals without Sofia's disapproval, and vice versa. She doesn't have to share in your goals. Sometimes it's healthier if she doesn't. You won't be spending much time together if you both want to be CEO of a Fortune 500 company, for instance. Ideally, she can support your values, and you can support hers.
- **Similar appetite for closeness.** Some people need more solitude than others, while some want more constant connection. Couples fare better when they have similar tastes for closeness. Widely

varying appetites in this area contribute to the risk of breaking up (Hagemeyer et al. 2012).

- **Quality of shared time.** Too much togetherness can actually harm relationship if the shared time isn't meaningful, especially if it leads to boredom and irritation. The amount of time you spend together appears to be less important than sharing activities you find mutually satisfying (Reissman, Aron, and Bergen 1993).
- **Perceived similarity.** Couples are more satisfied when they perceive themselves to be of similar mindset and disposition. But be careful; the more attracted we are to a person, the more we project ourselves onto their personalities (Morry, Kito, and Ortiz 2011). In this case, projection means we tend to think that the people we like must share our values. That's often the case, but not always. When the honeymoon fades, so can perceptions of similarity. We're also more tolerant of differences when we feel secure in the relationship. Focusing on positive events and reminiscing about the good times helps to increase perceptions of similarity. Fractures develop when couples lose sight of their similarities.

These are the characteristics of relationship champions, and I can't help but notice that Chris and Sofia would have struck out on each and every one. He craved excitement, she eventually realized she preferred serenity. His goals involved public life, hers revolved around the home. He preferred many loose relationships tied by professional and political interests, she preferred a small circle of a few close friends.

I've had my fill of Chris and Sofia. Let's set off for brighter horizons. First, I want to add one more item to the list of values that endure beyond the honeymoon: role expectations.

In my clinical experience, partnerships go much more smoothly when both are on the same page regarding relationship roles. Some people carry forward the roles their families taught them, others reject family influence and choose their own roles. It boils down to this question: What do each of you expect the man and woman to do in the relationships? How do you expect the other to express love and devotion? How will responsibilities be divvied up?

For example, maybe she expects you to maintain the cars because that's

how the men in her family operated, but the women in your family had no such expectation. Tiny resentments can creep in if you are both unaware of these implicit expectations. She's wondering, *Why won't he change the oil? Doesn't he love me?* You're wondering, *Why does she get so tetchy whenever we talk about the car?* Get those expectations out in the open as early as possible.

If you want to minimize the chances of romantic disasters, one of your best hedges is unapologetic honesty about who you are and where you're going in life.

WHAT GETS YOU OUT OF BED

INSURING AGAINST DEADLY DISILLUSIONMENT, CHOOSING WELL BY
HELPING HER CHOOSE WISELY, AND PROTECTING YOUR FUTURE BY
GUARDING YOUR MAN CARD

In Chapter 1, we looked at preventing your own mind from steering you toward the women who might ruin your life. In Chapter 2, we pinned down your values so you can let the right women in.

This chapter is about insuring against costly disillusionment later in the relationship. Do you want to know one of the most common complaints women have about their husbands and partners? *He changed*. Many women feel deceived when the man they married turns out to be someone other than who they thought he was.

More often than not, the complaint is about affection. “He used to be more loving,” she’ll say, or “He used to take me places.” This problem is easy to fix: don’t stop pursuing her just because you’ve won her over. You’re welcome.

Sometimes the problem is more complex, and the change she perceives runs much deeper. She sees what looks like a change of character, which raises the fear that she fundamentally misjudged her man’s personality. You can imagine how disruptive this would feel to a woman after she has rearranged her life around you. Her problem is your problem because that which disrupts her life has the potential to wreak havoc on yours.

Continuing on our risk-management foundation, we’re going to focus on giving her an accurate picture of yourself from the beginning. We want her to make an informed decision, and the most accurate impression comes from action more than words.

Intelligent women scrutinize how we move through the world. Because they’re predisposed to assess a man’s willingness to commit and his ability to

provide—that evolutionary mandate I discussed in the introduction—they’re attuned to a man’s industriousness, his social connectedness, his motivation to get up each morning and slay the beast. In other words, wise women are well attuned to a man’s sense of purpose.

In a classic study across 37 cultures around the world, women valued earning capacity, ambition, and industriousness in men far more than men cared about these traits in women, with the exception of Spain and Columbia, where men valued earning capacity at a rate negligibly higher than women (Buss 1989).

The only exception to the expectation of industriousness were the South African Zulu, whose expectations were the inverse of every other culture in the study. Buss wrote, “According to the research collaborator who collected the Zulu data, it is considered women’s work to build the house, fetch water, and perform other arduous tasks, whereas men often travel from their rural homes to urban centers for work.” Zulu women still expected their husbands to be industrious, just not as much as their husbands expected it of them.

In the U.S., women rated earning capacity, arguably one of the most meaningful byproducts of a sense of purpose, as important nearly twice as often as men. American women rated ambition and industriousness as important with much greater frequency than men.

The female predisposition to value a man’s purpose isn’t merely academic. It shows up in divorce statistics, too. Researcher Alexandra Killewald (2016) examined the correlation of marriage statistics and work status for couples who were married between 1968 and 2013. Couples in which the husband was working full-time had a 21 percent lower chance of divorce than couples in which he was unemployed or working part time.

While the social landscape has changed dramatically since 1968, the effect of male employment statistics on relationships has not. Husbands’ full-time employment is as important to wives as ever. Killewald’s findings suggest it is not a question of making a financial killing at work, but rather the knowledge that he is needed and valued. It’s not all about the money, at least not for healthy, well-adjusted women. They simply need to see that their men are consistently taking care of business, that they have a reason for getting out of bed each morning.

Let’s forget about what women want for a moment. Clarity also benefits *you*. A sense of purpose appears to improve men’s lives, irrespective of female preference. Or, more accurately, a lack of purpose harms us.

For example, unemployment has been shown to increase a variety of negative health effects for men, including suicide, but not for women (Courtenay 2003). In fact, money and work problems along with relationship breakdowns (relationships are another major source of purpose for most men) appear to be primary causes in male suicide, and men kill themselves at a rate four times higher than women (Scourfield et al. 2012).

Most male suicides occur in mid-life and old age, precisely the times when mastery and social position can be unceremoniously lost to injury or circumstance, or when it recedes naturally and isn't replaced with meaningful activities in retirement. Older men may be more prone to suicide because young men don't have as much mastery or prestige to lose, and when young men suffer a setback there is greater time and opportunity to reestablish themselves.

In my experience as a psychologist, a lost sense of purpose can be devastating to a man's resilience. Nietzsche wrote, "He who has a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*."

A man's purpose is the most visible aspect of who we are. Society expects it, and women look for it. Unfortunately, it takes time for most men to realize their purpose. That's one of the biggest challenges of being a young man. Yet good women seem to be tolerant of a man's uncertainty as long as he's trying to find his purpose.

I've seen this tolerance in the clinic consistently, and it was certainly true in my personal experience. I had no idea where I was headed in my younger days, but I was motivated and industrious, and that was apparently enough to draw the devotion of the good women I eventually learned to date. Of all the relationship problems I had early on, idle hands weren't one of them. Never did a girlfriend or my wife complain that I was going nowhere, and that feels mighty good.

Let's talk about man cards for a moment. If you'll indulge a working definition, let's think of a man card as the hard-earned respect of the community.

As psychologist Roy Baumeister (2010) pointed out, women aren't required to earn their status as women. They are considered women at physical maturity, regardless of behavior. It's different for men. Societies throughout time and across cultures have insisted that men earn their manhood, so we can't rest on our laurels. Like it or not, we must continually earn our man cards. At its most basic, that means a man is expected to

produce more than he consumes. As Baumeister wrote,

If the culture can convince most or all of the men to produce more than they consume, then the culture will be rich. It will have a surplus, at least, that it can use to take care of many who cannot care for themselves, including the children, the elderly, the sick and injured.

Women didn't impose this requirement on men, and I don't see any alien overlords cracking the whip on us. The vast majority of us take up the responsibility willingly. Joyfully, even. I pursue my man card because it feels indescribably good to be strong and respected.

In the book *The Way of Men*, Jack Donovan makes the case that "...competency has always been crucial to a man's mental health and sense of his own worth." Donovan's book is more historically informed opinion than science, but it's difficult to argue with the idea that competence is the opposite of soul-wrecking dependence in a man's life, and cultures have always rewarded competent and industrious men over ineffectual ones.

The beautiful part? For a mere 40 hours per week, a man can enjoy prestige in the eyes of his loved ones and his colleagues, provided he shows up with intention and effort. Prestige is good for men. Call it Vitamin P.

Prestige is associated with true self-esteem, agreeableness, conscientiousness, achievement, and mentoring, as opposed to unearned, hubristic pride, which is associated with aggression, disagreeableness, and narcissism (Cheng, Tracy, and Henrich 2010). Those narcissistic qualities may impress people for a while, but these folks almost always end up lonely and rejected.

Not all men operate the same way, and a sense of purpose may have different effects on individual men's mental health. Nor do all women relate to our sense of purpose the same way. That variety is a good thing. It's the unusual man who wants the burden of immense responsibility, and it's a rare woman who's attracted to a man who's scarcely home. Nevertheless, purpose matters much more than either men or women seem to consciously realize, and I've seen relationships torn apart by aimlessness in a man.

In *The Practical Guide to Men*, this book's counterpart for women, I described the case of Aaron and Bridget. Aaron was a great guy—the kind of

guy who put both men and women at ease—but he was rudderless, and he couldn't maintain his ambition or industriousness for more than a couple of months before he abandoned his mission and moved on to some new idea.

His distractibility and half-heartedness rendered all his plans impotent, and that alone was sufficient to eventually drive Bridget away. Like most commitment-minded women, she wanted the security that accompanies a man of focus and diligence. As for Aaron, his sense of self-worth came and went like the tide. Overall, he was miserable. He also had no idea that Bridget was the wrong woman until his lack of direction became the central point of conflict between them.

Just like lack of clarity in values, lack of clarity in purpose opens the door to the wrong women. We need to be absolutely clear about our purpose. While women are predisposed to admire the man with a plan, our purposefulness can become a point of contention when they feel they must compete for our time and devotion. It's important that we can speak intelligently and honestly about what we're doing in the world and why we're doing it.

Clarity of purpose minimizes your risk by helping a woman know exactly what she's getting into. As an aside, this forthrightness is one of the areas in which I part ways with the "pick-up artist" community. (Those are the guys, easily found on the Internet, who offer techniques for rapidly seducing women.)

Not all pick-up artistry is bad. Techniques that help shy men approach women can be great fun, and they don't automatically increase your risk of partnering with the wrong one. However, pick-up artistry becomes a danger to you when it veers into dishonesty or manipulation.

For example, some pick-up artists advise initiating contact by using a small insult, planting seeds of personal doubt, or keeping her emotionally off balance by arousing her interest then abruptly becoming aloof. Not only do those sleazy mind games reek of desperation to get laid, but they increase your risk of diving into a hot mess before you have any sense of her mental or emotional state.

Good risk management means full disclosure and self-composure. Even if you're well aware of your own sense of purpose, there's value in putting words and a framework around it. The question of purpose can be pretty daunting, so let's break it into bite-sized pieces by examining your:

- Status
- Responsibility
- Effectiveness

Status

You've probably heard women complain that men are overly competitive, and that we just can't get along as well as women. During my decade in higher education, I got an earful of uninformed twaddle about "toxic masculinity." We're unemotional, they say. We're aggressive. We're too individualistic. We suffer in a self-imposed patriarchy that is harmful to men, women, and all the little bunnies in the forest.

As it turns out, the data doesn't support that worldview. Yes, men are competitive. Yes, we're stoic. Yes, men tend toward hierarchy more than egalitarianism. But to suggest that these are harmful qualities is no better than saying feminine qualities are "toxic."

The truth is that men are sometimes more skilled at relationships than women. We have more of an innate team mentality and we cooperate more, especially when we're competing with other groups of men or tackling a challenging problem (Van Vugt, De Cremer, and Janssen 2007). Oddly, competition doesn't appear to increase cooperation between women. They end up bickering far more often than men.

Researchers have even discovered that a pheromone in male sweat increases cooperation between men. This finding suggests that contrary to what most of us have been led to believe about male hormones, men who work together tend to get along better (Huoviala and Rantala 2013). It's true that competitiveness is in our blood, but so is cooperation and camaraderie. If there's an analog within female hormones, it has yet to be discovered.

The uniquely male ability to balance ambition and teamwork appears to give rise to the uniquely male practice of status-tracking. I'm not talking about stature, prestige, or achievement. I'm simply referring to social rank—our duties, who we answer to, and who answers to us. Men who operate in the real world know their place in the pecking order.

If you grew up around other boys, there's a good chance you're so skilled at judging status that you don't even notice yourself doing it. Psychology professor Joyce Benenson (2014) wrote, "If you belong to a boys' group,

your allies may not remember your birthday, but they know very well if you can run fast, hit well, respect rules, and make good decisions.”

As Professor Benenson points out, male social groups and work groups are similar in structure to military organizations, with each man having a few close friends (his squad), a larger circle of associates (his platoon), and ever expanding, less familiar groups (his company, his battalion, and so on).

Girls and women appear to have no such compulsion since they have historically dealt with problems related to childrearing and caregiving rather than team activities like hunting and building. As Benenson points out, men “spontaneously organize their social lives so that they are prepared to fight wars,” and “the ingredients that facilitate successful warfare can be transferred to many other types of group activities.” According to the good doctor, boys begin spontaneously organizing themselves into hierarchical groups by age five.

Girls, on the other hand, tend to organize in pairs, and women tend to organize in flat, leaderless groups. If my female friends and associates are to be taken at their word, there’s a great deal more bickering within all-female groups than within groups of men.

Male attention to status is a brilliant survival adaptation. It’s hard to complete large projects safely when everyone is trying to figure out what the hell their jobs are. So, to all those who lament male preoccupation with status, I say: You might not be here without it. Sadly, parents and educators who deprive boys of the opportunity to play competitive games also deprive them of the opportunity to practice cooperation.

Why does any of this matter? Because a large part of women’s subconscious screening of potential mates includes an assessment of social skills. *Is he a confident or withdrawn? Capable or bumbling? A leader who takes what’s his, or a peon who settles for scraps? Will he defend his values? Will he defend me?*

These base motives within men and women may collide with some people’s modern sensibilities, but that doesn’t mean they don’t exist. Like it or not, men and women still rely on ancient instincts to size each other up, and to relate to each other. We’re not slaves to them, but they do provide our default positions.

Good and reasonable women don’t need us to be at the top of the pecking order. They just need us to be *in* the pecking order and preferably working our way up. (If she will accept nothing less than the top bird... well, be sure

you can live with her motives before you commit.)

A man who is a big ball of drama and at odds with the world, or who is a disconnected lump, is simply less attractive than men who can function among others. Even a loner like me can still have a solid sense of where he fits in the world. I know where I stand in relation to my colleagues, at my dojo, and among my friends. That sense of status is a basic indicator of relationship fitness, and women know it.

Even in a long-established relationship, a man's sense of status gives him a solid foundation from which to operate. Frankly, one of the most destructive things a man can do in a relationship is apologize for his purpose, but I understand why some men do it. Some of us have difficulty reconciling competing interests between work and love, so we err on the side of making our women happy at the expense of our teams, workgroups, or tribes.

Sometimes our women are right, and we would be healthier if we scaled back our work commitments, but not to the point of damaging our sense of purpose. Not only is purpose vital to our mental and physical health, but that same devotion to tribe that sometimes vexes women is part of our appeal. To some degree, there's an inherent conflict between work and love. Don't short yourself, or her, by neglecting your status outside the relationship. Know where you stand among other men, and make no apologies for your responsibilities to a network of friends and colleagues. Seek balance, even if it means disappointing her occasionally.

Remember that balance also means disappointing your team in her favor sometimes. Be sure to make it up to her when you must disappoint, but set a strong precedent from the beginning of the relationship that your purpose on the planet is not negotiable.

Sure, she might complain sometimes because she misses you, but only an unhealthy or immature woman would undermine a man's status by impeding his purpose in the world.

Responsibility

Men die sooner than women in all age groups. That's partly because we are less likely to maintain our physical health, eat and sleep well, wear seat belts, or maintain a social support group. We are also more likely to smoke, become alcoholics, and engage in risky or criminal behavior (Garfield,

Isacco, and Bartlo 2010).

I've met plenty of men who were more interested in an entertaining life than a long one. James Garfield said, "Man cannot live by bread alone; he must have peanut butter." Maybe you judge that life's peanut butter is a fair trade for a few years at the end. If you're interested in longevity in addition to fun, here's a counterintuitive research finding: Men live longer when we take on responsibility because we change our self-destructive habits when we take on devotion to a cause larger than ourselves.

Garfield et al. found that three-quarters of men make positive changes to their health and behaviors when they embrace heavy responsibility, whether that responsibility stems from fatherhood, career, or any other important, values-driven cause. Our diets improve, we exercise more, drink less, and forgo stupid risks. One man in their study even began eating more vegetables when he took on a weighty responsibility. I guess he aimed to be in top form for his new job.

This creates another fundamental difference women and men struggle to understand about each other. Women seem to have more of an ability (or maybe it's desire) to feel connected to loved ones, even in their absence. Men generally have more of an out-of-sight-out-of-mind approach.

For many men, loved ones recede from our minds when we're attending to other matters because compartmentalizing our lives seems to come naturally. Many women find that difficult to understand. The female tendency to maintain connection, and the male tendency to compartmentalize, are evolved adaptations designed for different but complementary sets of problems our ancestors faced.

Regardless, I've met many couples in which the female had difficulty understanding or sometimes accepting her partner's ability to say goodbye for the day, go slay the beast with his team, and essentially forget about home until he returns. When she asks, "Did you think of me today?" his honest answer is, "Not really."

If you compartmentalize like many men, and the woman in your life struggles to understand, then ask her to at least accept it. Responsibility helps us bring our best and healthiest selves to the relationship. For some guys, that responsibility may lie inside the home with children, the family business, or other domestic obligations. For others, it will be his devotion to his coworkers, his church, or even to his bowling team.

Paradoxically, gaining acceptance and respect from women means

refusing to apologize for possessing responsibilities. How can we ask her to accept this part of our nature if we implicitly reject it by begging forgiveness? It is a special requirement of male mental health, and for that we needn't explain ourselves. Well, maybe we should explain it, but we shouldn't disguise it in the least.

Sure, we may need to ask forgiveness for the occasional late night at the office, but we also owe it to our partners to be clear and assertive from the beginning about that part of our time and effort which belongs to others.

Effectiveness

Age twenty was the most depressing year of my life, and I won't pretend I was alone in that boat. It's a rough time for most young guys. My only asset was a job that paid just enough for a 500-square-foot apartment, a car that barely ran, and a weekly supply of ramen noodles.

I had no education, no prospects, no plan, no purpose, no future. Sure, I could fine tune the distributor clutch on an outdated pinsetter machine like a pro, but my paycheck proved that particular skill wouldn't carry me far in life.

As it happened, my personal pit of despair was unfolding at the height of the so-called self-esteem movement in which gurus wrote books and gave seminars promising we could lift ourselves up simply by convincing ourselves we are each good enough just the way we are.

What a crock. I knew I wasn't good enough. Not *nearly* good enough. I needed to improve, and while I was certainly no genius, I had sense enough to know that giving myself pep talks in the bathroom mirror wasn't going to fix anything. Besides, it would have been a lie. Dumb as I was, I was smart enough to avoid being fooled by someone like me.

No, I didn't need self-esteem. I needed self-*respect*. I needed to know I had value to someone other than the reflection in the mirror, that my presence had some effect in the world. The jury is still out on whether I've become useful, but the journey has been more important than the destination. *Choosing* to become useful is what saved me.

In cultures throughout time, boys have had to prove their worth before being called men. They had to withstand pain, hunt dangerous animals, or master some useful task. Since life was generally more brutal than it is now,

male rites of passage often required tests of strength and courage, like the Maasai rite of passage in which boys hunt and kill lions to demonstrate their ability to protect their families and livestock. What could be more important than your family and their food?

In our tamer world, we have mostly forgone dangerous rites of passage into manhood, but two American researchers have found that a newer male rite of passage has replaced the old (Bosson & Vandello 2011). Rather than acts of heroism or bravery, the modern rite of passage involves ongoing professional, academic, or military success. To be considered a man in Western society, we must demonstrate repeated accomplishments, like promotions and raises.

The researchers noted that despite our lack of dangerous rituals, manhood is still considered elusive. “The tenuousness of manhood lies in the fact that, once earned, this status can be lost relatively easily via social transgressions and shortcomings,” they wrote. Those who feel a threat to their manhood through shame or humiliation (getting rejected for a promotion, for example) usually feel compelled to defend their reputations or perform some task to regain respect.

The researchers noted that, just as in ancestral cultures, modern women have no such requirement to earn their place in society. “Compared with womanhood, which is typically viewed as resulting from a natural, permanent, and biological developmental transition, manhood must be earned and maintained through publicly verifiable actions,” they wrote. The ancient need to prove one’s worth is a uniquely male experience.

To be a man is to seek effectiveness, and this male-only requirement is an absolute gift. Just watch the confidence and joy of a man working in his element. It doesn’t matter if he’s chief of surgery or a supervisor on a loading dock. The man who knows he’s serving a purpose, and doing it well, is on top of the world. There’s no pill, no pep talk, no wisdom from the mountaintop that can outclass a solid sense of effectiveness. It may be the cornerstone of male mental health and happiness.

What does effectiveness have to do with romance? It’s part of your man card, and your man card helps protect you from the wrong women.

Guard Your Man Card

Chapter 1 was about understanding where you come from so you can prevent your mind from steering you toward the wrong women. Chapter 2 was about knowing where you're going so you can make room for the ideal partner.

In this chapter, we've talked about your relationship to other men (you status), your relationship to a cause larger than yourself (your responsibility), and your relationship to yourself (your effectiveness). So far in this risk-management guide we've talked about everyone except the woman in your life.

That's about to change. The remainder of the book will be about women who have the qualities that add value to a man's life rather than being a drag on his happiness and his success, but there's a reason we spent so much time on building a solid foundation.

Of all the couples I've worked with, the happiest and most successful meet a few basic conditions. One of these conditions is a man who knows where he came from, where he's going, and why he rolls out of bed each morning. These guys have their poop in a group. None of them are glittering examples of human perfection, nor are they necessarily obsessed with manliness. Look at me. I'm a psychologist. That doesn't rank up there with kickboxing or alligator wrestling in terms of masculinity.

No, men in great relationships possess something more valuable than brass balls or perfection of spirit. They're willing to assess themselves honestly. It's no guarantee of meeting the woman of your dreams, but it is the best way I know to keep the wrong women at a safe distance. In romance, insight is the foundation of risk management.

If nothing else, good partnerships begin with a little selfishness. I hope you will guard your man card, whatever shape it takes for you, because it has a direct bearing on your wellbeing. It doesn't matter if a dude is straight, gay, married, or living in a monastery. Those who are at odds with their own masculinity experience greater depression and anxiety, and more substance abuse. They also engage in more risky behavior, and they have a lower likelihood of seeking help for any of these problems (O'Neil 2008).

Men simply make better romantic decisions when their spiritual houses are in order. Sadly, there are forces at work that would have you relinquish your masculinity and all its benefits to you and to her. There are women, and even a few men, who consider masculinity to be a "toxic" plague on society. They argue that men are generally more aggressive and violent than women. (That's true outside romantic relationships. Within relationships, women are

violent with equal frequency. More on that later.) Therefore, they say, masculinity is a destructive force that should be suppressed in human affairs.

This spurious conclusion ignores a great deal of evidence. For instance, the overwhelming majority of men are never violent, and men tackling difficult tasks show a level of allegiance and altruism that far surpasses women. It ignores the male drive to provide more than we consume, as well as the fact that women sit high on a short list of those who benefit from the selflessness of the male spirit.

In fairness, you can argue that too few women have been exposed to the upside of masculinity. Popular culture often showcases men who behave dishonorably, and I suspect there are some folks who disdain masculinity because they've never seen a good example of the genuine article.

But even setting aside anti-male malcontents, men and women have always pressured each other to be a little more like their own gender. How many times have you seen a woman get frustrated at a man's limited capacity to discuss a problem into the wee hours, while he gets equally frustrated in the opposite direction.

Her: Why won't he talk to me?

Him: Why won't she drop it and move on?

The healthiest couples are those who can find the humor in this ancient tension without demanding their partner essentially switch genders. Our differences are our strengths. Anthropologists believe Neanderthals perished in part because they failed to incorporate both male and female traits into their culture (Kuhn and Stiner 2006). They didn't divide tasks and problems along gender lines. Everyone hunted, everyone gathered, everyone reared the babies.

Homo sapiens, on the other hand, learned to capitalize on both female and male strengths. Human infants had the benefit of being nurtured by adults with two different approaches to the world, solving two different but complementary sets of problems. What an amazing survival advantage!

It is hugely advantageous for couples to appreciate both male and female sensibilities. Whatever form your history, values, and purpose might take, carry them proudly so that any woman who looks in your direction knows

what she's getting into.

Alright. Enough about you. I encourage you to keep exploring these questions of history, values, and purpose, but now it's time to turn our attention to women—especially those who have what it takes to succeed in relationships. They are women of character, women of kindness, women who possess what I call the bright triad.

PART II

THE BRIGHT TRIAD

If your experience has been anything like mine, there have been people you wished you'd never allowed into your life. Sometimes they're run-of-the-mill knuckleheads, more of a nuisance than a real problem. Sometimes they're more malevolent.

Psychologists have a phrase to describe some of the most destructive personalities: the dark triad. These people possess an ugly combination of narcissism that makes them arrogant and coldhearted, Machiavellianism that makes them manipulative and relentlessly self-interested, and psychopathy that makes them impulsive and remorseless.

Women of that stripe obviously make poor partners, but what about the other end of the spectrum? If there's a dark triad to avoid, shouldn't there be a bright triad to seek?

I think there is. Women who succeed in marriages and partnerships have some basic, identifiable traits. Those women are clear in their words and intentions, they are mature, and they are emotionally stable. You might think of *clarity*, *maturity*, and *stability* as the minimum requirements for any woman worthy of your devotion.

CLARITY

ASSESSING HER SKILLS FOR MANAGING DIFFICULTY AND HURT FEELINGS,
HOW HER ASSERTIVENESS REDUCES YOUR RISK, AND MAINTAINING AN
ENVIRONMENT OF CALMNESS AND CLARITY

Have you ever been on the wrong end of this manner of conversation?

Him: Your mother is pretty forthcoming with her opinions. I'm worried she will undermine us if we have kids.

Her: You don't like my mother?

Her question is a setup. He can't win. If he answers "yes," then she'll probably grill him about why he would insult her mother. If he answers "no," then he's in for a long discussion about their compatibility.

There's a third option many men don't see: He can ignore the question and politely clarify his concern. Maybe he's simply looking for reassurance that she won't permit her mother to divide them. In-laws are, after all, a reasonable thing to worry about.

Conversations are bound to take an ugly turn once in a while. That generally isn't a problem until it becomes a pattern. In this chapter, we'll examine the way in which a woman expresses herself and the importance of establishing productive patterns rather than counterproductive ones.

Dozens of men have told me they feel verbally outmatched by the women in their lives. By comparison, only one woman has told me she feels verbally outmatched by her man. These guys find themselves lost and defeated in conversations like the one above. Most of them assume they're just not very good at expressing themselves, and some of them are partially correct, but here's the thing: If their women were *truly* skilled communicators, these men

would not walk away from interactions feeling bewildered and defeated.

Couples spend more time communicating than doing anything else. Sorry to break the news, but you'll spend more time talking than having sex, eating, or watching TV. Unfortunately, you can't assume she expresses herself with clarity simply because she's female and you've heard that women are superior communicators. She might be great with words but unskilled at negotiating misunderstandings.

In this chapter, we look beneath the surface for the signs of a woman's true ability to express herself, focusing on three traits that lead to *clarity*, the first pillar of the bright triad:

- Reliability
- Inquisitiveness
- Assertiveness

By the way, in the next two chapters, I'll describe the other pillars of the bright triad, *maturity* and *stability*. Then, in Chapter 7, we'll look at nine critical risk-management questions based on the triad.

Back to the matter at hand. If her communication style includes reliability, inquisitiveness, and assertiveness, then you will rarely end up in pointless, tangential arguments. Quarrels may go into the weeds once in a while, but it won't be a fixture in your life. Your exchanges will be focused and productive, which means you, the high-value man that you are, can remain focused and productive in other areas of your life.

Let's take a look at the components of clarity.

Reliability

Solid communication skills are like a dependable truck. They don't need to be sleek and shiny, they just need to be reliable.

Anyone can communicate well when skies are blue. Clear, calm communication matters most during the stormy moments. If her skills are unreliable, she may revert to more primitive means of expressing herself, such as tantrums and passive-aggressiveness. Good relationship risk management requires a partner who can express herself constructively (not perfectly) during times of stress.

(A brief aside: Since we'll be returning to the term, let's operationalize *passive-aggressiveness* as an indirect expression of hostility through behaviors like sullen avoidance, procrastination, resistance, withholding affection, sabotaging plans, and back-biting.)

Let me tell you about Samantha and Jared, a couple who came to my office several years ago after a tense incident at a football game.

The problem began with a simple misunderstanding. Samantha thought she and Jared were attending the game alone. When Jared's rowdy college buddies showed up and sat next to them, Samantha became instantly cold and quiet. Clearly disgusted at their presence, she barely greeted his friends.

She silently fumed throughout the game. During halftime, Jared politely pressed her to be more civil toward his friends. Her inhibitions softened by a couple of beers, she shouted almost incoherently about breaking promises, then stormed off. The four of them sat in icy silence after she eventually returned.

In Samantha's defense, Jared misled her. He hadn't disclosed that his friends would be joining them, or that he had paid for their tickets. (That last detail led to another argument when she learned of it.) Jared later admitted to hiding the information because he had come to fear her angry reactions. Though she was generally a kind person, she occasionally mistreated him, especially when she was under stress.

How did this come to be? Here's a little background. Throughout Samantha's life, her mother vacillated between alcoholism and sobriety. The alternating periods of neglect and indulgence of an alcoholic parent are difficult for a child to navigate. Young Samantha might come from home from school one day to a sober and attentive mother. By the next day her mother may have relapsed and become withdrawn and irritable. A bit of a mean drunk, that one.

Her father wasn't much help. He pretended the problem didn't exist, usually by retreating into work. He sometimes tried to defuse tension with humor, but he never offered any real leadership. By all appearances, he was yet another man who found himself weighing the equally grim propositions of staying in a broken marriage or leaving and paying a financial price he may have been unable to afford. Meanwhile, Samantha was learning she couldn't really depend on anyone.

By the time she reached adulthood, Samantha had developed solid ways of compensating for her inability to trust others. Rather than retreating from

people, she kept a safe distance by taking leadership positions that created a natural barrier between herself and those who answered to her. She was smart, funny, and easy on the eyes. It's no wonder Jared fell for her.

Samantha and Jared came to see me after the football incident because they wanted to stay together, but they realized they were falling into an ugly pattern. She had great communication skills... until she fell apart. She turned into an ill-tempered version of her mother whenever she felt those around her were letting her down. She was even beginning to overindulge in alcohol, just like her mother. When she became overwhelmed, she fell into childish behaviors like giving Jared the silent treatment.

It didn't take long to identify the source of her angry eruptions: She feared being abandoned. Who can blame her in light of the way her parents "parented?" Yes, that was a long time ago, but her mind wouldn't be doing its job if it forgot how undependable those early relationships were.

That's the lesson that haunted her as an adult. Whenever her relationship with Jared felt uncertain, as it had that day at the football game when he misled her, she began to fear for their future just as the little girl had feared for her future all those years ago. That fear hijacked her words and actions, and she became someone she didn't want to be.

Does that mean Jared should have dumped her? Hardly. Samantha recognized the problem and decided to fix it. They say you should never tell a woman she's acting like her mother. I cannot attest to that, but it seems any woman who can notice and alter her own troublesome patterns is surely a keeper. She resisted the temptation most people succumb to, which would have been to focus on those times when she's a great communicator and conveniently overlook incidents like the omnidirectional hostility she showed on the day of the football game.

Had she chosen to indulge herself in a self-serving mentality by blaming Jared for her unhappiness, he would have had a hard road ahead of him had he chosen to stay. She would have continued with tangential arguments in which they discussed everything but the real issue. Good communication skills amount to nothing if they disappear when the chips are down. Those are precisely the times they're most necessary.

Inquisitiveness

A couple once came to my office and immediately began to argue. The disagreement started over the sort of triviality people use as a proxy for the larger issues they're unsure how to approach. On the surface, she was angry because he had forgotten to take their dog to the vet the previous day. It wasn't the first time he'd overlooked a commitment. The larger issue lurking beneath the outward conversation was her feeling that he had been neglecting her and taking her for granted. Usually, I'm forced to intervene when people get lost down tangential rabbit holes, but these two had the skills to get themselves back on track.

He said he had simply forgotten because he was overwhelmed at work. This is where most couples go wildly off track. She could have taken his statement as a lame excuse, or focused on the dog's well-being, or complained that putting work first meant he didn't really love her. Any one of those responses, or a dozen others, would have put him on the defensive, and they could easily have spent the next hour in a pointless quarrel.

This woman responded in an entirely different manner: She got curious. She knew that neglecting responsibilities wasn't in his true nature, so she asked questions rather than blindly acting from her own hurt feelings. She truly wanted to understand what was going on with him. Her response to his claim that he had forgotten was, "I don't get it."

She listened patiently while he explained the demanding events at work the previous few days. She recognized that any reasonable person might have forgotten the dog under those circumstances. They made up and moved on to more important matters.

There's irony here. Some women in her position would have demanded reassurance about his commitment to her. She did not, and as a result he offered it voluntarily. It was the natural thing for him to do since he felt supported rather than attacked. Women who demand reassurance usually end up feeling more anxious because they've put their man on the defensive and he has responded in kind.

Because she did not put him on the defensive, he was naturally open to her point of view. He was open to hearing her disappointment because she was open to hearing his explanation. This peaceful outcome was the direct result of one singular quality: inquisitiveness.

If you've been on the planet very long, you've probably heard a laundry list of "active listening" techniques couples should use. Most of it is good advice (use "I statements," open body language, and so forth), but

inquisitiveness transcends technique. A woman's communication techniques might not be the slickest, but that doesn't matter if she truly wants to understand what's going on with you. If you're of the same mindset, your solutions will come with relative ease and without a list of techniques.

Inquisitiveness is a highly underrated and underdiscussed skill. In life, it's the foundation of wisdom. In couples, it's the fuel of efficient and peaceful conversations. It cuts through half-baked fears and insecurities, just like it did with the couple arguing over the dog.

The inquisitive person places facts and reality above emotion. Emotions still exist, they're just not in the driver's seat. The inquisitive woman won't attempt to read your mind because mind-reading is an empty exercise to anyone who seeks fact-based understanding.

The inquisitive woman doesn't merely allow for differences of opinion, she expects and tolerates it. If you disagree on a matter, she doesn't automatically assume you're wrong. If a woman lacks this fundamental quality and isn't willing or able to adopt it, she may not be the best candidate.

It's probably obvious, but inquisitiveness works best when it goes both ways. If you're not curious about what's going on in her head, then get curious. She'll dig it.

Assertiveness

The last couple I told you about had no real problems with their communication. This next pair, both professional and articulate, suffered the kind of communication problem that is insidious, difficult to spot, and can ruin a man's life.

Their problems started just after graduate school, though they didn't know it at the time. She was a rising star in her profession who began to put her career on hold so he could pursue his business goals.

It began in small ways, like sacrificing a bit of financial capital for her business to subsidize his. At social functions, the conversation centered on his exploits, disregarding the fact that she was equally driven to succeed. When their first child came along, she was the one who worked less so she could parent while he focused on his career. All the while, she quietly seethed about the dreams and the career she was relinquishing. She voiced her frustration here and there during arguments, but she mostly endured in

silence.

Eventually, when other frustrations mounted in the marriage, she could no longer contain her bitterness. She demanded a divorce, releasing all the rage she had contained since the moment she began setting her dreams aside for his. She had spent so many years marinating in her anger that she had become entirely resentful of her husband. The relationship was simply beyond repair.

It's easy to place the blame on her because of her passivity, but let's not feel too sorry for the husband. She gave plenty of subtle signals over the years, and he ignored them. Like many women, she had been taught to overlook her needs in favor of others, and he cheerfully capitalized on that. Though her resentment was her responsibility, a bit of inquisitiveness on his part might have saved the marriage. Bitterness and resentment are exceedingly difficult to overcome in a relationship. Once we lose respect for each other, it's often game over.

Assertiveness is absolutely vital for avoiding this negative outcome. People who squash their own desires to serve others eventually begin to feel they're being used and mistreated. Assertiveness is tricky for a lot of women. Even in today's enlightened environment, women often feel that it's selfish to assert their desires. If someone believes in a false dichotomy between selfishness and silent suffering, it's easy to opt for the "polite" option and overlook the long-term cost.

As for the husband's contribution to their demise, he made the same well-intentioned mistakes a lot of men make. Take a look at this hypothetical exchange and see if you can spot the error. It's the same variety of error this husband made repeatedly.

Her: I feel like you don't respect me very much when you mock my cooking in front of your parents.

Him: What are you talking about? It was just a joke. You know they're crazy about you, and so am I. You're being hypersensitive.

She's asserting a desire, but doing so in a subtle, easy-to-ignore manner. His response misses the point entirely. Here's the subtext of the same exchange.

Her: Please stop mocking my cooking and show me you respect me.

Him: No. You're being foolish.

Sometimes guys struggle to grasp subtext because they weren't taught how to do so. Sometimes they're actively avoiding it. By expressing herself so passively, the wife who gave up her career was hoping her husband would do the job of expressing her feelings for her. The husband declined to do so to protect himself from seeing his part of the responsibility for her pain.

You're not responsible for her emotions, but do yourself a favor and encourage her to be assertive. Tell her you appreciate it, and respond to her with an open mind. If she has a passive nature, listen for the subtext and encourage her to express herself. When assertiveness is gone, resentment grows and other destructive patterns can begin to set in.

For example, unassertive people sometimes resort to passive-aggressive behavior or manipulation to get their needs met. Sometimes their indirectness turns to nagging or resistance. Passivity can create unspoken tug of wars over petty details because the real issue is kept hidden. Sometimes passivity transforms into plain old aggressiveness and anger, as it did in this case.

Was the husband in this couple responsible for his wife's passivity and her ultimate resentment? As a psychologist, I have to say no. She chose to make sacrifices and hide her feelings. As a husband, my response is different.

Good risk-management requires us to make sure problems aren't festering in the background. Sometimes we have to pry beneath the surface. Besides, good relationships hinge on each partner giving more than they take. If a bit of curiosity and deference can improve the quality of her life, and therefore our own, then we'd be fools not to offer it.

How to Train Your Partner

Here's a dirty little secret about couples, though I don't know why it isn't acknowledged openly: We train each other much like we train our kids, our employees, and our dogs. We reinforce the behaviors we like, and discouraging those we dislike. Sometimes we train each other very poorly, like when a man discourages assertiveness in his partner.

Here's a common bit of poorly conceived training I see women giving

their men: She wants him to be more open about his thoughts and feelings, but she shuts him down when he finally takes a chance and expresses himself by telling him he shouldn't feel that way, or by scolding him for not speaking up sooner.

That kind of response is usually well intentioned. She's trying to soothe his feelings or to convey openness, but it nevertheless discourages the open and honest dialog she desires. Each time we discourage the choices we'd like to see, no matter how pure our motives, we encourage behaviors that put the relationship at risk.

Communication is often messy and inefficient, but it doesn't need to suffer from lack of clarity. The ideals in this chapter—reliability, inquisitiveness, and assertiveness—are targets to shoot for. Don't expect perfection, but don't settle for lack of effort. Clarity takes practice. For better or worse, couples practice on each other. Don't let it be a dirty little secret that you're training one another each and every day.

Men frequently fail to take the initiative in intimate dialog. If that describes you, I encourage you to break the mold and take the lead. When you see a problem in the relationship, name it—especially if the problem is on your end. (Here's a helpful hint if you suspect the problem is on her end: Focus on communication *patterns* you're both contributing to rather than telling her about her individual behavior. People are more receptive to shared responsibility and requests for help than they are to accepting full blame.)

If you find that you're really struggling with clarity, be smart and ask her to go to couples therapy with you. It's just good risk management to invest a bit of time and money at the front end of a problem rather than allowing it to fester and exact a higher price down the road. Besides, most relationship issues boil down to some fairly common problems that are easily fixed. Why reinvent the wheel?

Sometimes it's not entirely clear when there's a problem to be solved. Instead, there's just a vague sense that something isn't right. Here are two techniques for early detection and intervention. First, be on the lookout for one of the most common symptoms of an unspoken problem lurking in the relationship: repetitive, unproductive, or unresolved arguments. The single biggest misstep I see couples make is getting sucked down rabbit holes of trivial, tangential disagreements.

Couples can get so accustomed to their repetitive arguments that they forget to ask why they're having them in the first place. If you didn't resolve

an argument the second or third time, then you're not going to resolve it on the eighth try, or the forty-eighth. Stop it. When your arguments go nowhere, when you're not even sure why you're arguing anymore, it's time to get help.

Second, one of the best ways to discover problems before they cause permanent damage is simply to ask her how things are going. Check in. Ask her what's working and what isn't. Find out if she's happy, and don't hide from the truth. This may be the simplest and most overlooked relationship technique in the world.

Communicating with clarity can make life with her a joy, but it is nothing without the next pillar of the bright triad.

MATURITY

WHY EMOTIONAL MATURITY IS DIFFICULT TO DETECT AND HOW TO SPOT IT, HOW EMOTIONAL MATURITY LOOKS DIFFERENT IN MEN AND WOMEN AND WHY THAT MATTERS, AND FIVE NON-NEGOTIABLE EMOTIONAL SKILLS SHE MUST POSSESS

Dating is a lot like a job interview. You want the candidate who will show up each day with a smile and who won't crack under pressure. Unfortunately, interviews can be deceptive, and what you learn about a job candidate during an interview can completely fail to predict their future performance. Sometimes the most qualified candidates are so nervous they look incompetent during the interview. Sometimes the least qualified candidate can hold it together long enough to land the job. It isn't until later, during a crisis, that their strengths and weaknesses surface.

If you're hoping to avoid the ugly fate of a failed relationship, with all its emotional and monetary costs, then finding a woman who possesses maturity is a must. Maturity doesn't mean she's stolid and unimaginative. Mature people can still appreciate a whoopee cushion or a spirited wrestling match. I'm talking about the ability to handle crisis, the ability to rise to the occasion during challenges. I'm talking about *emotional* maturity. Emotional maturity is difficult to detect during the dating period if you don't know what to look for.

If she's immature in some way, maybe she'll do you a favor and reveal her dubious coping skills immediately, like a woman I once dated who insisted throughout our first date that her thighs were too large. She was fishing for reassurance or compliments, offering a glimpse of things to come.

Emotional immaturity more commonly shows up later, after the honeymoon period. Remember what Jim Florentine told us back in Chapter 1: "Most people are on their best behavior in the beginning. They hide it well until around the six-month mark." I agree, people hide their emotional

immaturity. Luckily, the signs of *maturity* are fairly easy to spot if you know what to look for.

Emotional maturity sits squarely in the center of this book's core concern: risk management. There will be conflict and challenges in any relationship. If she responds like a skilled adult, you'll sail through them. If not, then your problems will be compounded. Not only will you have to handle the situation without a teammate, you'll have to spend your time and energy compensating for her drag.

Emotional maturity is often the opposite of emotional impulse. The most basic mammalian response to crisis is fighting, fleeing, or freezing. These three primitive responses show up in relationships, and I'm guessing you want no part of them.

- The *fight* response in relationships includes delightful conduct such as blaming, criticizing, dominating, manipulating, pouting, and passive-aggressiveness.
- The *flight* response includes such joys as substance abuse, overeating, overworking, compulsive behaviors like shopping or having affairs, and retreating into fantasy when there are problems to be solved.
- The *freeze* response can include helplessness, dependence, whining, and avoiding important decisions.

People usually come by their immature strategies honestly. The manipulator, for example, may try to control others because it was once the only way to get her needs met. The woman who checks out from reality may have once found that behavior to be the only safe response to a hostile environment. The woman who becomes aggressive when she feels abandoned may have learned it was once the only way to get needed attention.

We all have counterproductive strategies that once served us well. The trick is to abandon them when they prove to be a liability rather than an asset and replace them with more useful responses.

Jennifer's Drama

Damon moved in with Jennifer after just six months of dating, and he was beginning to suspect he had made a mistake. They enjoyed the same activities, their values were well aligned, and the sex was great, but he was noticing a troubling pattern. She appeared to have a taste for drama, always placing herself at the center of attention.

One random Tuesday afternoon, Damon's father fell ill. Damon was forced to leave work early, grab a few clothes from the house, and book a flight to his hometown. He called Jennifer en route to the airport to explain why he wouldn't be home that evening and ask her assistance in handling a few loose ends around the house.

The conversation took a strange turn as Damon explained the situation. After Jennifer made a few half-hearted inquiries about his father's health, she began turning the conversation toward her aging cat. That's right, the cat. It had started new prescription a few days earlier and was now eating less than usual. Jennifer wanted Damon's advice. Had he noticed any unusual behavior with the cat? Was medication the right choice? Did he trust the veterinarian?

The cat was the last thing Damon cared about. He was worried about his father's health crisis and his family's well-being, and she had managed to turn the conversation to her aging house pet.

That's when Damon began to suspect he had made a grave error in allowing Jennifer to move into his house. It wasn't the first time she had managed to stir up a minor drama that detracted from a larger problem. He was beginning to notice that she always seemed to be in the midst of some crisis that drowned out needs of others.

For instance, Damon could recall the beginning of their relationship when she was having difficulty with her employer. Jennifer had painted herself as the victim of an unfair and unreasonable supervisor. He bought the story and sympathized with her at the time, but now he was beginning to wonder what Jennifer's supervisor might say about Jennifer.

Even her social life was marred by conflict and disagreements. She often complained that her friends were unreasonable and undependable. Again, he began to wonder what *they* might say about *her*. As he thought back on his own history with Jennifer, he noticed a pattern: She seemed to fall into some minor, self-involved crisis whenever he needed her support.

Whether it was at work, with her friends, or with Damon, Jennifer always seemed to pick the worst times to fall apart. The more he needed her, the needier she became. It was as if they were in a tug of war for attention. If he

was worried about his bank account, she was more worried about hers. If he was frustrated with his boss, she was more frustrated with hers. If he was irritated with his family, she was more irritated at her own.

She also tended to view other people as the source of her problems, routinely blaming and externalizing responsibility. Even now, she complained that the veterinarian must be incompetent rather than facing the realities of owning a geriatric cat.

You can probably imagine how exhausting it was for Damon to discuss the cat when he was worried about his father. Nevertheless, he indulged her because experience had taught him that Jennifer's drama would only escalate if he denied her the spotlight.

Damon is not a stupid man, and Jennifer had plenty of wonderful qualities, including a measure of intuition about situations that didn't directly involve her. Unfortunately, she lacked the ability to be present when others needed her. That's a troubling quality in a romantic partner.

Even worse was her tendency to externalize responsibility and blame others, putting Damon in a no-win situation. They were still in the honeymoon phase when his father fell ill, but what would happen months down the road as she became less infatuated with him? Most likely, she would eventually come to view him as the source of her misery.

Damon would end up in the same boat as her boss, her friends, and her veterinarian. He was destined to become her villain.

Five Absolutely Necessary, Utterly Non-Negotiable Emotional Skills

Jennifer may have given a good first impression during her early dates with Damon, but she was double trouble. Not only would Damon have to handle problems without the aid of his partner, but he would have to simultaneously prop her up.

A couple of questions leap to mind regarding Damon's choice of partner. First, why did he choose a woman in need of so much emotional support and rescue? Second, why did he make a serious commitment by moving in with her when there were clear signs of immaturity and irresponsibility? We will revisit both topics in later chapters. They are the downfall of many men.

For now, let's lay out some clear benchmarks and minimum requirements for maturity. If you're going to take the risk of allowing her into your world,

you had better make sure she possesses the minimum job skills.

The first thing to know about emotional maturity is that it looks slightly different in men and women. Why wouldn't it? Evolution has given us different predispositions, and society gives us different training. In general, boys are taught to value stoicism while women are taught to value discussion. That's not always the case, but it's true more often than not across most societies.

Yet women sometimes expect men to function like women, and we men are just as guilty of wishing they functioned like us. They wonder, *Why can't he be more sensitive?* We wonder, *Why can't she just drop it and move on?* We confuse the hell out of each other because we're speaking slightly different languages.

Still, men and women have more in common than not. Any reasonable person of either gender finds behavior like backbiting or passive-aggressiveness to be distasteful. It's the marginal differences between men and women that cause no end of trouble.

For example, one source of friction between men and women is so common it has its own name: the retreat-pursuit pattern. It works like this. Imagine some miscellaneous bit of tension arises in a relationship. One partner (usually the man) wants to escape the discomfort of talking about it. We'll call this person the retreator. The other partner (usually the woman) wants to escape the discomfort of *not* talking about it. We'll call that person the pursuer.

This couple is at odds right out of the gate. The retreator gets a hefty dose of anxiety if he discusses the problem, and the pursuer gets anxiety if she doesn't discuss it. The more the pursuer pursues, the more anxious the retreator becomes. The more the retreator retreats, the more anxious the pursuer becomes. This may be one of the most common relationship problems on the books. So why do we do it?

For starters, men and women have slightly different autonomic (fight or flight) responses, which come from our slightly different autonomic nervous systems (ANS). The ANS has big implications in lovers' quarrels because of its connection to feelings like fear and rage.

During an argument, the ANS can trigger elevated heart rate, shunting of blood to the muscles, increased respiration. It generally puts our bodies on red alert. It's preparing us to fight or to flee. This shifting of metabolic resources can lead to shaking, sweating, physical agitation, and so forth.

When the brain notices the body going on high alert, it also wants to get into the action.

The brain and the body interact in a feedback loop. The brain makes the body anxious, and the body makes the brain anxious. That two-way street provides a great system for dealing with physical threats because the body can sometimes react more quickly than the brain. It's far less useful when couples are trying to settle disagreements. Unfortunately, the ANS can become just as activated by our partners as by a real physical threat. To complicate matters, men and women recover from ANS arousal at different rates.

You've probably noticed that this fight-or-flight response doesn't last forever. It's a chemical and metabolic cascade that must eventually return to baseline. Heart rates slow, breathing becomes more normal, and the higher-order functions of the brain start to come back online. For men, this typically means it's time to kiss and make up.

In a cruel trick of biology, women recover from autonomic arousal more slowly than men (Sapolsky 2005). While he's calming down, she might still be in fight-or-flight mode, with her brain continuing to interpret bodily physical arousal to mean that the fight is still on.

I've seen this scenario in my office many times. Sometimes the man doesn't understand why the woman won't drop it, not recognizing that she's still under the influence of adrenaline. She interprets his calmness as a lack of caring, not realizing that his neurochemistry and metabolism are functioning differently than hers. If they're not mindful, their central nervous systems can feed off each other. Her continued escalation can send him into repeated autonomic arousal, which further stokes her anger, and so on.

There's a second, more social contributor to the retreat-pursuit pattern. Men are generally trained to avoid distressing internal experiences like fear or sadness, while women are generally trained to embrace and explore those kinds of feelings.

In 2012, a group of researchers (Davis et al.) showed men and women disturbing photos designed to elicit negative emotions like revulsion or sadness. Then they measured each gender's emotional responses. The researchers noticed that the women reported higher levels of emotion than the men. The women said they were more repulsed, sad, or otherwise negatively affected by the images.

That doesn't mean the men were less capable of experiencing those

emotions. They simply handled their emotions differently. The researchers discovered the men were less distressed by the images because they quickly moved away from their feelings by engaging in emotional distancing strategies.

Some of the men avoided dwelling on the pictures and steered their minds toward other thoughts. Other men shifted their attention away from the most disturbing part of the pictures to more benign details. Many of the men exercised control over their facial expressions. That particular strategy has been well documented to help people contain emotional reactions.

The female participants, on the other hand, faced their emotions head-on rather than retreating from them. Women were more likely to explore the nature of their reactions and pinpoint the meaning.

If we took a poll, the women in the experiment might say the men were emotionally detached, and the men might say the women dwelled unnecessarily. I'll wager that has been an undercurrent in disagreements between men and women from the beginning.

Also on the topic of emotional predisposition, there's an important difference in the way men and women handle anxieties. Across cultures, women appear to be more anxious than men (McLean and Anderson 2009)—or at least they handle anxiety differently.

For example, women the world over are more likely to overestimate the probability of terrible outcomes, to ruminate over painful emotions, and to vicariously experience other people's unpleasant feelings. These differences may contribute to the common perception among women that men are oblivious to friction, as well as to men's perception that women marinate in problems they would be better off ignoring.

It's no wonder men and women are so prone to problems like the pursuit-retreat pattern. Nature and society have stacked the deck. Still, sometimes what looks like emotional immaturity is nothing more than normal, healthy, emotional dissimilarity. Our differences serve a purpose.

For instance, the manly tendency to turn away from emotional discomfort might be the most productive response when the car is broken down on the side of the road and it needs to be fixed, while the feminine focus on emotion might be most useful when a family is broken down and needs attention.

The very differences that vex us also work wonderfully together. If the car breaks down and the children are upset about it, mom and dad have all the bases covered. Still, the language barrier between men and women is one

more obstacle to detecting emotional maturity.

In the service of seeing past this and other obstacles, let's lay out a few qualities of the mature woman who has what it takes to succeed in relationships:

- She can calm herself when she's sad or angry
- She accepts reality
- She can tolerate distress
- She keeps commitments
- She bases important decisions on values rather than impulse
- She takes care of relationships and doesn't burn bridges
- She possesses the emotional resources to function well in among coworkers, family, and friends

That's a lot to look for on the first few dates. Let's narrow it down to five non-negotiable, must-have emotional skills that any wife or girlfriend should possess.

- Insight
- Intellectual nuance
- Resilience
- Internalization
- Self-maintenance

You won't find this list in the psychology journals, though you'll find evidence of them scattered throughout the professional literature. I've compiled it by poring through my clinical records of high-functioning, successful couples and narrowing down the qualities of women who were highly skilled at relationships.

The men in these women's lives were hit the jackpot because these women made trials and conflicts easy to resolve. Their men never found themselves in second place behind a damned cat. You should expect nothing less than these qualities of any woman with whom you plan to share your life. Let's look at these essential skills.

Essential Skill 1: Insight

People argue about the silliest things while they're avoiding the most important problems, like the couple I knew who argued over which partner left the rotting fruit in the refrigerator when a crisis of overdue bills was looming over them. Their argument was dangerously detached from the gravity of their impending eviction.

Long ago, a couple in my office referred to these tangential arguments as "the rabbit hole." I've used the term ever since. I sit across from a lot of couples, and it's painful to see them get sucked down rabbit holes. Luckily, they can't go too far astray in my presence because I keep them on track, but these arguments can last for hours, days, or indefinitely when couples can't keep themselves focused or can't suss out the real issue on their own.

For example, I knew a couple who spent months arguing over their son's failing grades before they came to me. It quickly came to light that their son's problems were a normal reaction to something much larger: Both parents had been veering in and out of alcoholism for years. Alcohol was the issue, grades were the rabbit hole.

One of the reasons couples routinely fall into rabbit holes is an over-reliance on their own individual memories and the stories they tell. We make the mistake of believing our brains function like tape recorders, but we don't recall memories so much as we reconstruct them. The fallibility of human memory is the bane of courtroom trials. Our memories of emotionally charged events are generally about 50 percent accurate, but they *feel* 100 percent accurate.

This means that when one partner insists they witnessed the other partner putting the rotten fruit back in the refrigerator rather than the trash can, the accuracy of that memory might be no better than a coin flip. Since we're reconstructing memories, rebuilding and retelling the story rather than retrieving it from incorruptible storage, our recollection can go a little further off track each time we revisit the memory.

Insight short circuits this entire unreliable process, and the first requirement is the all-important quality of inquisitiveness. The insightful person is able to set aside the need to be right. She's more interested in checking the facts than in shouting a well-rehearsed story from the mountaintop. Because she begins by asking questions rather than telling stories, she can detect what's really happening within herself and within the relationship.

Couples can only be as insightful as the least insightful partner is willing to be. Substance abuse is a perfect (but sad) example. The non-addicted partner might insist on discussing the real issue of addiction while the addict is mired in distractions, justifications, and rationalizations. Conversations go nowhere until the addicted partner is willing to drop the story and exercise insight.

That's an extreme example. More typically, living with a partner who lacks insight is death by a thousand cuts. Life with this person becomes full of pointless arguments and silly disagreements that can grow into much larger problems. Good risk management means heading off small problems before they grow, and choosing an insightful partner is one of the best steps you can take.

If nothing else, an insightful partner makes life more fun because you won't be wasting time on unproductive conflicts. Just don't expect her to be a pushover. An inquisitive, insightful woman may occasionally realize *you're* the one who put the rotten fruit back in the fridge.

Essential Skill 2: Emotional Nuance

We all have psychological defenses against internal conflict. For example, I might notice myself eating cheese puffs over the kitchen sink when I know I should be at the gym. Or your girlfriend might find herself disproportionately angry with you when she knows you didn't really do anything worthy of such ire.

We can avoid those little internal conflicts, rationalize them, or lie to ourselves. None of these responses are particularly healthy. Ideally, I would say to myself, *Put down the cheese puffs and get your ass to the gym. Do it now.* Your girlfriend might say to herself, *Why am I so furious? He didn't do anything. I need to figure out what's going on with me.*

Unfortunately, unhealthy defenses are easy and natural. One of the most primitive and least productive defenses is known as splitting, which refers to difficulty holding opposing views about oneself or others. The person who relies on splitting can't reconcile the fact that she simultaneously feels hurt by her partner *and* the fact that she loves him. It's one or the other. He's either good or bad, an angel or a devil.

The healthier behavior, of course, is the ability to say, "I love you *and* I'm angry right now." That requires a level of emotional nuance that every

grownup should possess. It absolutely must be in the emotional toolbox of any partner you choose. The alternative is someone who idealizes you when she's happy and vilifies you when she's upset. That rollercoaster takes a devastating toll over time. Splitting poses a special threat to your happiness and your resources. If she casts you in the role of villain whenever you disappoint her, imagine how she'll treat you during the inevitable breakup or divorce.

Being vilified is a troubling position for obvious reasons. For starters, it's a tough hole to climb out of. You'll have to return to her good graces before you can even begin solving whatever issue stoked her rage.

Being idealized is also troubling. Sure, it feels good at the moment, but you will inevitably decline in her estimation. Woe unto you the day she discovers you're human and she must deal with a mess of conflicting emotions about you.

Emotional nuance may be the most important quality to search for during your first few disagreements with her. If you get the sinking feeling that you're being cast as the devil, then beware. There is stormy weather ahead. On the other hand, if she's able to focus on the issue, refrain from personal attacks, tolerate unpleasant sentiments, and remain solidly allied with you as the two of you work it out, then there's a good chance she has the emotional nuance every healthy relationship must possess.

Emotional nuance is also one of the more important risk-management considerations in this book because it helps prevent conflict from spinning out of control. Splitting typically coincides with a fear of abandonment so overwhelming that the splitter finds it impossible to contain conflicting thoughts about you. That fear, in turn, creates a powerful compulsion to engage in conflict in the hopes of resolving it. Arguing when emotions are high generally makes the problem worse.

Splitting can also compel her to abandon you during conflict if she's thinking, *I thought we were a perfect couple. Does this rift mean we're falling apart? I have to know that everything will be alright, or I must leave him before he hurts me further.*

The splitter's desperate desire to resolve that internal conflict makes it exceedingly difficult for her to step away from arguments and disagreements. Taking a break can cause immense anxiety by forcing the splitter to sit with the thought that their world is falling apart. Healthy couples don't fear taking a break from conflict. Even in the best relationships, things sometimes get

heated. Conflict is likely to escalate when one or both partners aren't able to regroup and collect themselves.

Taking a break and getting out of each other's sight is the smartest thing to do when our autonomic nervous systems hijack the discussion. The partner who lacks emotional nuance may one day try to prevent you from exiting the scene during a heated moment. That puts you in a very vulnerable position. While I'm unaware of any statistics that measure splitting as a contributor to domestic violence arrests, I've seen enough to wager that nothing good comes of blocking someone's exit when they're trying to cool off. (In later chapters we'll talk about minimizing risk during arguments, as well as strategies for taking breaks.)

Emotional nuance is an absolute necessity in a partner. Without it, her concept of you is less stable than it should be, and that puts you at tremendous risk for a rollercoaster relationship that can end in a flaming wreck.

Essential Skill 3: Resilience

Given the choice, would you prefer a wife or girlfriend who wilts and withers in the face of challenge, or one who is resilient, flexible, and resourceful and who knows how to handle herself? Be honest. There are a lot of white knights out there who get off on rescuing women. We'll revisit that topic in Chapter 8. For now, I want to make the case that resilience is another must-have quality in a woman.

It seems to me that managing risk means protecting your life plans against loss. I can think of no greater insurance policy than choosing a partner who can stand on her own two feet. You've heard the expression, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts"? That's only true when neither partner is running a deficit in the strength department.

You have plans (I hope). Unfortunately, the world probably won't cooperate with your agenda. The second law of thermodynamics says your world and your plans will descend into chaos if you allow it. A woman who lacks resilience will mightily speed that process of erosion by adding an extra layer of chaos. Each moment you spend rescuing her from the emotional distress of minor disappointment is one moment you *won't* spend pursuing your goals. The un-resilient woman will utterly suck the wind out of your sails.

What is resilience, exactly? What qualities define the ability to bounce back in life? Entire books have been written on the subject, so let's just cover the highlights. And let's start with emotion management.

Every hardship presents a basic choice: focus inward on emotions or outward on the problem. Both have their advantages. Focusing inward is known as *emotion-focused coping*. It comes with some useful results, include seeking out friends who can empathize and strategize, finding the positive aspects of the problem, disengaging from unproductive actions, and reframing our view of the problem. We do these things in the service of calming ourselves down, and ideally the problem becomes easier to tackle in the process. Taken too far, however, this approach turns into wallowing and wishful thinking. At some point, we have to take action.

The counterpart of emotion-focused coping is *problem-focused coping*. This includes seeking information, planning, and taking action. In a study on recovery from illness, one group of researchers found that a problem-focused approach led to better outcomes (Penley, Tomaka, and Wiebe 2002). People in the study who planned and took action simply fared better.

That doesn't mean emotion-focused coping doesn't also help. The renowned psychologist Richard Lazarus (1993) wrote that effective coping involves being able to handle both our emotions and the problem at hand. He called it "planful problem-solving." It's a pretty simple recipe:

- Identify the problem and what needs to be done without avoidance or denial.
- Make a plan and sticking to it without succumbing to discouragement, constant reappraisals, or setbacks.
- Be willing and able to change directions when the solution is failing.

Lazarus wrote that even the most skillful strategies and efforts can lead to distress when they fail. That's when a person needs to be able to turn to emotion-focused strategies such as seeking social support or practicing positive reappraisal. I would add that the ability to lick one's wounds and then get back in the game is a defining characteristic of resilience.

Another brilliant psychologist, Al Siebert, described the characteristics of resilient people in his book *The Survivor Personality* (2010), in which he studied the mindsets of true survivors. Here are some of the qualities that

helped people overcome tragedy:

- **Willingness to accept the unfairness of life.** It's tough to win the game when you're whining about the rules.
- **Possessing a playful curiosity.** Problems remain in proper perspective when we don't take them or ourselves too seriously.
- **Being flexible in the face of challenges.** Remember the second rule of thermodynamics. The best laid plans are sometimes no match for the forces of chaos. Accepting that fact, even welcoming it, keeps us from withering away when plans fail.
- **Finding opportunity in misfortune.** This is the mark of true resilience. The say every crisis brings opportunity. The resilient survivor knows it to be true.

Here's why this matters, and it ain't rocket science: There will come a time when the two of you face a real challenge. Two resilient people tackling the problem together are far more effective than one person whose attention is divided between the problem and an emotionally frail partner.

Essential Skill 4: Internalization

Have you ever met someone who has a history of trouble with every former employer, every landlord, every former romantic partner? And it's always the other person's fault? It's exhausting, isn't it? These people are never without an excuse. They are constant victims because they externalize responsibility.

Contrast them to someone who *internalizes* responsibility. The big difference is that internalizers' lives are in order. They don't let problems fester. They take care of their relationships and their responsibilities, and they are confident in the knowledge that they control their own destinies. Rather than asking how the world can change to suit them, they ask themselves how they can change to better succeed in the world.

We won't spend much time here because the advantage of living with someone who internalizes responsibility is fairly self-explanatory. If she externalizes, and she's always comfortable in her role as victim, then she's bound to one day label you as her oppressor. I wouldn't wait around for her

to mature because growth requires the same internalization skills she lacks.

Beyond the obvious benefits of a partner who internalizes responsibility, there are a couple of extra points to keep in mind where romance is concerned. First, some women internalize too much responsibility, absorbing the blame for every hiccup in their relationships. They marinate in angst over perceived tension with friends, family, or coworkers.

This is a bad arrangement for the boyfriend or husband. First, if you're not careful, it will insulate you from internalizing your own responsibility because she'll protect you from scrutinizing your own behavior. Second, it's a recipe for resentment on her part. One has to wonder why a person feels the need to be responsible for everything. Is it a bid to avoid abandonment? Anxiety that relationships will fall apart without constant supervision? A subtle attempt to establish control? A response to a traumatic upbringing in which life felt out of control? Whatever the case, too much internalization will be a detriment to her and to you.

Here's a bonus. The woman who internalizes in a healthy manner can help you be the best version of yourself. If she has a solid track record of taking responsibility for her choices, then you can probably rely on her perceptions when she notices areas where you could be more effective personally or professionally.

Internalization matters because it has everything to do with the quality of your disagreements. Life with someone who externalizes responsibility is like living with a child, except this child has real power to make your life hell. The experience of living with an internalizer is a dream. I say it from personal experience. Problems get solved and life moves forward. Don't settle for anything less.

Essential Skill 5: Self-Maintenance

Which comes first, self-neglect or the problems associated with it? Is a person depressed because they drink too much, or do they drink too much because they're depressed? Are they out of shape because they avoid exercise, or do they avoid exercise because they're out of shape?

Sometimes it's difficult to find the starting point. In a 2010 study (Boden, Fergusson, and Horwood), researchers found that smoking cigarettes may be an attempt to regulate low mood among people who are especially sensitive to nicotine's short-term mood-enhancing effect. At the same time, those

nicotine-sensitive people are also more prone to its long-term depressive effects. So which comes first, the depression or the smoking?

You can ask the same question for virtually any lifestyle choice with an unpleasant outcome. Personally (and clinically), I subscribe to the belief that actions precede feelings. If you want to feel good, be resilient, and possess good self-regard, then take the actions that provide those things. If we wait until we *feel* like taking good care of ourselves, we might die of old age before we get there.

Unfortunately, that means the person who avoids exercise because they're overweight, for example, will need to experience the unpleasant feeling of being soft as they exercise their way out of their predicament and into a better physical state. That's easy to say but difficult to do. People can get very comfortable in self-destructive habits because it's tough to give up that which feels good, like beer and pizza, and replace it with something unpleasant, like those first few trips to the gym.

Self-care is largely the act of avoiding the long-term costs of short-term solutions like chain-smoking, binge eating, and drinking feelings away. The more frequently we give in to short-term answers, the lower our overall functioning becomes. Self-maintenance is a series of small choices we make every day. Well, maybe not every day, but most days. We all need to cut loose once in a while.

If she's neglecting herself physically, spiritually, or emotionally, then she's not bringing the best version of herself to the relationship. Worse, poor self-care can snowball into all kinds of physical and emotional problems that could have easily been avoided.

Self-care is one of those behaviors that's easy to mimic at the beginning of a relationship. Her circle of friends will show you the real story. They say we're all the average of the people we hang out with most often. If her friends value self-maintenance then there's a good chance she does too. Be skeptical if she claims to value self-care but her closest friends clearly do not.

Self-care matters because the human machine isn't so different from any other machine. It's bound to break down at the worst times when we don't follow the maintenance schedule. There will be times when you need her to be at her best, not at her out-of-shape, neglected, broken-down worst.

Seeking What Isn't Flashy or Obvious

To recap, here are five bare-bones, absolute minimum emotional qualities to seek in a woman:

- Insight
- Emotional nuance
- Resilience
- Internalization
- Self-maintenance

Don't expect perfection, just effort. Maturity is always a work in progress. Noticing these qualities requires a keen eye because they aren't necessarily visible on the first date unless that date happens to be some sort of spiritual trial like a survival trek in the outback. To make courtship even more challenging, the lack of these basic emotional traits is easily obscured if you're smitten with her shinier qualities.

I can't tell you how many men I've known who have sacrificed emotional maturity for a great pair of... eyes. I suppose some people overlook maturity because it isn't flashy, nor is it obvious. It's merely useful. Our horny little brains are often unconcerned with utility when they're on the prowl. *Tomorrow be damned. I'm lonely tonight.*

There's no reason to fall into that trap if you know what to look for. Now let's look at the third pillar of the bright triad.

STABILITY

SPOTTING MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS THAT CAN PUT YOUR FUTURE AT RISK, THE MOST COMMON MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AMONG WOMEN, AND THE EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF PERSONALITY DISORDERS

This chapter is about the kind of stability that comes from good mental health. That term doesn't mean she has no problems, it simply means she handles her problems so that her life (and yours) isn't a series of crises.

Risk in romance isn't limited to the things we can lose, like freedom, happiness, or fortune. There's also the invisible opportunity cost of the wrong relationships: the plans that wither on the vine, the good health that was chipped away, the relationships that could have been.

The insidious opportunity costs of a mentally unstable partner—one who allows her cognitive or emotional problems to run roughshod over herself and her loved ones—can be devastating. I've met men who could have the world by the short hairs but for a wife or girlfriend who interrupts each thrust at success with her own crisis.

There's the attorney whose wife's alcoholism is sufficiently distracting to prevent promotion to partner; the father with a wife who refuses treatment for her descends into crippling depression, leaving his children anxious and frightened; the entrepreneur who could open new franchises were it not for his partner's all-consuming emotional breakdowns.

Given the legal and financial difficulty men face in extracting themselves from troubled relationships, it pays to insure our futures against the peril of emotional or mental instability. That requires some basic knowledge about mental health.

Let's start with an example. The odds of divorce *double* when one partner suffers from a major depressive disorder (Bulloch et. al 2009). Women initiate four out of five divorces. (We'll return to the divorce discussion in

Chapter 9.) Would you intentionally invest in an arrangement in which you are at a clear legal disadvantage and the odds of failure are astronomical? Of course not, but men do it all the time by marrying or partnering with unstable women.

Her mental health influences the effectiveness with which she meets the ordinary demands of life. For example, substance abuse, one of the most common mental health problems among men and women, profoundly damages a person's ability to fulfill personal obligations, succeed at work, and avoid expensive problems with the law. Any of the mental health problems we're going to look can exact similar costs.

Women, like men, are predisposed to certain garden-variety mental health problems. According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013) women suffer from major depressive disorders up to three times as often as men. Women also suffer social anxiety, panic disorder, agoraphobia, and generalized anxiety disorder twice as often as men.

Incidentally, we men are more than twice as likely as women to abuse alcohol or other substances, and substance abuse frequently accompanies psychiatric problems like depression and anxiety (Compton et al. 2007). Nearly twenty years ago, researchers noticed that rates of depression among women nearly mirrored rates of alcohol abuse among men (Hanna and Grant 1997). It appears that while women take their emotional difficulties to their physician or therapist, men take their problems to the pub.

Neither gender has cornered the market on mental illness. Both get depressed, for example. But male and female depression tend to cluster around different symptoms. They get morose and we get drunk, to greatly oversimplify this particular area of inquiry.

Here again, we see a bit of that old language barrier between men and women. Because our experiences are different, we sometimes don't notice our partners' struggles. I've met many men who thought their women were simply being difficult when in fact they were suffering with an underlying emotional problem. I've met a similar number of women, maybe more, who didn't understand the nature of their men's struggles.

I want you to enter the dating arena armed with some basic clinical knowledge so you can make an informed decision about whether you want to incorporate her difficulties into your life. There are three common types of mental health problems everyone should be aware of before they venture into romance.

- Depression and anxiety
- Substance abuse
- Unresolved emotional injuries

These are statistically the most common mental maladies, and we'll discuss them one at a time. There are also the personality disorders, which we'll discuss separately. Let's jump in.

Depression & Anxiety

There is more variability between individuals than between groups, but nowhere are group-based statistical differences more pronounced than between men and women. Plenty of informed folks, including a fair number of clinicians, don't realize there's a difference in the way men and women typically manifest depression and anxiety. Let's look at depression first.

Men in most cultures are expected to learn strategies for distancing themselves from unpleasant feelings. As I discussed earlier, the typical male emotional toolbox includes the ability to move attention away from the source of discomfort and replacing unpleasant thoughts with more palatable ones (Davis et al. 2012). Men around the world are usually taught to suck it up and move on.

There's a good argument to be made that this social behavior has a genetic basis because it advanced our survival. If there ever was a group of prehistoric men who stopped to contemplate their feelings about being chased by a bear while they were hunting for dinner, they probably didn't live long enough to pass on their genes. Perhaps it's no coincidence, then, that depressed men tend to be more irritable than sad.

Women do depression differently. For one thing, they're likelier to seek professional help, describing symptoms like sadness, guilt, a sense of worthlessness, and poor concentration. Women's experience of depression matches the healthcare industry's definition of depression. Symptoms that men more typically show, like agitation, substance abuse, and irritability, don't neatly fit the clinical definition of depression, so sometimes even healthcare professionals don't recognize male depression for what it is.

The difference shows up in epidemiological data. Eighteen percent of adolescent girls fit clinical criteria for mood disorder, but only 10 percent of

boys. Meanwhile, boys are diagnosed in similarly disproportionate numbers of having conduct disorders at a rate of 23 percent versus 15 percent for girls (Merikangas et al. 2010).

Girls tend to worry about the future and internalize blame. Boys are more likely to have thoughts like “I wish I were dead” or to show behavioral problems (Van Beek et al. 2012). Thirteen percent of boys are diagnosed with ADHD while only 4.2 percent of girls receive the diagnosis. It’s doubtful that all those diagnoses are reasonable or accurate. Some of those boys are undoubtedly expressing themselves through their behavior since they’re less likely to express themselves with words. (And some of them are just spirited children.)

All this says what, exactly? It says simply that men and women are probably depressed in similar numbers but show it in different ways. The genders certainly show similar rates of depression when clinicians look beyond subjective reports of depressed feelings, instead measuring objective, outward effects like loss of interest in activities, low sex drive, social withdrawal, and sleep problems (Maier et al. 1999).

Researchers have found that male depression is likelier to manifest with avoidance, irritability, substance abuse, unreasonable risk-taking, and withdrawal from friends and pleasurable activities (Martin, Neighbors, and Griffith 2013). We’re generally pretty good at masking our depression. We can be privately suffering while performing well in the community, though we’re often grumpy around loved ones (Rabinowitz and Cochran 2008).

Since women experience depression so differently from us, they sometimes have difficulty understanding that irritability and agitation can mean their men are depressed. To them, it simply looks like he’s being a grumpy jerk. They wonder, *Why can’t he stop being so testy and just and be happy?*

Plenty of men make the same mistake in reverse. They see their women feeling sad and hopeless, gaining or losing weight, being fatigued and withdrawn, and they wonder, *Why can’t she just shake it off and lighten up?* They think she’s just being lazy or feeling sorry for herself. The stock male response to depression sometimes amounts to, “Hey, stop being depressed.” It’s not ill intentioned, but it does backfire.

One of the challenges of recognizing and intervening in our women’s depression (for example, by helping them find a good therapist) is that her depression can have a direct effect on the quality of the relationship.

Depression can cause women to push us away or make the relationship miserable.

One study that looked at the effect of wives' depression on marriage found greater marital distress, more destructive conflict-resolution tactics, and fewer constructive tactics among depressed women. The women in these marriages were more likely to have been previously divorced, more likely to express regret about marrying their current husbands, and they were less affectionate toward their husbands (Coyne, Thompson, and Palmer 2002).

Women also bring their workaday stress into the relationship in different and arguably more destructive ways than men. According to one study, bad days at work "were linked with angrier marital behavior for women and less angry and more withdrawn behavior for men. Daily changes in workday pace predicted fluctuations in women's, but not men's, marital behavior" (Schulz et al. 2004).

Depression calls for rational compassion, but it's hard to be compassionate when your partner is treating you like a punching bag. Tensions can rise in the relationship over symptoms like anger and lack of sex, while underlying problems are ignored.

It's important for men to know that they cannot fix their partner's depression. So what can they do? Be kind, be direct about the problem, don't take depression personally, and help her find treatment. The rest is up to her. It's *her* responsibility to do the work of recovery. That's a difficult task because depression robs a person of the very motivation that would help them tackle the problem.

Just as I remind women that they don't need to remain with a mentally unhealthy man out of obligation, it is doubly important for men to hear this same message. Men tend to be service oriented, so we're prone to "rescuing" damsels in distress. It rarely works. You are not obligated to remain with someone who is unwilling to confront her own struggles.

My personal opinion, which I'm careful to distinguish from my clinical opinion, is that we have a duty to help our partner find treatment. If they flatly refuse repeated attempts, then it may be time to offer a choice: Get help or lose the relationship.

Anxiety is another common mental health problem women do slightly differently. Like depression, men and women seem to experience anxiety in similar measures but different flavors.

For example, a 2009 study (McLean and Anderson) reported that men

and women are equally fearful of situations like bodily injury and enclosed spaces, but boys as young as nine report less anxiety over things like mice or dogs. Women also report more fear than men of public places, while men generally have a higher tolerance for threats in the environment.

That's just the beginning. Men are likelier to experience higher adrenaline-based anxiety than women (like when navigating a dangerous situation). Women are more likely to experience higher anxiety than men when they are at rest because they are more sensitive to abstract threats. Women are likelier than men to ruminate or overestimate the probability of danger, according to MacLean and Anderson. Girls even begin experiencing more negative feelings than boys as early as age two.

MacLean and Anderson aren't the first to notice these kinds of gender-based differences, and there's a theme running through the literature. In general, women are less reactively fearful than men, but have a higher baseline level of anxiety during calm times. Add to this the fact that most boys are generally taught to be brave and face challenges aggressively, and you have two genders with quite different experiences of fear and anxiety.

Like depression, anxiety bleeds into relationships with symptoms that don't necessarily resemble anxiety. Anxious partners sometimes obsess over big things like money, but they may also obsess over little things like germs on the kitchen counter. These issues can become proxies for their underlying anxiety, and they can do serious damage to the relationship.

Depression and anxiety both require diagnostic skills beyond the scope of one's partner. Even physicians and psychologists refrain from diagnosing their loved ones. If you find you and your partner are arguing over issues that seem trivial or unrelated to what might be really going on, then it's time to find a skilled clinician to put an accurate label on the problem.

In Chapter 7, we'll look at some ways to assess her willingness to face emotional problems. For now, let's look at the next relationship killer.

Substance Abuse & Compulsive Behaviors

Here's a useful term from behaviorism: *experiential avoidance*. It refers to destructive habits done in the service of escaping unpleasant feelings. I'm reminded of Norm Peterson, the alcoholic character on the old TV show *Cheers*. He swilled beer at the bar until closing time in order to avoid facing

Vera, his wife. She was the experience he tried to avoid.

The problem with experiential avoidance is that it gives the feared object that much more power. The only time Norm was anxious or agitated was when the phone rang at the bar because he feared it might be Vera.

Here's another important term: *negative reinforcement*. Most people think this means punishment, but it is actually a reward by way of removing punishment. The more beer Norm drank, the more he escaped the unpleasant thoughts of Vera. Beer was negatively reinforcing because it relieved him of aversive thoughts.

What do drugs, alcohol, shopping, sex, gambling, cleaning, working out, and countless other behaviors have in common? Every one of them can be used to avoid painful thoughts and feelings. They can each become short-term rewards that override long-term solutions. When people don't have a strategy for handling difficult thoughts, and when they overvalue quick fixes, they can get lost in negatively reinforcing behaviors like swilling beer until the bar closes (Berghoff et al. 2012). Norm may be great to hang out with at the bar, but he'd make a damned awful romantic partner.

Substance abuse offers both the reward of negative reinforcement and the escape of experiential avoidance. There may be no single greater relationship killer. Norm may be great to hang out with at the bar, but he'd make a damned awful romantic partner. Substance abuse isn't merely correlated with increased divorce risk, it *causes* divorce (Collins, Ellickson, and Klein, 2007).

As I've mentioned, men are more predisposed to substance abuse, but women suffer through their share of it too. During any given year, according to the APA (2013):

- 4.9 percent of women have an alcohol problem (versus 12.4 percent of men)
- 0.8 percent have a cannabis problem (2.2 percent of men)
- 0.26 percent have a heroin or pain medication problem (0.49 percent of men)
- 0.2 percent have a cocaine or meth problem (0.2 percent of men)
- In a related statistic, 0.2 percent of women have a gambling disorder (0.6 percent of men)

While men abuse substances more often, women are unfortunately

closing the gap. In the 1980s, male substance abuse outpaced women five to one. By 2007, the gap had narrowed to three to one. Women are also quicker to become addicted to alcohol, pot, and opiates like heroin (Greenfield 2010). As a result, medical, social, and psychological problems become severe more quickly among women.

Greenfield also found that women abuse prescription opiates more often than men, and that addiction to those drugs has increased 141 percent over last two decades. Women are more vulnerable than men to stress-related relapse across substances, and they suffer co-occurring mood disorders more frequently than men (30 percent for women; 26 percent for men).

It's relatively easy to spot addiction to hard drugs like heroin or meth because they wreak so much havoc that the addiction is difficult to hide. Addiction to softer drugs like alcohol or pot can be just as damaging but more insidious. The costs mount so slowly that they can be difficult to detect. That's especially true of pot. If she's using daily, don't accept her protestations that marijuana has no deleterious effect on her. I don't care how many cannabis evangelists she can rally to her cause, researchers tell a different story about heavy pot use.

Heavy pot use lowers IQ (Meier et al. 2012); it damages memory (Solowij and Battisti 2008); it impairs decision-making (Tamm et al. 2013); it devastates motivation (Treadway et al. 2012; Smirnov and Kiyatkin 2008; Bloomfield et al. 2014); and it increases anxiety (Zvolensky et al. 2008). Finally, no matter what you might have heard, pot is addictive. In part, this is because it lowers the amount of available dopamine in the brain, necessitating its continued use to maintain normal levels (Hirvonen et al. 2011).

I'm no moral scold, and I have nothing against pot. Like alcohol, occasional use is mostly harmless, and unlike alcohol, pot has some legitimate medical applications. Daily recreational use is another story. A slow-witted, unmotivated pot addict is the furthest thing from a solid partner. I have seen marijuana ruin marriages, businesses, and friendships. Yes, there are high-performers who smoke a lot of weed, but very few people who smoke a lot of weed are high-performers.

The same can be said of any chemical addiction or behavioral compulsion like gambling or shopping. There are some behavioral compulsions that affect women more than men, particularly eating disorders. According to the APA,

- 0.4 percent of women suffer from anorexia nervosa, which involves compulsively eating fewer calories than a person burns. The APA estimates only about one-tenth as many men suffer from this eating disorder.
- 1.0-1.5 percent of women suffer from bulimia nervosa, which involves binge eating and subsequent overcompensation by vomiting, abusing laxatives, fasting, or exercising excessively. By APA estimates, this probably affects about one-tenth as many men.
- 1.6 percent of women suffer from binge-eating disorder, which involves regularly overeating followed by disgust or disappointment in oneself. This affects about half as many men.

Substance abuse and eating disorders share a couple of commonalities. First, they're both notoriously resistant to treatment and prone to relapse. Relapse shouldn't be viewed as failure, but simply as an opportunity to practice getting back on track and zeroing in on recovery. Most people relapse several times before kicking their addiction or compulsion.

Second, addictions and eating disorders can be difficult to detect because people hide them out of shame. Meanwhile, their personal and professional lives are falling apart.

Addicted or compulsive partners come with formidable medical, monetary, and legal problems. These are serious risk-management considerations for men. Know the signs before you commit to an addicted or compulsive woman. (We'll discuss the signs in the next chapter. They are important and subtle enough to warrant their own section.)

Don't be fooled by a woman who is clearly denying the heavy personal and professional toll of addictions and compulsions. These problems can transform otherwise wonderful people into top-tier liars and manipulators against their will. Though it may not be their true character, these diseases can turn people into con artists, always selling their well-rehearsed rap that everything is under control. It's disturbingly easy to be lulled into false security or even become a participant in her lies.

There's really only one path to recovery: complete honesty about the problem and full willingness to participate in treatment. That includes the hard work of facing up to underlying problems. If Norm Peterson from *Cheers* ever decides to get treatment for his addiction, he's going to have to

face up to the issue of Vera. Or, more accurately, he'll have to face up to why he chose a woman to whom he feels no real connection. We'll leave that question to Norm and his shrink.

Personally, I would accept nothing less from an addicted partner than structured treatment followed by ongoing support. Refusal to get treatment is grounds for leaving. Please read that last sentence twice, if you don't mind.

On the other hand, people in recovery are often wiser and more insightful than your average Jane for having done the work. In my experience, a solid devotion to recovery makes a person more skilled at relationships because they've learned how to tolerate discomfort, see beyond their ego, and develop tremendous perceptiveness.

We'll revisit this in Chapter 7. Next, let's look the third relationship killer.

Unresolved Emotional Injury

Way back in Chapter 1, I suggested that your mind's primary job is to protect you. It follows you through the world taking copious notes on the dangers to avoid. The mind in her head is no different. It was paying attention each and every time she was hurt, and it intends to protect her from any situation reminiscent of old wounds.

Just like your mind, hers can actually end up recreating old injuries if she hasn't done the work of understanding and overcoming them. That's the backward power of core beliefs. You, an innocent bystander, can get caught up in this process.

Here's how the mind goes about recreating history: Imagine you're working on your engine on a bitterly cold day. You're loosening the idler pulley to replace a fan belt. You don't have the proper tensioner tool, so you improvise with a box wrench. That's when your hand slips. You bang your freezing knuckle on ice-cold engine block. The pain is searing, and it only gets worse when you attempt to warm up your hand. I'm not saying it's happened to any psychologists in this book who were being rushed and sloppy. It's just a hypothetical situation.

You can be sure your mind will take note of that incident. It's going to make a special place in its memory for certain contextual cues, like the temperature, the wrench, even the smell of the engine. The next time it

encounters those cues, especially in combination, it's going to remind you of the searing pain. It's not trying to punish you by recalling the memory of the banged knuckles. It's trying to prevent it from happening again.

In the future, if you let it, your mind will alter your behavior, possibly making you more hesitant and timid with tools. Ironically, that can increase the chances of re-injury by hindering your performance. Caution can lead to anxiety, and anxiety can lead to hesitation and clumsiness.

The solution is to talk our way through these experiences, putting words to them so our minds don't gain exclusive control over our behavior. Using words—actually talking to ourselves—can help us understand how temperature affects dexterity, touch perception, and even frustration tolerance. Putting words to the experience helps us avoid overcorrecting. Otherwise, we tend to create what we fear.

The mind can similarly overcorrect for emotional pain. We get clumsy and fixated on the pain we hope to avoid. When that happens, we almost always find a way to recreate the injury.

I knew a woman whose father was consistently harsh and critical. She could never win his approval as a child. If she received a C in school or caused him some minor inconvenience, he was aggressively disapproving and punitive. When she had good news, he was dismissive and cold. He often responded to a good report card or a task well done by saying, "It's about time."

Her mind took a lesson from his callousness. *Be secretive. Fly under the radar. Stealth is the safest way to avoid harsh judgment and unreasonable penalties.*

Of course, her mind didn't confine that protective behavior to her father. It overgeneralized, as minds are prone to do, and it tried to apply the lesson to all the important men in her life. Her mind would compel her to hide both good news to avoid feeling dismissed and bad news to avoid feeling punished. I can't blame her mind for looking out for her.

That's rough for her, but here's the rough part for the men she will encounter: Since her father was her first model for male relationships, she's prone to find herself in relationships that feel similar. Why? We do what we know how to do until we choose to learn a different way. If her mind works like most, she'll gravitate toward men who relate to her the way her father did. The mind prizes familiarity, even when it's unpleasant. Like I said, we need to supervise these minds of ours.

Here's the fascinating thing: Even if she stumbles into a relationship with a good and patient man, she may find a way to turn him into her father. Her secretiveness will eventually arouse his suspicion. His suspicion, in turn, will justify her anxiety, and she will have completed the circle. She'll feel every bit as monitored and judged by this patient man as she did by her impatient father.

Tread lightly if there's a whiff of painful history and broken relationships about her. If she's done the work of overcoming that history, she's going to be that much more insightful as a partner. If not, there's a chance you could be cast in the role of bad guy.

Let's look at one last relationship killer. It's a big one—and sneaky, too.

Personality Disorders

We've all had difficult people in our lives. Maybe it was the boss who was so daft he couldn't find his own ass in the dark, or the relative who was too forthcoming with her judgments and opinions on other people's lifestyles. Good people can have annoying habits, like the buddy who always manages to forget his wallet on outings, or the chronically tardy friend who will probably be ten minutes late to her own funeral. We tolerate their foibles because they're fine and decent people.

Then there are the personality disorders. This is a totally different category filled with people who, by the very definition of the term, have great difficulty navigating relationships. They often seem ideal at first. They can be charming, caring, charismatic, and generous. In time, however, their relationship difficulties begin to surface.

These people have inflexible and counterproductive ways of thinking, perceiving others, and behaving. They're often self-destructive. Their history is littered with chaotic and broken relationships. They are driven by deep and abiding insecurities, and their attempts to quell the self-doubt only aggravate their problems.

Personality disorders aren't particularly rare. One extensive study estimated that approximately 7 percent of middle-aged adults suffer from at least one category of personality disorder (Oltmanns et al. 2014). Other estimates run as high as 9.1 percent of the adult population (Lenzenweger et al. 2007).

Anyone in the market for a mate should possess a rudimentary knowledge of personality disorders because it's so easy to be drawn in to a relationship that can turn out to be hellish. People suffering from some of the disorders we're about to discuss can be deceptively alluring to people who have a desire to be needed.

Here are some of the most important personality disorders you should know about. The figures in this list are from the American Psychiatric Association (2013).

- **Antisocial personality disorder.** This personality style is marked by a pattern of disregard for the rights of others. This person is charming, deceitful, manipulative, and destructive. The true sociopath views others as pawns to be used for her benefit. This disorder exists in 0.2 to 3.3 percent of the population. The APA reports it is "much more common in males than females," but explains that it may be underdiagnosed in women due to criteria that make it easier to detect in men.
- **Narcissistic personality disorder.** This person is grandiose, coldhearted, and ruled by a consuming need to be the center of attention. She has an extreme sense of self-importance and entitlement. She's dishonest and exploitative, and she's prone to flying into rages when she feels she's been denied the deference and respect she feels she deserves. This disorder exists in up to 6.2 percent in some community samples. 25 to 50 percent of those diagnosed are female.
- **Borderline personality disorder.** This disorder includes a pattern of broken relationships, unstable self-image, emotional impulsivity, feelings of emptiness, and fears of abandonment. Relationships are consumed by emotional volatility and unpredictability. People with this personality disorder are unskilled at managing normal relationship friction, and they leave their partners fearing that any small incident could explode into a histrionic crisis. Up to 5.9 percent of the adult population suffers from borderline personality disorder, with 75 percent of diagnoses going to women. Prevalence may decrease in older adults as they develop more reliable coping skills.
- **Histrionic personality disorder.** This person suffers "pervasive

and excessive emotionality and attention seeking behavior” coming from a lack of self-worth. She needs to be seen and heard. This person is uncomfortable in situations in which she isn’t the center of attention. She is unusually seductive or provocative, often using physical appearance to draw attention to herself. She has rapidly shifting, shallow, theatrical emotional displays. She perceives relationships to be deeper and more profound than they are, giving relationships a flavor of insincerity and superficiality. In non-clinical parlance, this person is a drama queen. This problem exists in less than 2 percent of the population, with similar prevalence between men and women.

- **Avoidant personality disorder.** This person suffers from extreme social inhibition, persistent and irrational feelings of inadequacy and ineptness, and hypersensitivity to negative evaluation. Relationships are heavily constrained by her avoidance of social situations and her persistent fear of being criticized and rejected. This problem is found in about 2.4 percent of the population, occurring equally in men and women.
- **Dependent personality disorder.** This person shows a pattern of submissive and clinging behavior resulting from an excessive need to be cared for. Relationships are overrun by the constant need for reassurance and assistance with even minor decisions. She’s unusually preoccupied with being abandoned, along with the fear of being unable to take care of herself. This is found in about 0.5 percent of the population, and is more frequently diagnosed in women.
- **Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder.** This person has an obsessive preoccupation with orderliness and control at the expense of efficiency and openness to new ideas. She is obsessed with rules, lists, and procedures, and can become agitated or angry when faced with uncertainty or a lack of deference to rules. (This disorder was called anankastic personality disorder back when words like *scalawag* and *foofaraw* were in the vernacular.) This problem exists in up to 7.9 percent of the population, making it one of the most common personality disorders. It is diagnosed in men about twice as often as in women.

The APA currently recognizes ten personality disorders, as well as personality disorders due to medical conditions and a catch-all “other” category. Rather than covering them all, I think it’s more useful to understand the basic characteristics of disordered personality styles.

- **Emotional experience is intense and inflexible.** The person experiences disproportionate or unbefitting emotional reactions, and she has yet to develop a range of nuanced emotional skills. Her lack of emotional prowess forces her to rely on a handful of brute-force techniques such as tantrums, manipulation, or avoidance. She struggles to manage emotional impulses and to tolerate emotional discomfort.
- **Thoughts about themselves and others lack complexity.** People with personality disorders lack emotional nuance, tending to view themselves as good beyond reproach or damaged beyond redemption, sometimes alternating between the two. They tend to view others in the same all-good or all-bad scheme, and their estimation of people can fluctuate with mood, thoughts, or circumstance. Her behavior is driven by this lack of emotional complexity, with her treatment of others governed by her momentary feelings rather than enduring and coherent understanding of other individuals. Life is great when she’s happy, and it’s miserable when she’s sad, mad, or feeling victimized. Some personality disorders with this characteristic lead people to view others merely as potential victims, saviors, or abusers.
- **Relationship behavior is ineffective.** Her attempts to manage conflict are typically driven by insecurity and emotional chaos. She struggles to tolerate discomfort, and her conflict-management style is counterproductive. For example, the person with a histrionic personality demands the spotlight because she can’t tolerate rejection, but her theatrics and insincerity push people away. She’s evoking the very reaction she can’t tolerate. Personality disorders by definition create problems with bosses, family members, and friends, adding further burden to intimate partners who must serve as a constant source of support.

I'd caution you against being fast and loose with suspicions of a personality disorder when a wife or girlfriend is difficult to get along with. Proper diagnosis requires an objective and experienced eye. That said, there's power in knowing what to watch for because it's so easy to be lured in. If you catch a whiff of these traits, don't let the relationship progress, and certainly avoid legal or financial commitments until you are sure it's safe to proceed.

Life with someone suffering from an untreated personality disorder can be chaotic and miserable. It can leave you feeling as if you're always walking on eggshells, fearful of histrionic outbursts that can happen without warning. You'll end up carrying the burden of creating stability for her, apologizing on her behalf, and watching your goals and dreams disappear in a cloud of drama and conflict.

Personality disorders are no fun for the sufferers, either. They are often in tremendous emotional pain. They don't enjoy it when their relationships fall apart any more than their friends, colleagues, or partners do. Borderline personality disorder appears to be particularly destructive to marriages, leading to both low marital satisfaction for both partners and high levels of verbal aggression (Oltmanns and Powers 2012).

None of this means you should never date someone with a personality disorder. Like anyone else who has fought their way through difficulty, hard work in treatment leads to high insight and great relationship skills. At minimum, conditions like borderline personality disorder involve long-term individual therapy along with support outside the relationship, usually in the form of group therapy, so the partner can simply be a partner rather than a therapist or a punching bag.

Unfortunately, people with personality disorders often resist treatment. It can be painful for them to hear that they need to change. Narcissistic and antisocial personalities are particularly resistant to treatment because they generally think they're just fine. In their view, it's everyone else who needs to change. Less confident personality types, particularly borderline personalities, can be so overcome with shame and unchecked emotions that treatment seems a bridge too far.

On a somewhat related note, beware the woman who boasts of being an "old soul" or wise beyond her years. That can be a powerful defense against self-scrutiny. If she regards herself as an old soul, you can look forward to some very frustrating disagreements in which you get to carry all the blame. Genuinely wise people scrutinize their own behaviors while "old souls"

ironically see no reason to do so.

So, should you gamble your future on someone with a personality disorder? Only after they've done the very long, hard work of recovery. This may seem like an unforgiving idea, but people suffering from personality disorders must learn different and more effective ways of thinking, acting, and managing emotion before they can succeed in close relationships. You might consider a more emotionally stable partner if you're not up for the considerable challenge of standing by her side through the ups and downs of recovery.

Your Role in Her Mental Health

Depression and anxiety, substance abuse, emotional injury, and personality disorders can kill relationships. Yet none of them automatically preclude close relationships. It's not what she's struggling with, it's her willingness to manage it that counts. So, what's your role?

It's not your job to rescue her from herself. Your efforts will fail, and she'll probably resent you for it. Your job, if you choose to accept it, is to empathize with her struggle and be her advocate. She might be ashamed and embarrassed. There remains in society a strangely persistent stigma against mental health problems. You can counter that stigma by speaking plainly, clinically, and non-judgmentally about the situation, just as you would about a broken arm, or any other malady.

All this is especially true when you're already committed to someone who falls into mental illness. She might need you to help her strategize and navigate the system, but she doesn't need you to fix her mental health in your living room any more than you would mend her broken arm in your garage.

To build on this chapter's opening point, good mental health doesn't mean she has no problems. It simply means she's willing to face them and do the work of recovery. Tribulation builds character, after all. A fellow could make a good argument that overcoming hardship tempers a person's spirit and makes them a better partner than they would otherwise have been. Sometimes the nature of the problem is less important than the willingness to conquer it.

Whether you choose to accompany her on that journey is your call, and there's no shame in acknowledging that you don't have the time or the desire

for the task. Just know this: The woman who is unwilling to strive for her best state of mental health is unlikely to succeed in relationships.

NINE CRITICAL RISK-MANAGEMENT QUESTIONS

AVOIDING THE DANGERS OF THE HONEYMOON PHASE, ASSESSING HER CLARITY OF COMMUNICATION, EMOTIONAL MATURITY, AND MENTAL STABILITY, AND RECOGNIZING AND RESPONDING TO ADDICTION

Getting hired by the FBI is no walk in the park, according to the agency's website. To even be considered, candidates must possess the relevant education, they must prove their trustworthiness through an extensive background check, they must obtain a top-secret security clearance, and they must demonstrate good mental and physical health.

Only then may candidates begin a two-year probationary period. Apparently, the FBI has learned that it takes a couple of years to really get to know a person. They risk a lot in bringing a new agent on board, and they clearly take that risk seriously.

By stark contrast, I've met men who cohabited with virtual strangers after only a few months. Some have married in less than a year. These men are playing with fire. (Don't fall into the trap of believing that the absence of a marriage license will protect you from complicated legal problems if she decides to get litigious or just downright unhinged.)

The International Organization for Standards defines *risk* as "the effect of uncertainty on objectives." I like that definition because it forces a guy to consider the question: What are your objectives in romance and in life, and what are your sources of uncertainty?

Setting aside the vast differences in ambitions amongst men, a fundamental objective in romance is to find someone we can trust. I haven't met anyone whose goal is to find the person who will tear down everything they've worked for or destroy their hopes and dreams. I think most men are looking for that breathtaking creature who will propel them on their quest for an amazing life.

If so, then we can take a lesson from the FBI. They have the wisdom to know that time is a crucial element in reducing the effect of uncertainty on their objectives, creating opportunity to observe behavior and watch for warning signs.

In this chapter, I'm going to offer nine risk-management questions to fend off the wrong women. These questions are based on the bright triad—clarity, maturity, and stability—and they should give you a good sense of whether she possesses the bare essentials, assuming you're willing to wait for the real answers to appear over time.

How long should it take to get to know her? A year? Ten years? The length of a Chicago Cubs losing streak? I believe the answer isn't found on a calendar, but in our neurochemistry. We don't really get to know someone until we move well beyond the altered mental state called the honeymoon phase.

The honeymoon phase is that period at the beginning of a relationship when couples are intensely attracted to each other. The sex is great, they find each other's quirks adorable, and they aren't the least bit annoying to each other... yet. We're quite literally in an altered state of mind during those first months of infatuation.

Researcher Helen Fisher (2016) reported that serotonin signatures in the blood of moon-eyed lovers suggest the honeymoon phase lasts about 12-18 months. After that, neurochemistry appears to return to baseline, and with it we return to our normal lives and start to feel more neutral about our partners.

The data vary, and some of them suggest the honeymoon lasts longer. Fisher described one self-report study in which 29 percent of couples claimed their honeymoon phase lasted 2-5 years, and 8 percent reported 6-10 years.

I'm skeptical of self-report measures because they are susceptible to self-interested motivations, such as wanting to believe the honeymoon lasted longer than it did. I'm more convinced by the 12-18 month figure backed by biological measurements. Another argument against extended infatuation is that being googly eyed, obsessed, and euphoric is an inefficient way to go through life, and natural selection is loathe to saddle one of its highest-performing organisms with biological inefficiencies.

Call me unromantic. Either way, the honeymoon doesn't last forever. When it tapers off, according to Fisher, infatuation is replaced by a more measured, long-term love. Portions of the brain associated with anxiety that showed increased activity during the honeymoon phase give way to increased

activity in areas associated with calmness and pain suppression. Our brains calm down about the relationship and reach a state of pleasant relaxation. *That's* when the truths and subtleties of her personality will reveal themselves.

The honeymoon phase is a risky time. Couples often want make big commitments to build lives together while in this state of chemically induced ineptitude. Our minds want to live happily ever after *right now*.

Unfortunately, we are ill-informed about her true nature *right now*. *Right now*, she's still a stranger. If the FBI wouldn't hire in a stranger, why should you combine your life with one? If you're looking for a rule of thumb about how long to wait before committing real resources to a woman, here it is: Get beyond the honeymoon phase, then date for at least another year.

Why a year? Because it seems about right to me. Not very scientific, I know, but four seasons of normal, day-to-day joys and trials seems long enough to find out if she possesses clarity, maturity, and stability, and if your personalities are compatible. Yet it's not so long that you're wasting her time and yours.

Sometimes the return to baseline is a hard crash rather than a soft landing, and the qualities that were once endearing can become painful and grating. You will not want to have fully invested in her if that turns out to be the case.

One researcher (Felmlee 2001) studied couples whose transitions out of the honeymoon phase were unsuccessful. Her paper had the flawlessly honest title *Appealing to Appalling: Disenchantment with a Romantic Partner*.

Echoing what we discussed in the beginning of this book, Felmlee wrote, "Like a moth to a flame, people can be drawn to the very aspects of another person that they eventually found troublesome." By way of example, she described a woman who was attracted to a "relaxed" man whom she eventually found to be "constantly late," and a man who found a woman's "shyness and timidity" appealing at first but later found her to be annoyingly "insecure."

Protectiveness can become possessiveness; concern can become control; wittiness can become sarcasm. Here are some of the initially ingratiating qualities with which men and women later became disenchanted:

- Partners who seemed nice at first later seemed passive (17.6 percent of study participants)
- Strong became stubborn (17.6 percent)

- Funny became flaky (13.5 percent)
- Outgoing became over the top (10.8 percent)
- Caring became clingy (9.4 percent)
- Quiet became closed (9.4 percent)
- Exciting became scary (8.1 percent)
- Physically attractive became high maintenance (5.4 percent)
- Laid back became lazy (4.1 percent)
- Successful became workaholic (4.1 percent)

It's almost unavoidable. The qualities you once idealized are likely to contain a dark side that gets under your skin at some point. That's not necessarily the end of the world. Couples greatly increase their chances of success and happiness when they can recognize which annoying aspects of their partner are the flip-side of the qualities they once found attractive. Simply keeping that perspective in mind can make their partners' behavior seem far less grating.

Felmlee doesn't say it because it was beyond the scope of her study, but I suspect the transition from idealism to realism signals the end of the honeymoon phase and the return to a healthier, more sober estimation of the relationship. Think of the post-honeymoon phase as the romantic equivalent of the FBI's probationary period. The interview is over, and now you get to observe how the candidate performs in real life.

From the moment you and she declare your intentions, with that glorious honeymoon phase and all the sex and affection awaiting you, you should be collecting data on each other, sizing each other up, finding out if she has what it takes. The nine questions in this chapter will help you determine whether she is a creature of the bright triad, or whether you might be better off without her.

Clarity

It's 3:00 AM. You're wide awake in bed with your partner, but nothing good is happening. For hours now you've been discussing your relationship. You desperately want to sleep, but each time you think the conversation is drawing to an end, she reignites the conflict.

Bleary eyed and exhausted, the 6:00 AM alarm looming ever closer, you

try to remember why she's unhappy, but your mind is in a fog. These conversations are destroying your focus at work, not to mention your happiness. You'll be lucky if you can muster the energy to hit the gym after work tomorrow. You're becoming depressed and overweight, and your boss is noticing that you've lost your spark.

Now imagine a different picture. Think of the calmest couple you know. They exist without drama or shouting matches. They're healthy and well rested. They surely disagree like any other couple, but they both seem so... *relaxed*.

Disagreements don't hurt relationships. They can actually strengthen a couple. It's disagreeing *destructively* that can ruin your relationship, and that which ruins your relationship can ruin your plans, your serenity, and your bank account.

These first three risk-management questions focus on her ability to be calm, focused, and clear, beginning with her ability to argue constructively.

Clarity Question 1: Are Her Coping Skills Reliable?

Reliable coping skills don't fail when things get difficult. I guess you could make a case that they aren't coping skills at all if they vanish when they're needed. Those would be good-weather skills. Everyone has those. You want the woman with bad-weather skills. Here are two behaviors that indicate reliability.

First, she's able to argue constructively, especially when she's feeling angry or hurt. Even if the two of you have to take a break to cool off, the conversation resumes with good intentions and a clear focus on the issue. She doesn't resort to personal attacks, tantrums, threats, manipulations, coercion, tangents, or any other behavior that leaves you wondering, *What just happened?*

The reliable woman isn't afraid to take timeouts to cool off before conflict escalates. The ability to step back from conflict is vital. It's a serious warning sign if a woman is unable to de-escalate on her own, or if she routinely returns from timeouts angrier or more desperate than before.

When I work with high-conflict couples, I usually recommend setting the groundwork for timeouts by choosing a safe word like "jambalaya" or "molasses" to signify that it's time to take a break. You set the ground rules prior to conflict, when you're both calm and happy.

The rule is that either partner can say the safe word whenever he or she notices tensions rising and the same old unproductive arguments resuming. When one partner says the word, all conversation stops and they go to different locations to cool off and grasp what their partner is trying to say, not to rehearse their arguments. They return after a pre-designated period of time. The cooling-off period should also be determined beforehand, though it's open to negotiation if one partner needs more time, or if both partners need less. Timeouts shouldn't exceed one day.

The purpose of timeouts is first and foremost to break the cycle of repetitive, counterproductive arguments, and they happen to be a wonderful way to test her willingness at the beginning of a relationship to break away from conflict and return with a rational, solution-focused mindset.

A second behavior to watch for is the ability to focus on what's happening in the real world, rather what's happening inside her head. Here's an example.

Him: Did you empty the dishwasher?

Her: Why are you constantly harassing me about the dishwasher?

Him: I'm just asking. I'm going to cook dinner and I was wondering if I needed to empty it first.

Her: Well, it always feels like you're attacking me and calling me lazy!

Him: What? I didn't say you're lazy, why do you always assume I'm criticizing you?

Her: You're doing it again! You are always attacking me!

Ugh. This would be a great time to call "jambalaya." She's responding to him as if he were attacking her because that's what it *feels* like to her. She's lost track of what's happening in the real world: He's simply trying to cook

dinner.

It's possible she has a point in the larger sense. He may in fact be habitually critical of her, but he's not being critical at the moment. She will easily make that distinction if her skills are reliable, and she'll discuss his critical nature at a different time and in a more constructive way.

"Reliable" doesn't mean "perfect." She will have bad moments just like you. The point is, she has far more good moments than bad, and she works on increasing her skills.

There's a caveat. It's possible that her unreliable communication skills are the natural outcome of the way *you* interact with her. Couples have a natural tendency to engage in what psychologists call "over-claiming." That's when we take too much credit for the good that we bring to a situation, and too little credit for the bad. As the authors of one study put it, "Group members cannot be responsible for more than 100 percent of the group's output, yet claims of responsibility routinely sum to more than 100 percent" (Schroeder, Caruso, and Epley 2016).

A different study found over-claiming in work groups, sports teams, and married couples, though the authors also found that people sometimes claim more than their share of responsibility for problems. That suggests that the issue isn't so much one of stealing credit and avoiding blame, but plain old egocentrism (Ross and Sicoly 1979). People tend to focus on their own efforts more than the efforts of our partners and teammates.

I can assure you that nowhere is this truer than in couples, and over-claiming can evolve into truly ugly blame-fests. Men and women can both begin to focus on their own positive contributions and their partner's negative contributions until it turns into an "I'm all good" and "she's all bad" nightmare, especially when partners begin recruiting their friends and family to side with them.

If you want to give her the best shot at having reliable communication skills, then your job is to reverse the usual formula of over-claiming success. Go into each disagreement with an honest appraisal of her positive motives and contributions, along with an honest assessment of your shortcomings.

Lead by example. Give her every benefit of the doubt. If you want an accurate impression of her reliability under pressure, don't poison the well. Be at your best so she can be at hers.

If she still can't argue constructively when she's hurt or angry or respond to real-world events rather than her thoughts and feelings, then adding her to

your life may add a great deal of conflict, and she might drain time and energy that might have gone to more constructive pursuits.

Clarity Question 2: Is She Inquisitive?

Have you ever been in a relationship where you had to fight to be understood, or one where you felt constantly criticized? Or one in which you're repeatedly told you are wrong? If so, you were not dating an inquisitive woman.

There's one quality that stands out among all the high-conflict couples I've met. At some point, they stopped trying to understand each other. They speak *at* each other rather than *with* each other. They're like two people with bullhorns, impervious to each other's messages. It's exhausting to watch, and it must be miserable to participate in.

Few couples are that bad, though many have moments in which they're unable or unwilling to hear each other. The walls usually go up during the type of conflicts that touch insecurities about feeling judged, criticized, or rejected.

That's when the relationship masters get curious rather than closing their ears. Conflict resolves quickly in these couples because neither partner is having to backtrack repeatedly to clarify their meaning. Here are three qualities that suggest she possesses all-important inquisitiveness:

- She listens without assigning her meaning to your words.
- She asks questions rather than making assumptions about your intent.
- She is willing to be wrong for the sake of the relationship rather than right for the sake of her ego.

Let's look at another hypothetical scenario in which a man returns home late from work to an inquisitive woman.

Her: I thought this morning you said you'd be home by five. It's almost seven.

Him: I don't think I said that. I said I had a meeting at five and I'd be home later.

Her: I heard "five." That doesn't mean you said "five." I may have heard you wrong.

Him: It's more likely I misspoke. I was in a rush this morning and probably wasn't thinking straight. Sorry about that.

Her: OK. How did the meeting go?

End of discussion. Isn't that beautiful? I'm sure you've seen conversations like this turn into lengthy arguments in which a litany of past injuries get dredged up. This woman's inquisitiveness allowed her to check the facts and tolerate the answer, which was a minor miscommunication that may be impossible to reconstruct. She tolerated the ambiguity and let it go rather than caving to a need to reduce discomfort by proving she was right.

A word of caution. The inquisitive person will be the first to notice patterns. It won't escape her attention if miscommunication, or any other pattern, becomes habitual. You'll need to be clear, consistent, and honest because her openness to facts and reality will give her uncommon clarity.

It's wonderful to be in a relationship in which you don't have to fight to be heard. Like any of the qualities I'm suggesting you look for in a partner, success doesn't require perfection. I'm generally satisfied with an 80:20 ratio among the couples I work with, and that applies to inquisitiveness, too. If she's curious and open four out of five times, you will avoid a great deal of unnecessary conflict.

Clarity Question 3: Is She Assertive?

Assertive women don't dominate or manipulate. They're not passive-aggressive or dependent. They don't avoid little disagreements that can fester, live in fantasyland, or restrict sex to manipulate your behavior.

It's exhausting when a person won't admit to what they want, and it

creates dangers down the road when their lack of assertiveness sets the stage for destructive replacement behaviors. Maybe you've been involved in this kind of conversation:

Him: Let's go out. Where do you want to eat?

Her: I don't know, where do you want to eat?

Him: I want to take you where you want to go.

Her: I don't know. It's up to you.

Even if she truly doesn't care where they eat, an assertive person says something like, "I want you to decide, it's your turn," rather than collapsing into passive indecision. One obvious risk associated with her passivity is that she may be dissatisfied with your choice and hold you responsible for subjecting her to it. She'll claim your choice of pizza was fine, but complain that she would have preferred something healthier. Unassertive women have a way of putting you in the no-win situation of forcing you to choose, then subtly punishing you for your decision.

The same dynamic can play out writ-large when she's passive about her goals and desires. If you want to live in the suburbs and she wants to live in the city, you'd better hope she speaks up. If she asserts herself, then you can compromise. You'll each have a stake in the outcome with no passive-aggressive disgruntlement. If there is no compromise, no buy-in on her part, then there's room for resentment.

A overly pliant woman who bends to your will is practically guaranteed to resent you at some point, possibly in the distant future after you've built a life together and the stakes are high. When that happens, there could be so much pent-up aggravation it will be difficult to overcome. At that moment, a massive amount of risk and uncertainty will put your goals and your happiness in jeopardy. Here are some qualities to look for:

- She's forthright about what she's trying to achieve, and she makes no apologies for it.

- She's clear about what she desires from you.
- She doesn't depend on primitive strategies like manipulation, passive-aggressive resistance, or other immature tactics of the sort we discussed in Chapter 5.

Power balances in relationships can be tricky. There are a couple of tools that can make compromise easier. First, when you and she are at an impasse over certain goals, you can assign a numerical value to the strength of your desire. Suppose you want pizza for dinner, and its importance to you is a 6 out of 10. She wants sushi, and the importance is 8 out of 10. The higher number wins.

A second tool is to make a list of jobs and functions, with each partner claiming a percentage of responsibility. If you're 80 percent responsible for the condition of the garage, and she's 80 percent responsible for the condition of the bedroom, then you are each claiming 80 percent of the work and 80 percent of the decision-making power.

There are alternative lifestyles in which people formally exchange power and submission, but even submission is a form of assertiveness in those relationships. The submissive partner is placing the dominant one in a position of authority by choice, and the dominant partner agrees to follow certain rules. I'll refer you to the Internet for the details if you're interested. It can't wait to tell you all about it. The term "power exchange relationships" is a good place to start searching.

My wife and I prefer a more organic give-and-take arrangement, and that's where most healthy couples end up. We don't keep track of each other's contributions or who got their way last time. We each work hard and pull more than our share of the weight because we're adults and it's important for each of us to stay in the other's good graces. Don't be afraid of the more structured approaches if one of you has difficulty expressing your wishes or if one of you is enthusiastic about your desires and needs to be reined in a bit.

An assertive woman makes life easy because her honesty keeps guesswork and resentment to a minimum. You'll always know where you stand with her. You can combine your goals and dreams with hers, secure in the knowledge that she isn't stashing discontent to unload on you down the road. If each of you is forthright about your desires, then the whole of the relationship can truly be greater than the sum of its parts.

Maturity

Drama is expensive. It consumes time and energy that could be used for better things, like conquering the world or just relaxing with a beer. Dramatic people are thieves. Low-grade thieves, to be sure, but they force others to redirect their efforts away from their goals and their happiness.

A mature partner, on the other hand, brings solutions rather than problems. Life with her brings a sense of peace. Her competence will inspire you to be the best man you can be, and she won't force you to waste time on pointless conflict.

Drama and immaturity create precisely the kind of uncertainty that threatens our objectives. Clear-headed and mature women, by contrast, have precisely the opposite effect on a man's existence. They provide a solid foundation on which to build the good life. These following three questions will help you know which path to expect from her.

Maturity Question 1: Is She Resilient?

You might recall the idea of planful problem-solving from Chapter 5. Here's a quick summary. It involves:

- Identifying the problem without denial or avoidance
- Making a plan without succumbing to setbacks
- Willingness to change directions when a solution is failing

You might also recall two other components of resilience we discussed. The first is the solution-focused approach to problems, which involves gathering information, exploring options, and other behaviors aimed at getting the job done. The second was emotion-focused, including behaviors like shoring up social support and reframing our view of the problem.

If she's resilient, meaning she has a full toolbox of these coping skills, then you'll notice it in small ways. You don't need to wait for a big life challenge to test her mettle. You'll see her resilience in the way she handles life's minor difficulties.

Maybe you show up to her favorite restaurant only to discover it has closed. Maybe her boss had a bad day and yelled at her out of turn. Maybe

her credit card was stolen. The resilient woman won't pout, rage, or fall apart—at least not for long. She won't proceed from the absurd idea that life should be fair, nor will she give up and wait for someone else to put her life back in order.

What you'll see is a woman who knows how to thrive during life's little scrapes. If she shows good habits during the little ones, there's a good chance her resilience will transfer to the big ones.

Maturity Question 2: Is She Accepting?

For decades, social scientists have been operating under the assumption that women are the wiser gender in romance and communication. My over-long career as a student showed me that researchers and other academic types tend to believe women care more about others, are more social, and handle interpersonal relationships better.

But as psychology professor Joyce Benenson (2014) has pointed out, "Social scientists miss some evidence." For example, while researchers typically assume women enjoy closer relationships with each other than men, "The physical closeness of men during sports, travels, or even war may surpass the deepest conversations between women in terms of intimacy."

Benenson wasn't saying men are better at relationships than women, and neither am I. We're just different. Personally, I think the differences are a perfect balance, but I'm not naive. Our differences are also our challenge.

For example, men sometimes want more time away from the relationship than women. It's also a fair generalization to say women want to discuss problems more than men, who would generally rather focus on solutions. Or how about the tendency for women to remember past arguments in the midst of a current one. This is a frequent source of conflict. As one man told me in a survey,

They don't forget anything. The old mistakes, the purchases that didn't work out, the words said in anger—a guy can never take them back. Women always bring them back up in an argument. They won't accept an apology and forget it.

Women generally don't do that sort of thing to be cruel. Rather, this behavior is generally an attempt to solve problems. They're more prone to notice overarching themes and threats to the relationship. Sometimes when we men are arguing about what's happening here and now, women are arguing about the theme *behind* the here-and-now, including prior incidents that shape the theme. Men tend compartmentalize problems and take them one at a time. Women more generally see problems in combination and want to get to the root of it all at once.

Add individual quirks and predispositions to those gender-based differences. Maybe you're country and she's rock 'n' roll. The field is fertile for misunderstanding. The trick is to prevent that misunderstanding from evolving into the belief that the other partner is fundamentally flawed simply because they experience things differently. Men and women are both prone to making that error about the opposite sex, but women are backed by social scientists who frequently assert that men are inept in relationships, not to mention advertising and popular culture that depicts men as buffoons.

That mindset is foolish, and it's a direct threat to your objectives. How will you pursue your goals and values, let alone have a happy partnership, when the operating assumption is that you are a bit thick in the head?

To protect your future and your happiness, you'll want to know that she respects your masculinity and your individuality. How will you know? First and foremost, she'll have a sense of humor about differences in the ways you two approach problems.

She'll also be open to your explanations about the way you think and perceive. Remember the value of inquisitiveness. Rather than informing you of the misguided nature of your perceptions, she'll actually be curious about them.

Men whose partners are accepting rarely feel as though their backs are against the wall, or that they're having to justify themselves. They're simply relaxed around their women, and that's the most significant sign of her accepting nature. If you are unable to let your guard down around her, then the relationship has a problem that will probably only grow in intensity as she becomes increasingly convinced you can't think straight.

Maturity Question 3: Is She Good to You?

How do you quantify whether someone is good to you, especially if

you're not sure what kindness looks like because your role models were unkind to each other?

Here's a simple and direct definition from marriage researchers Dew and Wilcox (2013). They framed the question in terms of generosity, which includes "small acts of kindness, displays of respect and affection, and a willingness to forgive one's spouse his or her faults and failings." Generous couples give these little gifts to each other "freely and abundantly."

Unsurprisingly, Dew and Wilcox found that those powerful, simple habits lead to happier marriages and lower conflict. These couples also consider divorce far less frequently than their more selfish counterparts. Seeking a woman who is kind and generous by nature not only makes life more satisfying, it's a solid risk-management strategy. Kind and generous women are less likely to become angry, divorced women.

Perhaps I should amend that to say you should be looking for women who are *consistently* kind and generous. Inconsistently generous women seem to be particularly alluring, and particularly dangerous. I know a man is in trouble when he describes his woman with a phrase like "When she's good, she's great." Translation: "Sometimes she treats me well, but it never lasts." Women can be every bit as unkind as men, and every bit as abusive, though few people know much about domestic abuse against men.

According to the Centers for Disease control, one in four men has experienced violence at the hands of a woman. One in seven has experienced severe violence, such as being beaten or hit with a hard object (Black et al. 2011). The CDC also reports that 48.8 percent of men have been the victims of psychological aggression (compared to 48.4 percent of women), which includes behaviors intended to monitor, control, or threaten an intimate partner.

If you've heard women are less violent than men, don't believe it. About 8 percent of male domestic violence victims (compared to 4 percent of women) were shot at, stabbed, or hit with a weapon between 2002 and 2011 (Catalano 2013). Women are also much quicker than men to escalate from verbal provocation to physical violence against intimate partners (Winstok and Straus 2011).

Don't count on the legal or medical systems to be on your side if she becomes abusive, either. Few options exist for abused husbands or boyfriends. These men are often met with skepticism by mental health workers, and men are sometimes arrested by default when police officers

have difficulty discerning who the aggressor is. This makes it all the more important to screen out hostile women as early as possible.

Here are a few warning signs to take seriously. Forgive me if they seem obvious to you. I need to list them because they aren't always obvious to someone who has become accustomed to abuse. That might even include a buddy or a family member of yours. Since the law and the mental health system often work against men, we need to be vigilant on behalf of our brothers.

- Physical assaults like slapping, pushing, kicking, and throwing objects
- Stalking
- Threats
- Humiliation
- Separating you from your friends and family
- Yelling and screaming
- Belittling or diminishing you
- Jealousy or possessiveness
- Telling you you're worthless
- Talking down to you
- Ordering you around
- Physically blocking your exit during an argument
- Telling you there's no way out of the relationship

These behaviors are grounds for rethinking a relationship. Sadly, that isn't always obvious. Guys get stuck in abusive partnerships all the time.

Rarely do relationships start out in full-on assault mode. Abusive relationships tend to evolve over time. The slow buildup and the increasing sense of obligation can leave men feeling that there's no way out.

Recall also that some people with personality disorders can become quickly attached and make you feel idealized—right up until the moment they begin demonizing and mistreating you. A sense of obligation can develop during the idealization phase that complicates your exit when she turns against you.

A sense of obligation isn't the only thing that keeps men stuck in abusive relationships. Men frequently hesitate to leave a relationship or stand up for themselves because the alternative seems too costly. They worry about

things like:

- Losing income and access to children
- Disrupting the lives of children
- Having the fear of never again experiencing love
- Enduring the pain of splitting assets and finding new living arrangements
- Uprooting one's life and forfeiting predictability
- Losing relationships with cherished in-laws and mutual friends

Some men also accept abusive relationships because it's all they've ever seen or known. If that describes you, then you've got a bit of relearning to do. Therapy helps, as does a community of good, successful men who can provide the examples your role models should have, and who can keep you anchored to a useful mindset about women. Men simply must expect kindness from women. Otherwise, we can only stumble into good relationships by luck, and luck is a terrible strategy.

The ideal woman isn't merely non-abusive, she's *kind*. Here are a few traits that will help you separate the truly kind women from those who are merely on their best behavior early in the relationship:

- She's empathetic. She takes genuine interest in your thoughts and feelings. She does the same with others.
- She speaks about former romantic partners with respect. If all her previous men fell from grace, then so will you.
- She's kind to people she doesn't need to be kind to, like wait staff and store clerks.
- She routinely brightens your day. You have no sense of dread about seeing her. You look forward to her.
- She's attentive to your needs, not competitive about them. She won't resist helping you when you need it, paying for dinner once in a while, or letting your needs take center stage. She gives willingly and happily.

A good and kind woman will never put you in the position of building her back up after she has been abusive. For example, she will not suggest that

you caused her behavior, however outrageous her behavior may have been.

With a good woman, you will never find yourself in a cycle in which she mistreats you, she apologizes, and you comfort her for it. A good woman, after she loses her cool, takes meaningful action to prevent it from happening again.

One of the most important ways to measure her kindness is to observe the way she speaks about and interacts with her family. Unsurprisingly, couples who have good relationships with their families of origin tend to have happier marriages. They are more compromising and cooperative. They don't compete with each other for affection and resources, they are less violent, less avoidant, and less insulting (Bertoni and Bodenmann 2010).

Sometimes women who complain about their families are right. Their clan really is toxic, and the healthiest response is for them to cut those people from their lives. Those situations are rare, and those families are usually marred by obvious problems like substance abuse, serial divorces, or violence. If she's estranged from or vilifies her family, you'll want to discern whether she's right about them. Take a long, hard, honest look at two questions:

- Is she blaming others for her choices and behavior?
- What would *they* say about *her*?

Kindness can be difficult to assess both because we sometimes lack good role models and because people acclimate to unhealthy relationships. If you have any doubt about your own judgment of her kindness, don't hesitate to check in with your support crew of friends and family. They can frequently see our situations more clearly than we can. We can avail ourselves of their wisdom—if we're willing to listen. Ignoring the wisdom of friends and family is one of the ways we fool ourselves into pursuing the wrong women. We'll discuss that in the next chapter. Now let's look at assessing the third pillar of the bright triad.

Stability

A woman once came to my office complaining that she and her husband were arguing with increasing frequency. She couldn't explain what was happening

beyond her sense that he was becoming annoying and unreasonable. That's a pretty imprecise complaint.

When we began to explore how she might improve things at home, she realized that she had been working increasingly more hours over the last few months. That left less time for her usual self-care routine. She had stopped going to the gym. She was eating poorly. She wasn't sleeping enough.

It's no surprise that things improved at home when she got herself back on track with exercise, nutrition, and sleep. I never met her husband, but I'll hazard a guess that he became easier to live with (in her estimation) as she took better care of herself.

To repeat the point, good mental health doesn't mean an absence of problems. It means willingness to overcome the problem. This good woman, in her own words, had become a bit unstable because she was neglecting herself, and her husband paid the price.

These final three questions will help you determine whether she has her emotional house in order before you risk your future on her.

Stability Question 1: Does She Understand Her History?

The world is full of walking wounded who are tormented by experiences they have yet to overcome. It's affecting them, and they don't even realize it.

I knew a woman, Lisa, whose father was unreasonably angry. When Lisa was a child, her father sometimes yelled her mother. It was full-on shouting, peppered with obscenities and accusations. His outbursts were frightening to young Lisa. She became adept at detecting the early warning signs of his anger—usually a brooding silence before he exploded—and she would hide in her room until the storm had passed.

She was well aware that his behavior affected her as an adult. In particular, she was highly attuned to people's moods, and she would timidly retreat when she sensed someone becoming angry. What she didn't realize was the extent to which her father's behavior affected her choice in men. Whether it was out of familiarity or some other motivation to recreate her childhood, she married Anthony, a man whose temperament was reminiscent of her father's.

Anthony didn't shout and lose his temper like Lisa's father, but he did become animated when he was angry about something like his workplace or the political landscape. Understandably, this made Lisa intensely anxious.

She would shut down, falling silent and averting eye contact. Her unresponsiveness prompted Mike to try to draw her out. He began asking questions like “Aren’t you listening to me?” and “What’s wrong with you?”

The questions weren’t abusive, but they were pointed. They caused her to withdraw further, which frustrated Anthony. He wasn’t getting angry with her yet, but it isn’t hard to predict their trajectory. Over time, her silent reactions would become increasingly frustrating to him. Eventually, out of frustration, Anthony might have started becoming as angry at Lisa as her father had been with her mother.

Being stuck with someone like her father was the one thing her mind feared most, and her mind was finding a way to create that fear. It’s very much like the banged knuckles on the cold engine block from the previous chapter. The more we try to overcorrect, the likelier we are to recreate the injury we’re trying to avoid.

The danger in dating women who haven’t come to terms with their history is twofold. First, their unresolved emotional pain can bring you costly drama that you didn’t create and don’t deserve. Second, you may end up like Anthony, unwittingly cast in the role of the villain as she reenacts her history.

Emotional injuries, like any other challenge in life, can make us stronger partners if we overcome them. Through a bit of work and introspection, Lisa was able to see how she was replicating her mother’s relationship by choosing an animated man and then responding to him in a way that increased his level of agitation.

Lisa was sharp and inquisitive. She didn’t have to work very hard at this awareness. Ultimately, she and Anthony decided they weren’t right for each other, and they parted on good terms.

There is no simple test to determine whether she has overcome her history. That information will unfold slowly, and her history and patterns will emerge over time. You’ll notice it in the way she speaks about her former partners, her father, and her role models. If she doesn’t confide directly in you about a troubling history of abuse, broken families, or the like, she will almost certainly allude to it. Sometimes she will run away from those topics, which can be a very telling behavior.

People often feel ashamed about problems and mistreatment over which they had no control, and so they tread lightly or have difficulty putting words to it, especially before they come to terms with their history. Make sure you use the underrated skill of inquisitiveness. Be patient, and don’t brush aside

any feeling that she's trying to tell you something.

Those who have come to terms with their history can speak of it with nuance and objectivity. They can go well beyond simply saying *it happened*. They can describe the ways in which it affects their relationships and choices, and the actions they take to prevent it from running their lives.

If you're like most people, you've had to come to terms with the darker moments of your own past so you can be the best man you can be. That man deserves a partner who is the best woman she can be.

Stability Question 2: Is She Addicted?

Lawrence married a woman who developed the ugly habit of drinking nearly every evening. She routinely used booze to escape tension in her life, and she seemed to make a special point of getting drunk when Lawrence expressed concern about her drinking. (I believe she drank to avoid his disapproval. Shame is a common driving force in substance abuse.)

When she finally promised to stop drinking, Lawrence enjoyed a couple months of peace. He began to feel closer to her. He began to trust her again, until the credit card statements began showing up.

His wife had stayed true to her promise not to drink, but she had not dealt with the underlying drive to escape discomfort. Instead of drinking, she now turned to online shopping when she felt overpowering urges to replace emotional pain with a warm, fuzzy feeling.

Remember the idea of experiential avoidance, in which people use their various habits and vices to escape unpleasant thoughts and feelings? This poor woman was up to her neck in it, and Lawrence paid the price, both figuratively and literally.

Substance abuse is possibly the costliest form of experiential avoidance, but everything I'm about to suggest can apply to shopping, compulsive sex, gambling, or any other tool of experiential avoidance. They all have the power to decimate your family and your bank account should the woman in your life fall into their clutches.

I won't repeat what we've already discussed about substances, but let's flesh out the clinical side a bit. We can divide consumption into roughly three categories. *Substance use* is the occasional enjoyment of a drug or alcohol to feel its effect. *Substance abuse* occurs when the substance begins to interfere with commitments and responsibilities.

Addiction is the next level. It includes tolerance to the substance (the person needs increasingly larger amounts to feel the effects) and withdrawal (the body reacts negatively when the substance gets metabolized and leaves the body). The addicted person spends increasing amounts of time trying to get or use the substance. Their world revolves around it.

The realities of abuse and addiction show up when a person's life begins falling apart. That's when the addict's personality begins to change. He or she becomes someone whose reason for being revolves around the single-minded pursuit of the substance. Addiction can turn good people into liars, thieves, and master manipulators.

There is seemingly endless information on the Internet about recognizing substance abuse and intervening. If you have the slightest inkling that she has a substance abuse problem, I encourage you to start gathering information from reputable sources and building relationships with others in the same boat. Don't procrastinate. It's easy to get caught up in the addict's web of denial and deceit. The best countermeasure is information and support.

Below are some of the warning signs I find to be most useful for early detection. She may have a serious problem if you notice yourself engaged in these types of behaviors.

- **Arguing with her about her level of use.** You, the clean and sober partner, will want to discuss her behavior at some point. It's a bad sign if she responds with rationalizations, indignation, avoidance, and counter-accusations. Sometimes the argument is simply about her unwillingness to discuss it. She's in pain and can't seem to approach the topic without retreating or lashing out.
- **Making excuses for her.** You find yourself covering for her with friends, families, and employers. You're rationalizing her odd or rude behavior, her broken promises, her failure to meet basic social obligations. If you hear yourself saying things like, "Sorry boss, Wendy has a migraine today," when you know it's a lie, it's time to step back and assess the situation.
- **Boredom.** All she wants to do is get drunk or high with you. It's impossible for her to have fun without being altered. You find yourself lobbying to take a break from being stoned, high, or drunk. Other activities vanish.
- **Avoiding friends and family to escape embarrassment.** You

begin to experience the shame she is probably feeling about her addiction. You might even participate in her denial by avoiding friends or family who might call attention to the problem.

- **Intuition.** This is the most easily ignored warning sign. Your gut tells you something is wrong, but you're buying into her lies and rationalization. That little voice is your friend. Listen to it.

Eventually, the problems wrought by the addict will become hard to ignore. The missing money, the lies, the odd behavior changes, the secretiveness, defensiveness, manipulation, and peculiar explanations—whether it's substance abuse or some other compulsion, it's going to cost you.

Addictions and compulsions are death by a thousand cuts. Some couples waste years or decades limping along in a shell of a relationship. The sober partner falls into a cycle of impulsive fixes, rationalizing away each embarrassing, dangerous, or painful episode, sometimes turning to quick fixes of his or her own. The addicted partner becomes well practiced at reassurances and diversions.

Don't let this situation happen to you. Insist on absolute, complete honesty where substances and other compulsions are involved. You don't have to be pushy. In fact, I recommend against ultimatums because demands create resistance. Offering choices is the more effective route. You can tell an addicted partner something like this when you're ready to draw the line:

I love you, but I can no longer watch you destroy yourself. I've begged you to get help. If you aren't in treatment by (some time frame approximating a couple of weeks), then I'll know you've chosen your addiction over our relationship. It will break my heart, but I'll know it's time for me to move on.

One caution: Don't bluff. Only offer this sort of forced choice if you're ready to follow through, otherwise you will have no credibility the next time you try to intervene.

If she does enter treatment, you'll want to monitor her progress. You'll know things are going well when honesty replaces the deceptions. She'll

develop relationships in the recovery community. She'll jettison old acquaintances associated with her addiction. Ultimately, she'll learn to tolerate the fear, sadness, anger, or memories that triggered her use. She may relapse. That's part of recovery. It's not the end of the world if she's able to recognize it and quickly get back on track.

Let's look at one last risk-management question that is the lynchpin of them all. In fact, I'm not sure if clarity, stability, and maturity can even exist without this personal quality.

Stability Question 3: Does She Internalize Responsibility?

Mentally healthy people, the sort who conquer difficult days and tough challenges, do one thing that is rarely discussed in public. Even people in my profession, who should be laser-focused on this personality trait, rarely bring it up.

Are you ready for the big secret? Here it is: Successful people internalize responsibility. They realize that life comes with difficulties, and they make it their duty to handle those difficulties correctly. They don't get stuck blaming others or waiting for a miracle. They get to work when there's a problem to be solved.

People who *externalize* responsibility approach life as if their destinies are ruled by luck or prejudice. If she fails a math test, it's because the professor doesn't like her or the test was unfair. When the *internalizer* fails the math test, she resolves to work harder next time. It makes no difference whether the professor dislikes her or the test was unfair. She's the captain of her own ship, and she knows it.

Internalizers make the best partners because they take the same approach to mental and emotional health. She may have been dealt a bad hand in one respect or another, but that won't stop her from building a good life. Although my profession may be a bit too shy about advertising the benefits of internalization, researchers have nevertheless provided plenty data to support it. They've shown that *externalizing* responsibility contributes to:

- Depression (Culpin et al. 2015)
- Anxiety and low life satisfaction (Warnecke et al. 2014)
- Self-pity and anger (Stöber 2003)

- Reduced persistence (Nowicki et al. 2004)
- Reduced success (Ahlin & Lobo Antunes 2015)
- Difficulty overcoming physical illness (Helvik et al. 2016)

None of those qualities make for the healthiest partner. Internalizing takes the day. The same research shows that *internalizing* responsibility leads to:

- Positive mood
- Reduced anxiety
- Increased life satisfaction
- Increased appreciation for freedom
- Reduced self-pity and anger
- Increased persistence
- Increased success
- Increased ability to weather illness and life difficulties

One of the core characteristics of resilience is accepting life's unfairness. Accepting unfairness and internalizing the responsibility to manage it is the only way to overcome roadblocks in life. The only real alternative is to rely on luck or charity. I don't know about you, but luck and charity have never panned out for me. I certainly wouldn't want a partner who relied on them.

Externalizing also directly aggravates the problem at hand. If her only way of recovering from setbacks is to rely on the efforts of others, then she's going to have to play up her symptoms in order to gain attention. Unfortunately, people who play up their symptoms eventually begin to believe their own sad stories.

Distinguishing internalizers from externalizers is probably the simplest of all nine risk-management questions because attitude about responsibility shows up in the way people speak about the world.

The internalizer will speak and act (with emphasis on action) as if *she* is the common denominator in her successes and failures. She won't blame her parents, her boss, or the fates. She speaks about what she can do to improve her circumstance, and she follows through. She doesn't view herself as a pictures of virtuous perfection. She knows she is a work in progress, and she's striving to improve.

Humans have a natural tendency to externalize responsibility, but we're

supposed to outgrow it. Men who are rescuers can get drawn into babying a woman who never outgrew her dependence. Those relationships rarely end with happiness and satisfaction.

Internalizers bring strength, resilience, and an ever-increasing wisdom to the partnership. They are women, not girls, and they are the only option for a man who possesses aspirations of any kind.

Heed the Bright Triad

Luis had an expensive habit. He kept moving in with the wrong women. Jenny, the most recent, got him to pay off her credit cards and buy her a Toyota before running off to Florida with an ex-husband. Luis had only known her three months when they shacked up. It was the second time he had paid off a woman's debt, and the third car he had bought in the service of "rescuing" a woman.

Don't feel bad for Luis. He's actually a genius, not for his stunningly bad choices in women, but for the fact that he changed his pattern. When he came to my office and we began to inventory his failed relationships, it became clear that each of his former girlfriends lacked all three pillars of the bright triad.

- **Clarity:** All but one of them had been a terrible communicator. He had a penchant for "fiery" women who also happened to be masters of confusion and drama.
- **Maturity:** None of them had the wherewithal to work through relationship difficulties. Many of them were verbally abusive. The last one was essentially a con artist.
- **Stability:** Many of his exes had traumatic histories they hadn't overcome. One was clearly an alcoholic. None of them internalized responsibility for solving the problems in their lives.

Luis, however, was an internalizer. He resolved to change when he could no longer deny the existence of the pattern his friends had been chiding him about. He uncovered his motives for bringing troubled women into his life, which had to do with his mistaken belief that women would only accept him if he surrendered his needs and catered to theirs. Now he's well on his way to

building healthy relationships with mature women who score high on the bright triad. Plus his career is flourishing, unencumbered by the emotional weight and opportunity cost of high drama and unhealthy women.

Believe it or not, Luis was lucky. He made some serious tactical errors that merely cost him money. They could have cost him much more. Avoiding expensive tactical errors is our next topic.

PART III

HOW TO AVOID COMPLETELY F*CKING UP YOUR LIFE

I mentioned that I was lucky enough to spend my youth working in my father's bar, but I never told you the name. It was called Larry's Lounge. It was due east of the oil refineries north of Denver, a couple blocks from the dog track.

Believe it or not, it wasn't as classy as it sounds. But there was no better academy for learning the basics of adult relationships. I think this was the single most important lesson:

The costliest relationship mistakes are often the easiest to avoid.

To avoid these mistakes, a man must be patient. Sometimes the right decisions in life are obvious, but that's not always the case with romance. Time is your friend, but impulsivity makes a man vulnerable to the most common and costly errors. The best defense against impulsive relationship decisions is to slow down, be honest about the data trickling in, and protect the downside so the upside can flourish.

AVOID THE MOST COMMON BLUNDERS

HOW TO RAPIDLY SCREEN OUT THE WRONG WOMEN, THE PERILS OF
PLAYING HOUSE, AND HOW TO AVOID DELUDING YOURSELF ABOUT
WOMEN

In these next two chapters, I'll give you a long list of skills and strategies for avoiding traps and making great decisions with women, but first I need to establish why marriage is a larger gamble for men than for women. We have much to gain and much to lose. Divorce kills bank accounts, scars children, ruins friendships, devastates families, and deflates life goals. Divorce is a game for the very rich whose lifestyles won't be affected by the immense cost, or the very poor who have no assets and no children to quibble over.

I've met couples who divorced successfully. They managed to rely on mediation and to avoid the worst parts of the family court system, but it only takes one partner to drag a couple into that swamp of financial and emotional ruin that is the family court system. Women have a much greater financial and parental incentive to enter the family court system than men, and once in the system they have little incentive to behave well.

This fact is evidenced by divorce statistics. Women initiate 70 to 80 percent of divorces, whereas women and men initiate an equal number of breakups during courtship, when stakes are low. Even if a couple is cohabiting, the man is just as likely as the woman to call it quits (American Sociological Association 2015). It's only *after* the nuptials, when stakes are much higher, that women are 20 to 30 percent likelier than men to initiate the breakup.

Why might this be? For starters, women are disproportionately awarded money and child custody during a divorce. As recently as 2006, 96 percent of alimony awards went to women (Sorge and Scurlock 2013). And things don't

always end with the judge's decree. Legal battles in family court can rage for decades, even after the initial alimony settlement is supposedly agreed upon. Women have less of an incentive to avoid this battle of attrition since they generally come out ahead when the smoke clears.

Child support is another area where women are incentivized to divorce because they enjoy great advantages over their ex-husbands. According to U.S. Census data (Grall 2016) 53.1 percent of women who were awarded custodial parenthood were also awarded monetary support from the father. Of the fathers who were awarded custodial parenthood—roughly one out of seven—only 31 percent were awarded support from the mother.

Divorcing women enjoy good odds of keeping their children and claiming some portion their ex-husband's future earnings. I prefer to believe idealistically that most judges are unbiased and equitable, and that family court is like any other experience in that the treatment people receive is mostly a result of the attitude with which they show up. But more than one family attorney who read early drafts of this manuscript disagreed. They told me that courts, including male judges, are reliably biased against men, and they're certainly in a better position to know than I am. Either way, family court is nothing to trifle with even under the best of circumstances.

In their book, *Divorce Corp.*, Joseph Sorge and James Scurlock (2013) chronicled the \$50 billion-per-year divorce industry that drains bank accounts by keeping couples mired in conflict until assets run dry. They describe a legal system that is staggeringly complex, a system run by judges and attorneys who have little accountability and who hold tremendous power over the couples who appear before them. In some states, judges can even dip into your non-marital assets to pay legal bills after attorneys have exhausted other assets.

And let's not forget the cost of *not* divorcing a neglectful or abusive wife. Most of us have met a pitiable husband who has resigned himself to a life of unhappiness because he fears losing his kids or being financially sodomized by a vindictive judge. These men lose decades of their lives because they see no way out. As for their hopes and dreams, forget about 'em. The emotional cost of a miserable marriage can drain a man's soul.

Just as we men disproportionately foot the bill in family court, we disproportionately pay the emotional cost for marital discord. For all our manly stoicism, research shows that male mental health is more affected, both positively and negatively, by relationship quality (Simon and Barret

2010). Incidentally, female mental health is more negatively affected by singlehood status and by recent breakups. Overall, there appears to be no difference between men and women in the many positive mental health benefits of a good relationship.

I'm painting a pretty grim picture of marriage. Let's step back and take a reality check. Remember, there are countless success stories for every single marital horror story. This ominous data should simply encourage men to approach the marital contract with as much certainty as possible. Certainty requires the following:

- **Knowing ourselves.** The goal of Part One was to uncover the hidden decision-making processes that can lead to catastrophic relationship choices.
- **Knowing the traits of healthy women.** The Bright Triad in Part Two was about recognizing women who have what it takes to be solid, reliable partners.
- **Avoiding tactical errors.** Here in Part Three, we examine a variety of mistakes that cause men to blunder into relationship nightmares.

Let's start here: The single most effective way to statistically maximize success is to avoid marrying too young or too old. The five-year probability of divorce is highest among couples who marry younger than the age of 20 (31 percent) and lowest between the ages of 30 and 32 (9 percent). Those probabilities begin to rise slightly after the age of 33 (Lehrer and Chen 2013).

The reason for the high rate of divorce among young couples is fairly obvious. They have unrealistic expectations, and their adult personality traits have yet to emerge.

As to why divorce rates increase slightly after the mid-30s, the researchers suggest that one factor is women's declining choosiness as they age. Older women may be ignoring their intuition and making poor choices in the interest of security.

Other factors that reduce uncertainty and increase the odds of success include years of education, intact family of origin, and religiosity. None of these variables by themselves are the sufficient. They are cumulative, and each of them pales next to larger considerations like shared values.

The data are instructive but ultimately academic. You are an individual,

not a statistic. You're fully capable of making wise decisions, provided you know where the pitfalls are. If I'm scaring you about marriage, good. It's a momentous decision.

In a world where it can seem like every woman is out for herself, it is tempting to wonder where the good ones are. Let me offer a ray of sunshine: They're everywhere. They just don't stand out. They're quietly living their lives, and they're looking for good men. I hear from them all the time.

It's important to have that perspective because people generally find what they're looking for. If you believe that all women are gold diggers, then gold diggers is what you'll see. The same holds for duck-faced dingbats on social media, screeching feminists, or high-maintenance hot messes. Our perceptual filters define what's available to us.

This isn't new-age psychobabble. Expectation quite literally biases our brains. For example, our visual systems are primed to recognize faces. That's why we find faces in electrical outlets and pictures of Mars. Another example: our brains are biased to notice events that have recently occurred because recent events have a statistical likelihood of repeating. If you catch a glimpse of one rabbit running out from behind a bush, you'll get a full-on view of the second one because your mind is prepared for it. We possess this sort of predisposition because they grease the wheels of decision-making (Summerfield and de Lange 2014).

This applies to large decisions as well as small, and our assumptions and perceptions shape our social choices. It's why most guys won't pursue the woman who's "out of my league." They expect to be shot down, so they make a decision that, ironically, reinforces the assumption. With enough practice, a guy can stop noticing the out-of-my-league women altogether. Some men even come to resent women as a way to protect themselves against rejection.

What is your perceptual filter feeding you? Is it time to throw out that filter and tell yourself a different story about women? If you're in search of Mrs. Right, I'm hoping you'll give serious consideration to those questions. Even if you don't believe it, tell yourself that there are good women out there, that you know how to recognize them, and that you expect to start meeting them.

Expectation matters. One pair of studies found that what people *intend* to do is a less likely outcome than what they *expect* to do. The problem is that our intentions are foremost in our minds while our expectations can be

obscured by all manner of inhibitions (Armitage et al. 2015). If a guy merely *intends* to start meeting a better class of woman, but expects deep down that he'll fail, then he's likely to fail.

Men, as a group, offer things to women they cannot get anywhere else. That's why they participate so enthusiastically in the mating game. You, as a high-value man, offer something to a subset of those women that they do not wish to live without. In short, it's not merely true that there are good women. There are good women looking for *you*. The following sections provide three strategies for letting them in.

Define and Defend Your Values

Way back in Part One, I suggested that you must possess clarity of values and purpose to succeed in romance. I suppose that's true for any area of life. Even if you haven't completely nailed it down yet (it takes a while for most guys), I hope you at least have a sense of direction and some goals that will move you closer to your reason for being on the planet.

The right woman will unwaveringly support you in your purpose and values. It's a very bad sign when she asks you to separate from the people and activities that bring you meaning. That's widely considered one of the warning signs of a controlling and abusive relationship. It's equally destructive for you to voluntarily sacrifice your values for the sake of the relationship.

Nor is it any better for her to sacrifice her values for you. Remember Chris and Sofia from Chapter 1? He picked a woman whose values hadn't yet ripened. That oversight was the death of the marriage and the beginning of his problems.

Here are a few ways to help ensure you don't share Chris's fate. There's no guarantee values won't change on one side of the relationship or the other, but a few precautions will help you reduce the risk of a values mismatch.

- **Don't apologize for or mask your values.** Be honest about yourself from the outset. Don't be a chameleon for the sake of getting laid. Not that you would, but some guys do. Proudly speak about what's important to you. If it drives some women away, good. Each rejection puts you one step closer to the right woman.

- **Include her in your activities and social circles.** If she fits in, great. Be honest with yourself if she doesn't click with your world. Ask her to join you in interesting situations that will challenge her. If cars are high on your list, then invite her to the auto show. See how she does. Challenge yourself to participate in her circle, too. New lovers have a tendency to isolate from the world. That's a mistake. Stay engaged in life so your compatibility will reveal itself.
- **Be clear about your non-negotiable terms.** We all have personal irritants we won't tolerate. Whether it's the woman's religion, her family's behavior, her political views, or the way she chews her food, it's better to be honest from the outset. The alternative is for the incompatibility to turn up later, probably during an argument or some other inopportune moment. By the way, if there is a major divergence in values, be honest. Yes, even if she's hot. Force the issue now rather than having it forced upon you later. Don't let her fool herself either. Wide gulfs in values—for example regarding children, religion, or money—are easy to overlook in the beginning, but they become serious problems down the road.
- **Look for the signs of long-term values compatibility.** Earlier in the book we discussed qualities of successful couples: they find similar activities meaningful, they share similar preferences for excitement or calmness, they are generally on the same page emotionally regarding their experiences, they support each other in their individual endeavors, they have a similar desire for emotional closeness, and they are confident enough in their shared values to tolerate their differences. These subtle aspects of compatibility are easy to ignore. Do so at your peril.
- **Speak honestly about where your values diverge.** Differing values don't kill relationships; contradictory ones do. A compatible partner will encourage you to pursue what's important to you, even if she doesn't quite understand it.
- **Don't be a values thrill seeker.** There's something exciting about pursuing someone whose values clash with our own. It's stimulating, and it seems like a challenge to conquer. The heart is great at choosing mates who won't work out in the long run.

Don't fall for it. Life isn't a romantic comedy in which the credits roll after the wedding vows.

- **Discuss the meaning of money.** As we've discussed, money is a proxy for values. Whether it's freedom, excitement, security, or something else, money gives us the power to act on what matters. Make sure you and she aren't going to collide over your monetary goals and behaviors.
- **Discuss the meaning of sex.** The same reasoning applies here. Couples with incompatible values regarding sex are at risk for conflict, affairs, and divorce.

Discovering her values is like a long job interview, but more fun. Be patient. It may take a while for the truth about her values to show up. Take the initiative in comparing your values. Remember, you're the one who will pay the price if things progress too far and then fall apart. It's far better to end amicably after a few months of dating than to end contentiously after a few years of marriage.

On that note, let's move on to one of the biggest, ugliest, most regrettable decisions a man can make: playing house. This blunder is easy to avoid if you understand how the trap works.

Don't Play House

There's an arrangement many men enter that's a bit baffling to me until I remind myself they were probably thinking with the wrong head. These guys end up with all the costs and responsibilities of marriage without ever intending to get married. It's like they bought swampland in Florida on the installment plan.

They accomplish this regrettable feat by unintentionally sliding into ever-increasing commitments. It often starts by moving in together out of convenience. Next, maybe they increase the level of commitment by getting a puppy with their girlfriends. Then they cosign on a car, they share a credit card, they buy furniture.

Little by little, these men build financial and emotional commitments with women, often at their girlfriends' urging, until escape is nigh impossible. They unintentionally slide into the largest commitment of their

lives.

Being slowly and unintentionally dragged into the role of husband is one of the most serious tactical errors a man can make. Sometimes it happens so incrementally that it escapes attention. It begins with her taking a few drawers in his dresser. Next thing they know, these dudes are trailing their girlfriends through Ikea wondering, *How the hell did this happen?* I call it playing house.

I'm not advancing any particular morality. I don't care if couples cohabit, I simply ask that you protect yourself by maintaining your boundaries. If you *choose* to cohabit with her, that's fine. I wish you well. Just please be intentional about it. Intention makes all the difference.

Researchers at the University of Denver (DU) have found that couples who cohabit generally aren't very thoughtful about their reasons for doing so. They found that the decision usually boils down to one of convenience or the desire to spend more time together (Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman 2009). Couples also do it for financial reasons or to test the relationship.

According the DU researchers, women tend to cohabit out of convenience, whereas men are often do so to test the strength of the relationship. These men might be trying to avoid the legal disadvantages I discussed earlier by trying the relationship on for size before marrying her. That's understandable, but horribly ill conceived.

Shacking up without the clear intent to marry or otherwise remain together greatly increases the chance of divorce or separation. Ironically, living together to "test the relationship" increases the chances of failure. It also increases the chances of entering an ill-fated marriage.

The DU researchers found that some couples who would otherwise never have married do so out of the sheer force of inertia (Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman 2006). The puppy, the shared furniture, the joint tenancy on the lease—it all adds up to a level of commitment difficult to escape because it's easier to take the next step and keep moving forward than it is to remove all the entanglements.

According to the DU researchers, there are two types of commitment in playing house: dedication and constraint. Couples who are *dedicated* are motivated to stay together because they love each other. For them, choosing to cohabit is just one step in a larger journey of their choosing. Couples who are *constrained* remain in unhappy relationships because staying is easier than going.

Sadly, constrained cohabiting is not uncommon. An Australian study found that in contrast to the great deliberation people give to marriage, most couples are reckless about cohabiting. When asked how they came to live together, many couples replied, “It just happened” (Lindsay 2000). Don’t let it “just happen” to you.

There is strong pressure to play house. It not only comes from women, but from men who advise cohabiting in order to test the relationship. The Internet is full of that particular bit of advice, often from men who are trying to spare other men from costly divorces.

I appreciate their intent, but their advice ignores larger variables. These men usually say it’s important to get to know a woman before committing to her. That’s true, but I prefer to frame this risk-management goal with more precision. To my mind, the goal is to get beyond the honeymoon phase before making commitments that are difficult to escape. That can be done from separate residences.

If you’ll recall, the honeymoon phase is that 12-18 months during which your neurochemistry departs from its baseline, and so does hers. You’re both under the influence. Neither of you are perceiving the world, or each other, accurately. You are temporary blissful idiots. This is the absolute *worst* time to be adopting puppies and choosing furniture.

Luckily, there’s an alternative. You can get to know her without putting your future in peril. It’s called courtship.

I know, it’s an old-fashioned idea and an ancient-sounding term, but it could save you from a world of hurt. Give the relationship a year or so after your neurochemistry returns to baseline. You’ll know when the honeymoon is over when the two of you start to express annoyance at the little quirks you once found so charming, when you begin to turn your attention back to the activities and commitments you enjoyed before the honeymoon, and when your old friends and family begin to reclaim the positions of importance they used to occupy before you and she became so focused on each other.

In romance, as in driving, speed kills. Moving too fast makes you vulnerable to your old history and patterns. It prevents you from assessing her clarity, maturity, and stability. It steals your intent and saddles you with commitments you didn’t want.

Defending your romantic boundaries is one of the greatest risk-management strategies I can offer you. Here’s a little tool to help you stay on track: Categorize yourself. You are either a boyfriend, a fiancée/intended, or

a husband/partner.

Maybe you prefer different names for these categories. That's fine, but there should be no in-between state. Please make this commitment to yourself if you value your future: Vow that you will never be "kinda married."

Hold her to the same categories. She is your girlfriend, your fiancée/intended, or your wife/partner. She has to earn her status, and she should only graduate from one category to the next with crystal-clear, stated intent.

You'll be doing both of you a favor because clear intent increases the odds of success tremendously, particularly among men. Statistically, she'll benefit because guys who slide into marriage against their will are less dedicated to their wives than those who put off cohabiting until they are ready to commit (Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman 2006).

Be assertive. Don't be afraid to say *no* when she asks for space in your sock drawer. Share these statistics with her, and explain that couples who are thoughtful, patient, and intentional about their decisions enjoy greater dedication to the relationship, higher satisfaction, and fewer affairs (Owen, Rhoades, and Stanley 2013). Take it as a red flag if she protests, and please don't allow yourself to be coerced.

How to Be Relentlessly Honest with Yourself

It's tough to make wise decisions when you're lost in self-deception and wishful thinking. My first car purchase was a great example of self-delusion.

It was a 1979 Dodge Omni, olive green and oxidized. It had cheap plastic bumpers and a sun-bleached cloth interior. It had somehow hobbled through 80,000 miles when I purchased it, a miracle by 1970s Detroit standards. At \$850, it was grossly overpriced.

That car immediately began draining my time and money. The window crank broke. The flimsy clutch cable snapped. The muffler fell off. It even threw a rod. It always had some minor mechanical injury between major breakdowns. That car was ugly, slow, and discouraging.

A little voice told me that car would be trouble, but I bought it anyway. Why? Because I was following my impulse, and I was lying to myself about reality. I was desperate for transportation, or so I thought, and I had some fantasy that the only car I could afford was some sort of ticket to freedom and

happiness.

My impulse was not to be trusted. My impulse, it turns out, was to be an impetuous idiot. I would have been better off riding my bike.

How many men have you known who approach relationships with the same addled thinking? Deceiving ourselves about something as trivial as a car is expensive and annoying. Deceiving ourselves about women can be devastating. We can follow our instincts right into a war zone.

Good decisions are grounded in facts, not fantasy. It's tempting to overlook reality when our hearts are shouting at us, so let's look at ten strategies for keeping yourself honest about women:

- Heed red flags
- Listen to warnings from friends and family
- Respect your intuition
- Be honest about her bad behavior
- Be honest about her sexual attitudes and appetite
- Reject white knighthood
- Know when to tap out
- Find the common denominator
- Reject fantasy
- Avoid the chronically angry

These strategies will help you stay anchored to reality, and they might even prevent you from owning an olive-green Omni.

Reality Anchor 1: Reject Wishful Thinking

Long ago, I believe I was barely 21, I helped a female friend move from Denver to Memphis. We loaded up her car, hit the road, and the plan was for me to fly back.

This attractive woman wanted a relationship, but I was hesitant to commit. There was a problem I couldn't quite identify, and my Dodge Omni had taught me to avoid impulsive decisions.

Though I couldn't describe my reasoning at the time, my hesitance was born of her moodiness. Her demeanor could turn on a dime, and I would go from hero to villain in her estimation. I remember once choosing the wrong

words over dinner, and her giving me the silent treatment for the rest of the meal. I didn't know much at the time, but I knew something wasn't right.

Inevitably, we had a small conflict somewhere outside of Little Rock that ballooned out of proportion, and I became the villain again. It was the meltdown to end them all. I can't recall why she became angry with me, but I clearly recall the awful position I had put myself in. I had no money, no resources, no way of getting home if I couldn't patch things up with her.

I was stuck, and I had no one to blame but myself. She had given me plenty of warning signs during the prior months. Through all her moodiness she had shown me *exactly* what was in store for me, but I succumbed to wishful thinking. At the worst possible moment, she delivered in spades.

I somehow put her back together. We completed the trip and I made it home, after which we didn't speak again. Parting ways might seem like an obvious decision, but these are precisely the types of situations in which some men double down on their bad relationship investment. For reasons that are their own, they ignore the warning signs.

Often, those reasons have to do with optimism and wishful thinking. There's a difference.

- Optimism: *I'll be able to retire early if I work hard and invest wisely.*
- Wishful thinking: *I'll play the lottery! That'll work!*

One of the most egregious examples of wishful thinking is starting a relationship with someone who's already in a relationship and cheating on their partner. It seems to happen with alarming frequency among love's lottery players. If she's cheating on someone else when she meets you, you better plan on her cheating on you someday.

Don't beat yourself up if you, like me, have ignored warning signs in the past. Just take inventory of your motivations so you're less likely to do it again.

Reality Anchor 2: Heed Warnings from Family and Friends

Most men are trained to be stoic. The upside is knowing how to walk it off when things don't go our way. The downside is a possible predisposition

to ignore warning signs, especially when a new relationship involves a steady supply of sex.

We tell ourselves that it's not that bad, that relationships take work, that she's just fiery, that when it's good, it's great. The opinions of our friends and family can be a great antidote to this kind self-deception. A man has to be willing to listen, and you sometimes have to be persistent. They may hesitate to tell you you're making a mistake. Sometimes, you have to push through their initial polite response to get their real opinion. (Greasing the skids with a few beers can help.)

If your friends and family are dropping hints or acting oddly around your partner, do yourself a favor: Set aside your ego and get curious. Be open about their concerns. You don't have to obey their warnings. I'm sure plenty of good relationships begin without the blessing of family and friends. Just listen.

Maybe you think *they're* the ones with the problem... Listen anyway.

Maybe you think they've never really been on your side... Listen anyway.

Maybe they've made horrible relationship decisions, and they have no business doling out advice... Listen anyway.

Maybe it hurts to hear them saying unpleasant things about the woman of your dreams... Suck it up and listen anyway.

If you hear yourself making excuses and rationalizations, ("This one is different" or "She's not like that") then your eyes and ears are probably closed. Slow down, stop rationalizing, and consider the data as a scientist would.

Challenging our own mindset is exceedingly difficult. Research has repeatedly shown that humans have a knack for taking all things as evidence in support of our beliefs, even as our beliefs are steering us toward a cliff. Listen to your loved ones. They might be trying to save you from yourself.

Reality Anchor 3: Respect Your Intuition

That's right, men have intuition too.

Intuition isn't magic, or ESP, or an experience reserved for women. Think of intuition as non-verbal information processing (Leiberman 2000). Research on intuition suggests we learn on at least two levels: one involving words, logic, and slow deliberation, and another which is wordless and takes

place quickly and without awareness. As we collect experiences, we build a tacit body of knowledge about what to expect in the world. That's the basis of intuition. Though it's prone to certain errors, that tacit wisdom usually works in our favor (Hogarth 2007). (One of those errors is confusing intuition with a jaded defensiveness born of repeated injuries, usually of our own making. I've met many men who believed all women were out to get them, and they confused that overgeneralization with their "little voice.")

Intuition doesn't show up the way most thoughts do. Our minds speak to us through indirect channels like bodily sensations, anxiety, unease, or dreams. Intuition can be so subtle it's easy to ignore.

Intuition is a brilliant adaptation for self-preservation, and it might be especially attuned to your relationships with others. Researchers have found that newlyweds' unstated, automatic attitudes about their relationships—their intuition—more reliably predicted the success of the relationship than their conscious, stated predictions (McNulty et al. 2013).

In a different study of 464 recently married couples, women who harbored premarital doubts had higher divorce rates at four years (Lavner, Karney, and Bradbury 2012) than those who felt good about the marriage. Eight percent of confident women were divorced versus 19 percent of those who had doubts. The effect was smaller for men, but still meaningful (9 percent versus 14 percent).

Among intact couples at their four-year anniversaries, those who had premarital doubts started less satisfied and remained less satisfied over time. The authors concluded, "Premarital doubts appear to be common but not benign, suggesting that valid precursors of marital distress are evident during couples' engagements."

Don't brush off that funny feeling, and don't let her ignore her own intuition. Slow down and ask questions. Put words to it. Your own mind might be trying to tell you something very important.

Reality Anchor 4: Be Honest about Her Bad Behavior

Have you ever witnessed a woman publicly ridiculing her man? Or maybe you've experienced it personally? I'm not just talking about obvious, full-on abuse, but snide comments that ride the line between civility and maltreatment. It could be thoughtlessness, backstabbing, or any other base human callousness. Women can be awfully mean spirited toward their men.

The optimistic man wants to believe she's just having a bad day, and I think everyone deserves the benefit of the doubt for their rare lapses. But what if you begin to notice a pattern?

Acknowledge what's happening. Resist the temptation to make excuses. Don't rescue her from the consequences of her behavior. If she's acting like a turd, she needs to know it. If she's unwilling to change, then perhaps she doesn't belong in your life. Tolerating bad behavior only encourages more of the same.

It's easy for some guys to fall into the trap of excusing abuse or maltreatment, but it's even more tempting when her bad behavior isn't obvious. If your interactions with her leave you feeling down, depressed, or irritated, don't ignore that feeling, and don't become isolated. Start speaking to her about it, and if necessary start speaking to your own support system of friends and family to help you make sense of it.

Reality Anchor 5: Be Honest about Her Sexual Attitudes and Appetite

Sex is pretty important for most men. Those men suffer greatly when their partners withhold intimacy, whether their women have low libidos, unresolved histories of trauma, or are using sex to manipulate their behavior.

Women who use sex to control men can be pretty coy about it. Imagine you and she had an argument earlier in the day, and though you thought it was resolved, she seems to be giving you the cold shoulder. That evening you begin to initiate sex, and she replies tersely, "I'm not in the mood." You ask what's wrong, and she simply repeats herself. You have the sinking feeling you're being punished for your earlier disagreement, but you don't dare ask because you fear she would feel insulted and become even angrier.

Sex should never be a reward or a punishment. Of course, there will be times when she finds sex unappealing, but a healthy woman's refusal doesn't create a weird, wordless tension about sex in which you end up feeling confused, off balance, and frustrated. A non-manipulative woman views sex as an expression of love, not as a behavior-modification tool. If she's declining because she's angry with you, a healthy woman will be honest about it and work toward a solution.

Whether a woman uses sex to manipulate or has a libido that simply doesn't match yours, please don't get suckered into the fantasy that your sex life will improve after you commit to her, even if she promises it will.

Marriages and partnerships dissolve every day over sexual incompatibility. Prior to these splits and divorces, sex-starved men go through months or years of painful frustration that can affect their mental and physical health. Some unscrupulous women even use sex to secure advantageous relationships with well-to-do men, after which their libidos mysteriously vanish.

Her attitudes about sex will become apparent over time. You may start off humping like bunnies until the honeymoon fades and your collective neurochemistry returns to baseline. That's when her true inclinations will appear. This is yet another reason to get well beyond the honeymoon phase before taking the relationship to the next level of commitment.

Reality Anchor 6: Reject White Knighthood

Women and men both have a misguided tendency to rescue each other, and there are a couple of widely recognized patterns.

Female fixers tend toward “projects” who need help getting their lives together. *He's a diamond in the rough*, they think. *The right woman will bring him to his full potential. He'll always be grateful that I helped him get his life together!*

Male fixers—white knights, in the vernacular—tend to pick women in need of emotional rescue. *She's a broken little bird*, they think. *She just needs the love and guidance of a good man.* Pardon me while I retch.

I've never seen a truly altruistic white knight. White knighthood almost demands duplicitous motivations, though they're rarely malevolent in my clinical observation. Sometimes these men pursue troubled women because they believe healthy women are out of their league. Sometimes they seek the thrill of being a powerful figure in her life. Sometimes they're avoiding their own problems by fixating on someone else's. Sometimes their upbringing made them comfortable around people who are in constant crisis.

Whatever the particulars, the need to rescue women is a pretty reliable sign of insecurity within a man. Good relationships involve mutual growth. They don't involve dragging your partner kicking and screaming toward the person you hope she can be.

White knighthood is a recipe for resentment. You'll tire of her drama, and she'll tire of your supervision. It's disrespectful to yourself to deny yourself a mature relationship, and it's equally disrespectful to her for you to buy into

her story of victimhood. White knights are fooling themselves if they believe their women won't one day be repelled by their rescuers' desperate need to be needed.

If you're pulled toward white knighthood, you're probably a decent, stand-up dude. Men have an inborn desire to protect women, and sometimes we cover our insecurities by letting that instinct slip into overdrive. Danger lies there.

Reject white knighthood. If you seek real fulfillment, then only pursue fully functioning, adult women who know how to internalize responsibility for their lives.

If you're a white knight, figure out what drives your need to rescue women so you can knock it off. White knighthood is a common problem that plenty of men have overcome. They're on the Internet and in men's groups, so don't be afraid to seek them out. Why reinvent the wheel? This particular problem is often addressed well by communities of other men because it is so common and because it is easy to relapse into old patterns of being a nice guy who unwittingly slides into white knighthood.

Typing a phrase like "overcoming white knighthood" into a search engine will provide dozens of useful blog posts, articles, and resources in addition to what you've read here. I'd avoid men whose opinions are tinged by anger because that emotion is one of the underlying sources of white knighthood. Men who have successfully overcome the problem and who built healthy relationships with women generally speak and write with compassion and humor, not bitterness.

Overcoming white knighthood takes work. First and foremost, you'll need to say goodbye to unhealthy women and seek healthy ones. For that, you may need to learn what healthy women look like and develop qualities they find attractive: confidence, resourcefulness, humor, social influence, and intellectual depth. It's all in there somewhere, but you may need to bring it to the surface. If you find yourself compelled to rescue damsels in distress, take it as a sign that your own self-regard may be in need of some repair.

Reality Anchor 7: Know When to Tap Out

People can develop a strange sense of allegiance to unworkable situations. In relationships, it sounds something like, "I've invested two years of my life in this person. I can't give up now." Those years, in economic

terms, are a sunk cost. They're an irretrievable expenditure that shouldn't influence today's decisions.

The human mind has a built-in error that can make us feel counterproductively attached to any person, place, or situation into which we've invested effort. Our minds have a powerful aversion to lost effort. That's a healthy survival mechanism—up to the point at which it becomes a burden. Have you ever heard yourself saying things like this?

I've already bought a new transmission for this '77 Pinto. I might as well invest in a new motor, too.

My job is destroying my soul, but I've already worked here for five years, so I might as well stay a while longer.

This old house is sucking up all my spare time on repairs, but I may as well stick with it.

That transmission, those years at a dead-end job, that effort to repair the house—they're all sunk costs. You'll never get them back, so logically they should have no bearing on the present decision. The same is true for relationships that are clearly failing.

I think people waste time for the same old reasons we've seen elsewhere. Our myopic minds think the short-term pain of saying goodbye and perhaps feeling like a failure seems larger than the long-term cost of staying.

Luckily, feelings aren't everything. We can rise above them and defer to logic. Every day we spend nursing a dying relationship comes at the cost of lost opportunity. The right woman is out there looking for you, and you won't find her if you're clinging to Mrs. Sunk Cost.

The sunk-cost fallacy is a cousin to the gambler's fallacy, which compels people to throw good money after bad in the hope that their luck will change. Don't count on it. Las Vegas was built on that fallacy, and so were countless ill-fated marriages in which men kept thinking their luck would change with the wrong women.

Embrace reality if you suspect it might be time to break up. Converse with her about the problems you're having. Talk to your friends, family, and

mentors. Take an honest look at this question: What will life be like with this person a decade down the road? Two decades? Four?

And for the love of god, whatever you do, don't let anyone convince you that marrying, having children, or otherwise taking the relationship to "the next level" will eliminate problems. That's the worst kind of wishful thinking. It's like saying a drowning man could save himself if he just had more water to work with.

If it's time to go, please bear this in mind: Difficult events are rarely as painful as our minds predict. The authors of the book *Freakonomics* ran an experiment in which more than 100 people left the fate of their troubled relationships or jobs to a digital coin toss. These people agreed to stay or go according to chance.

Those who broke up or quit their jobs generally turned out happier than they previously were (Levitt and Dubner 2014). As the authors point out, this isn't evidence that breaking up leads to happiness. Their findings simply suggest that there's no evidence large losses necessarily lead to misery. The participants didn't die of heartbreak, nor did their former partners or bosses perish in fits of despair. If you need to make sense of the loss, grab onto the priceless lessons you learned in the relationship.

Reality Anchor 8: Acknowledge the Common Denominator

I know a man who has been fired three times. By contrast, no one in my circle of friends has ever been fired. They don't operate in a way that causes people to push them away.

This guy, however, has a well-practiced rap about his resumé: All his bosses have been idiots, he says. He refuses to play politics, he says. They just don't know how to handle an employee of his caliber, he says.

He is falling victim to another bizarre quirk of human psychology: We have a hard time recognizing when we are the common denominator in our problems. The more we experience the same relationship problems, the more opportunities we have to rehearse our nonsensical, externalizing explanations about everyone's shortcomings but our own.

The truth is, the person who complains that every boss was a jerk is probably a substandard employee. The one who says every landlord has been a cheat probably has a habit of shafting them on the rent. The guy who says every woman he's dated has been insane (or whatever catch-all diagnosis he

prefers) has probably been choosing poorly or behaving badly.

If you hear yourself complaining that every woman treats you the same way, and it's never good, then it's time to explore the possibility that *you* are the common denominator. This is another case where a few hours with a good therapist can spare you from years of wasted effort.

If you're up for an even greater challenge than therapy, you can follow the very creative route one client of mine devised. He sought out as many exes as he could find and asked for their honest feedback on his performance in the relationship. Instead of listening to his own personal propaganda about them, he asked what they would say about him.

It was a gutsy thing to do, and he learned a lot about himself in a short period of time. He went on to have much more satisfying relationships. His approach may not be right for you, but his question is the right question for everyone to ask: *What can I do to get out of my own way?*

Reality Anchor 9: Use Time to Avoid Self-Deception

The easiest way to succumb to life-ruining fantasies and self-deception about a relationship is to engage in the folly of a whirlwind romance. I've already preached about the importance of courtship, and why it's vital to get beyond the chemically altered brain fog of the honeymoon phase.

Avoiding fantasyland is one more reason to insist on a nice, long courtship. We can all lie to ourselves for a little while, but it gets harder with time—especially if you're paying attention to the data sources I suggested earlier in this list: red flags, warnings from friends and family, and your own intuition.

Don't succumb to the pressure to play house. Give yourself the time and space to notice the truth you might be hiding from yourself.

Reality Anchor 10: Avoid the Chronically Angry

Dr. Helen Smith has a lot to say about a troubling trend in which men are pulling away from marriage, fatherhood, and women in general. In her book, *Men on Strike* (2013), she lists the challenges men face in biased family courts, lack of reproductive rights, hostility against men at universities, and belittling of men and fathers in popular entertainment.

I think it's no mere coincidence that marriage has declined in recent decades amidst what Dr. Smith has observed. The Pew Research Center reported that in 1960 about 10 percent of adults over the age of 25 had never married (Wang, Parker, and Rohal 2014). By 2012, the number had doubled. Even more to the point, men are more likely than women never to marry (23 percent versus 17 percent). That gender gap has widened since 1960, when the percentages of never-married men and women were 10 percent and 8 percent respectively, and the gulf is steadily rising. It appears men are declining to marry with increasing frequency.

Dr. Smith argues that while men are routinely criticized and told they are acting immaturely for refusing the traditional trappings of manhood, they are actually responding rationally to "the lack of incentives today's society offers them to be responsible fathers, husbands and providers."

Unless you've lived in some sort of sheltered enclave, you have undoubtedly encountered women who have fully adopted an anti-male ideology. A small group of women despise men and take comfort in the sort of anti-male messages offered up in abundance in Western society.

Here's the other side of the coin: There are also women who adore men, and I'm convinced they are far more numerous than their noisy, disgruntled, man-hating counterparts.

For the life of me, I cannot fathom why any man would waste a moment of his life on women who view men with disdain. Nor do I understand why a man would rule out *all* women based on the behavior of an unhappy minority.

Our response to anti-male sentiment doesn't have to be so black and white. We have choices. We can avoid women who don't appreciate us and devote ourselves to women who do. That means we need to know how to recognize the difference, so I asked Dr. Smith for some guidance. She said,

The warning signs of women who do not like men, or who see themselves as victims, are a sense of entitlement and a feeling that they have free access to a man's time, money, and livelihood. If a woman seems to have a lack of respect for you, and puts her needs above yours, she may not be a good fit for you or anyone. If she talks about women's studies classes and how women are oppressed by men,

it's time to go. It's fine to take an interest in women's studies, but not to the extent that a woman thinks men are the enemy. It will only be a matter of time before she starts taking her anger out at you.

If she seems angry all the time, this is also a warning sign to find another companion. If she tries to isolate you from friends or family, or wants you available at all times to do things for her, then run. In addition, if she calls or texts you continuously about where you are, this is not a good sign for the relationship.

I also asked her about the differences between men who choose wisely and those who end up in relationships with women who use the political atmosphere or the legal system for coercion and monetary gain. She said,

Men who choose wisely respect their time, money, and autonomy and do not want a mother or time-manager as a girlfriend. Some men have a tendency to be rescuers or white knights because it makes them feel good to help a damsel in distress, only to find that she abuses him. It is the man who continues to put up with this abuse who is more vulnerable to being victimized by her and by the legal system.

I believe the most dangerous aspect of an anti-male mentality in a woman is the sense of victimhood Dr. Smith mentioned. Spurred on by the more strident quarters of modern feminism, such women equate masculinity with criminality and oppression.

Women who despise men are able to speak endlessly about the rare misogynist who trolls the Internet while overlooking the vastly more numerous men who cherish the women in their lives. They also cultivate a laser-like focus on specific inequities, such as the lower number of female CEOs, while completely ignoring the virtual absence of female sanitation workers and coal miners. Like extremists of any stripe, toxic feminists indulge in selective attention to reality when they are more interested in tearing down men than building up women.

That selective attention is an important red flag. Please don't ignore it.

Her dissatisfaction with men in general will find its way into your relationship. If she indulges herself in a victim-based worldview that frames men as her constant oppressors, then she is preordained to see any man she's romantically involved with in the same light.

Perhaps you believe that Western society truly does oppress women. That's fine, but agreeing with her won't help. When she's angry with you, as she will be at some point, you will be forced to wonder whether she's fighting for your relationship or fighting for her sisterhood.

Relationships take teamwork. Don't hitch yourself to someone who cannot fully participate because she regards you as a member of the enemy camp. There are plenty of amazing, high-functioning women who genuinely appreciate men and who recognize that supporting their own gender doesn't involve destroying yours.

SAFETY IN MASTERY

MINIMIZING RISK BY SETTING A PROTECTIVE TONE FROM THE OUTSET,
GUARDING AGAINST INSIDIOUS RESENTMENT, AND MANAGING RISK IN
MARRIAGE

Mastering the art of human interaction and maintaining relationships is a manly tradition. Even the military genius George S. Patton stressed the importance of it when he wrote, “When a man gets married, he must be just as careful to keep his wife’s love as he was to get it. It would be very sad for both of them if he said to himself, ‘now that I have you I need not worry about losing you.’”

He also said, “May God have mercy on my enemies because I won’t.” The man had impressive philosophical breadth.

Managing risk in romance isn’t simply a matter of choosing wisely. That’s just the beginning. What use is finding a woman of clarity, maturity, and stability if you’re going to neglect her or drive her away? General Patton would not approve. (Note that sometimes things fall apart despite our best efforts. At the end of this chapter, we’ll cover a few preemptive strategies to minimize damage in the event of divorce or dissolution.)

I think there are two things men can do right off the bat to improve relationship longevity. First, be wiser than 90 percent of the other guys out there. Luckily, that’s easy to do. All it takes is the inquisitiveness we discussed earlier and a daily desire to be slightly better than yesterday.

Second, set the right tone in the partnership from the beginning. In this chapter, I’ll give you nine expert tips for setting a tone of admiration and respect and for keeping her interested in you. Guard against little resentments. They grow like weeds in a garden.

I’m sure you’ve heard the metaphor of the frog in boiling water. If you drop a frog in hot water, he’ll jump out. But if you place him in cool water

and slowly raise the temperature, he won't notice the danger until it's too late. We could change the name of the metaphor from "frog in boiling water" to "dude in a bad relationship." Men who ignore the first signs of trouble usually come to regret their complacency.

I'm not talking about little points of friction or disagreement. Differences in style and opinion exist peacefully in healthy relationships. I'm talking about relationship patterns that leave one or the other feeling disrespected.

Here's an example. We've probably all known a guy who thought he had the perfect woman. She was outgoing, affectionate, and beautiful, but early in the relationship she began to get jealous. She wanted him to focus on her, and in order to keep her happy he began eliminating activities—a Friday afternoon beer with his buddies, or a pickup basketball game on Sunday afternoon.

These little self-defeating sacrifices have a way of growing into expectations. She'll be surprised and a little angry if he takes too much time for himself. Eventually, this cycle evolves into a constant, low-grade anxiety about her anger. He ends up feeling controlled and resentful of the woman who once seemed so perfect.

My father's generation had a word for this: pussy whipped. What started out as her charming desire to spend time with him turned into emotional manipulation. In this little scenario, it's tempting to blame her for being controlling, but *he* is the one who allowed the pattern to grow.

Women can also end up feeling aggrieved or mistreated. If you want to be the best version of yourself, and to reduce the chances of ugly breakups and divorces, nip destructive patterns in the bud regardless of whether they start with you or with her.

Here's another great Patton quote: "Never let the enemy pick the battle site." I take that to mean we should take the initiative so problems don't sneak up on us. In that spirit, here are nine tips to help you avoid some of the most common sources of relationship friction. Use them to start the relationship on the right foot, and to keep the relationship on the right track.

Expert Tip 1: Know When to Problem-Solve and When to Empathize

You've probably heard the common old complaint that sometimes women just want men to listen while they vent their frustrations. There's plenty of truth in it.

This doesn't mean women aren't interested in solving problems. Men and women simply approach problems differently. Think back to the research we discussed concerning anxiety. Women tend to focus on feelings in order to make sense of the situation, while men tend to focus on taking action.

Neither is better or worse, they're just different. Unfortunately, it's one of the most common sources of friction in couples. We men sometimes have difficulty understanding why they don't seem to want to solve the problem, and they don't understand why we seem unwilling to help them put their thoughts and feelings in order.

This simple misunderstanding can lead couples into heated arguments that never need to occur. Luckily, the fix is easy: Simply ask her what she needs. Does she want you to connect with her and provide an empathetic ear, or is she looking for your opinion?

If she wants you to listen, then do it well. It's the easiest job in the world. (Up to a point, of course. When she's repeating herself for the second or third time, it enters the realm of counterproductive rumination.)

Don't be proud about asking her whether she needs a fixer or a listener. Smart people ask questions. Just be wary of this troubling response: "I shouldn't have to answer that question. You should know what I need from you."

Punishing you for inquiring about her needs is a serious red flag. It puts you in a no-win situation, and it may be a harbinger of many no-win situations to come.

Expert Tip 2: Don't Apologize for Your Masculinity

At the time of this writing, an American Ivy League university was offering a course for men in which they could purge their "toxic masculinity" (meaning their normal, healthy, male psychology). The female instructors of the course promised to help men become more like women.

Even in my own profession, there are those who unquestioningly defer to the stereotypical female sensibility concerning relationships. They see male protectiveness as controlling, stoicism as cold, and the desire to end conflict quickly as mindlessly avoidant.

Men and women evolved together to function together. It's sad that a few malcontents want to dispose of half of the equation. The happiest couples I know celebrate and capitalize on their differences. It doesn't bode well when

one partner rejects the other's emotional style, regardless of gender. Happy couples not only understand each other's emotional style, they have the ability to shift perspective to their partner's style (Schröder-Abé and Schütz 2011). They actually understand where their partners are coming from.

When her skills and sensibilities are better suited to a problem, set yours aside for the moment. But don't apologize for possessing them. Ironically, the more we bow to the pressure of a few grumps who want us to emasculate ourselves, the less attractive we become to the great majority of women who appreciate men. At the end of this chapter, I'll discuss research clearly indicating that most women are grateful for masculine qualities, regardless of what you may have heard.

Expert Tip 3: Tolerate Her Discomfort

Imagine hypothetical Anthony, who works nights, and hypothetical Olivia, who's unhappy about it. She complains she misses him and wishes he didn't have to work such crazy hours.

If Anthony isn't careful, he'll begin having thoughts like, *I can't win with her. She's mad at me if I work, but she'd be even angrier if I didn't.*

It's a normal reaction, but there's a trap in it. If he's too uncomfortable with her discomfort, he runs the risk of misunderstanding *why* she's uncomfortable. In this case, she's uncomfortable because she misses him. He'll become focused on reducing her discomfort, or more accurately, reducing *his* discomfort about *her* discomfort, and he'll lose sight of the bigger picture.

Most men are taught to keep women happy and to fix their problems. That's a fine goal, but there will be times when their comfort is beyond our reasonable intervention. A lot of us have a tough time sitting with the thought of letting her down or watching her suffer through unpleasant emotions.

If that describes you, then learn to tolerate her discomfort. It won't kill you. Give her the dignity of experiencing her emotions without rushing in to rescue and without sacrificing a long-term good for some short-term relief.

For example, if hypothetical Anthony rearranged his work schedule to reduce Olivia's discomfort, he might create more problems at work than he solves at home. He'll probably fare better if he's empathetic ("I miss you too") but assertive about his responsibilities.

She can survive her discomfort, and so can he. As a thoughtful woman

once told me, “I wish men did not feel they are so responsible for our happiness.”

Expert Tip 4: Be Assertive About Personal Maintenance

Did you know men take more health risks than women, but we use fewer healthcare services? Men represent 70 percent of those who haven't visited a doctor in more than five years (Courtenay 2003). We're simply less inclined than women to attend to our basic needs. We frequently eat poorly, get insufficient sleep, and deprive ourselves of exercise.

There's a lot of pressure for men to neglect themselves, especially men who have responsibilities. There's always someone who needs our time, or some job to be done, so we have to be assertive about taking time to maintain ourselves.

Sleep, diet, and exercise are the basics. They are crucial to bringing our best selves to our relationships, and they help us avoid costly mental and physical problems.

By the way, men who become depressed have higher incidences of cardiovascular disease, high triglycerides, low muscle strength, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and even urinary tract problems (Atlantis et al 2011). Self-neglect is a quick path to depression in men, which in turn can create a small avalanche of problems.

Let's not forget about healthy diversions, like time with other men, fishing, bowling, judo, or whatever takes your mind away from the daily grind. Successful men pursue them unapologetically. That's right, I said unapologetically.

Men, much more than women, are still expected to keep our emotions under control. There's no reason for productive men to bear shame when we need to occasionally escape into a video game or a round of golf. Just let her know what you're doing, and why. No well-adjusted woman will object to her man taking care of himself, especially if it makes him happier at home.

Expert Tip 5: Reject “Happy Wife, Happy Life”

A 2014 study out of Rutgers University found that good marital quality among older couples has particular benefits for wives (Carr et al. 2014).

Women who are happy with their marriages report overall higher life satisfaction and wellbeing. Happy wives are nicer to their husbands than unhappy wives, and their husbands are therefore happier and physically healthier.

Husbands' happiness matters less to wives, according to the study, possibly because unhappy husbands are more stoic about their marital dissatisfaction and don't burden their wives with complaints.

In short, when wives are happy in their marriages, husbands are happier too. That's no surprise, and any reasonable man wants his wife to be happy and fulfilled. (That's much easier to accomplish if you choose a woman who is predisposed to happiness in the first place, by the way.)

However, the expression "happy wife, happy life," isn't typically presented as a feel-good bromide about treating your soulmate with kindness. It's a warning: *Buddy, you better get used to saying "yes, dear" because life will be hell if she doesn't get her way.*

I've heard the "happy wife, happy life" advice more times than I care to recall. It's often given by one man who is advising another to back down in a disagreement with his partner. He probably doesn't want to see his friend suffer the burden of an angry or disappointed woman.

It's horrible relationship advice because it is precisely the opposite of the kind of compromise and cooperation that characterize healthy relationships. Plus, it's insulting. You might as well just get to the point and call her a bitch.

What man wants to slink around trying to avoid being yelled at? And what kind of woman wants to be treated as if she's so emotionally frail that she cannot tolerate her man having an independent thought? If the deprecating nature of the phrase isn't reason enough to ignore "happy wife, happy life," bear in mind that women are generally repulsed by men they manage to emasculate.

Of course you want her to be happy, but not at your expense. You'll resent her for controlling you, and she'll resent you for being a patsy and denying her the best parts of yourself. "Happy wife, happy life" is rubbish. Reject it just as any self-respecting woman would reject the reverse idea.

Expert Tip 6: Don't Lead with Sex

Do you want to stand head and shoulders above the competition when courting a woman? If so, don't lead with sex. I'm not saying you should

abstain until marriage. There are good arguments to be made against that.

However, waiting until you and she have developed an emotional connection greatly increases the chances of relationship success, even when factoring out all other variables like education and religiosity (Busby, Carroll, and Willoughby 2010).

Not only does a bit of sexual self-discipline create better foundations, but it's an exceptional risk-management strategy because it reduces the danger of saddling yourself with an emotionally unstable woman. Women, more than men, tend to develop emotional bonds after sex. It will be much easier to extricate yourself from a hot mess if you've avoided sleeping with her before discovering her emotional problems. From a less cynical perspective, waiting will help you avoid hurting good, kind-hearted women who simply turn out to be incompatible with you.

Waiting also keeps power in your hands while you reduce uncertainty and assess her qualifications. Sex is a powerful tool for women because it is so important to men. If she's great in the sack, it can blind us to traits and behaviors we would otherwise reject.

Besides, flirting and anticipation are fun. It's part of the dance. Let the tension develop on both sides so that you aren't coming across as the indebted recipient of her sexual favors.

So how should men approach women if not with sex? Well, if you're looking for quality women, I'd advise against the sleazy, deceptive techniques offered by the pickup-artist community. Those used-car-salesman manipulations convey weakness, along with a sad desperation to get laid.

It's better to approach women from a position of strength. Women dig men who carry the kind of genuine confidence that comes with personal and professional mastery. Whatever you do in the world, strive to be the best at it. While you're at it, cultivate a social network of real people with whom you've had real dealings instead of a lengthy but meaningless list of Facebook connections. (Increasing your social connectedness also increases the number of worthy women in your circle.) Hone your sense of humor and your ability to converse about the world. Be curious about her history and what makes her tick.

If you're simply out to get laid—and there's nothing wrong with that—then find partners who agree to sex without commitment and proceed with caution. If you're looking for the love of a good woman, then lead with purpose, mastery, humor, inquisitiveness, and social connectedness. Don't

chase pussy if you're seeking connection. Chase excellence, and *she* will want *you*.

Expert Tip 7: Don't Clam Up

In my younger days, I was the king of shutting down with girlfriends. There were times I couldn't speak if my life depended on it. It's not that I didn't want to; the words just wouldn't arrive. It took a lot of work to learn how to verbalize my thoughts with women, but it had to be done. Clamming up is one of the most hurtful things men do to women. One woman told me it's comparable to a woman withholding sex from a man.

When I've interviewed women in the past, they've had some pretty frank words about men who go silent and how hurtful it is. One told me, "Men ignore problems until it's too late. By 'too late' I mean they wait until there is no love or affection left to rebuild on."

Another said, "I wish I understood what's going on in his head when he withdraws. It's so hard to see he's in pain, to know he's in pain, and to also know he'd damn near rather eat glass than admit it."

Not only is it unfair to put women in this position, it's like setting a booby trap for yourself. Men can ruin relationships through their silence. It creates a downward spiral. The less we communicate, the more anxious they become. The more anxious they become, the harder it is to communicate.

From their perspective, our silence can seem childish and hostile, regardless of our intent. Can you blame them for filling in the blanks? Do yourself a favor and seek professional assistance if you struggle with this particular problem.

Expert Tip 8: Don't Play House

I realize I'm repeating myself, but it's one of the most important points in this book: Don't play house. Protect yourself. Protect her. Be clear and intentional about your relationship status, and remember the categories: girlfriend, fiancée/intended, wife/partner. Avoid the perilous no-man's land between these categories.

Expert Tip 9: Study Human Nature

Anyone who owns a car should know how it functions. They should know how to change a tire, flush the radiator, and fill the wiper fluid reservoir. They should know the trouble signs, and how to keep it running.

The same logic applies to people. If you're going to be in a relationship, learn how people work. Be curious. Develop some theories about the human condition and the wild, amusing endeavors between the sexes. Your theories don't have to be completely accurate, they just need to be a foundation from which to frame the quirks of human behavior.

Be especially curious about her history with parents, family, and exes. Not only will it make you a more informed partner, it will make you a more interesting one. People like to talk about themselves, and she will show you exactly who she is if you give her enough time—provide you are willing to observe and listen.

Curiosity isn't merely for the getting-to-know-you phase, to be disregarded once you think you understand what makes her tick. It's a lifelong source of fun and entertainment. Your 47th Valentine's Day together can bring you a level of satisfaction that can be found nowhere else in life if you're willing to observe and listen.

Nurture that curiosity. A master is always improving, and masters rarely find themselves up shit creek without a paddle.

A Word about Managing Risk in Marriage

Do you know what's worse than being up shit creek without a paddle? Being up divorce creek without a prenup. This book doesn't offer legal advice, as I'm not qualified to offer it, and legal conditions vary from place to place. Nevertheless, there are some cautions and strategies every man should be aware of.

Sharon Liko is a Denver-based domestic relations attorney who represents men. I asked her how men can minimize the risk of losing their shirts in a divorce. Sharon is passionate about the topic, and she had a lot to say. First and foremost, she recommends a prenuptial agreement, though it only goes so far to protect you.

"A prenuptial agreement can really only protect your assets," she says. "Agreements waiving maintenance [what used to be called alimony] may not

be enforceable because the court has a right to review maintenance at the time of divorce. If they find that the waiver is not fair or conscionable given that person's current circumstances, the court can set it aside."

Prenuptial agreements can be a difficult subject to broach with a potential bride. In my clinical estimation, it's best to discuss it early in the relationship, just like any other difficult topic. It can be done conversationally and in a non-threatening manner.

For example, you might mention to your girlfriend that you know someone who signed a prenuptial agreement, and that you're curious to hear her opinion about it. Discussing it periodically during the courtship can make it easier to discuss during the engagement. You can also mention early in the relationship that *no one* should marry without a prenup, and you wouldn't marry without one. This might help her take it less personally.

But enough from me, let's get back to Ms. Liko. I'd caution you to heed her counsel. Don't rely on the hope that an emotionally injured and angry spouse will do the right thing during a divorce.

Sharon tells the sort of painful anecdote we've heard too often. "I just had a guy who wanted a prenuptial agreement because he had significant assets. He brought it up to his fiancée and got attorneys involved. On the advice of her attorney, she wouldn't sign it. He married her anyway and then tried to get her to sign a postnuptial agreement, which is valid, and she promised she would.

"She never did, and they got divorced. They were only married for three and a half years, but he had assets that appreciated substantially, and she walked away with about half a million bucks."

Even in cases where partners are cohabiting, an agreement can be useful. Conveniently enough, this type of agreement is called a cohabitation agreement. Sharon says, "It's sort of like a partnership agreement. If you were living with a friend and you started buying property together, or furniture, it would be in your best interest to have something in writing if you guys quit living together or you want to get out from under the property."

Common-law marriage, which perhaps should be called commonly misunderstood marriage, doesn't come about simply because you live with a girlfriend.

"You can cohabit in this state forever without being considered married, so it's not a function of how long you've lived together," she says. "It's a function of the relationship you present to the world.

“If a couple lives together and both partners refer to their significant other as their husband or wife, or they file joint tax returns, or they name each other as spousal beneficiaries on insurance, then they’re holding themselves out as married. They put themselves on the hook for being considered common-law married.”

That’s in Colorado, where Sharon practices. It’s only one of 13 states that recognize common law marriage. You’ll want to check the laws in your area before moving in with your girlfriend.

When I asked Sharon what men can do to protect their parental rights before becoming fathers, she replied bluntly, “Nothing. There’s nothing they can do.”

Like maintenance, parenting rights cannot be bargained away in a pre- or postnuptial agreement. Courts have continuing jurisdiction over issues regarding children, and judges are legally mandated to do what’s in the best interest of children regardless of what the parents may already have agreed. However, there are things men can do during the marriage to protect their parental rights in the event of a divorce.

Sharon says that parental rights fall into two categories: decision-making and parenting time. Decision-making has to do with the major decisions that need to be made in a child’s life, including education, non-emergency medical care, extracurricular activities, and religious upbringing.

She says men should be involved in the daily decision-making with their children in order to protect that right during divorce. Men who are hands-off (for instance, if they work long hours) and who subsequently lose decision-making rights during a divorce are at a severe disadvantage *after* the divorce. These rights are very difficult to reinstate once they’re lost.

“One of the biggest games women will play is with kids,” she says. “They will use the kids as leverage. If the guy is thinking about getting divorced, then he needs to make sure that he’s involved in his kids’ lives and participates as much as possible with kids’ activities. Get to know the teachers, get to know the school personnel.”

She explained that if the wife can convince the court she has been the primary caretaker, then she’s likely to be awarded the majority of the parenting time, particularly if the children are very young or if the husband does not live close by. If the husband has historically deferred all of the major decisions regarding the children to the wife, she could end up with sole decision-making authority. The consequences can be devastating to fathers.

The mother could even choose to move out of state, taking the kids with her, and the father would have a costly, difficult time fighting it.

As to the financial risks of divorce, particularly maintenance, Sharon says men commonly make a couple of big mistakes during marriage that become costly during divorce.

First, men naively think wives who have stayed home to raise children will be able to easily re-enter the workforce. Regardless of how educated or experienced she was when she left the workforce, she becomes increasingly less marketable the longer she remains unemployed. The court may expect her to return to work after a divorce, but it will not expect her to start where she left off. She may be starting at the bottom.

In these situations, the man will probably be on the hook for ensuring that she maintains the standard of living she enjoyed prior to the divorce. Though Sharon recognizes it can be difficult to do, she recommends that husbands urge their wives to return to work after having children in order to prevent this outcome.

“In 2014, the legislature made a big change,” she says. “Colorado now has a maintenance statute which serves as a guideline for judges in establishing the amount and duration of maintenance. In applying the maintenance guidelines, the Court has to consider the length of the marriage and the current earnings of both parties.”

Sharon told me about a case in which the wife had a PhD from MIT, and who once held six-figure jobs. At some point she quit, and for the majority of the marriage she chose to work at a daycare center for \$15 per hour. “You guessed it,” Sharon said. “The husband had to pay her maintenance.”

A second big mistake is losing track of finances. “Some men turn the checkbook over to the wife, and they have no idea how much she’s spending,” Sharon says. “When they get divorced and they look at their bank account for the first time in ten years, they’re shocked at the lifestyle their wife may have been living, the expenditures—clothes, things, hobbies.

“They can’t come back and say ‘Well, I had no idea she was spending all this.’ That’s a lifestyle the husband allowed, and that’s the lifestyle the husband is going to be stuck supporting if he earned enough money. So don’t lose track of the checkbook.” Ignorance or apathy about your own finances is no defense in the eyes of the court.

Men in troubled relationships also need to be strategic about the possibility of incurring criminal charges. Divorce is often preceded by heated

arguments, and men need to be particularly careful to avoid any behavior that could be construed as violent. In the court's view, the definition of violence is not limited to physical contact. Domestic violence can be defined as broadly as blocking someone's exit, making repeated phone calls, or stalking.

"Women are quick to call the police alleging domestic violence, and they may file a protection order against the husband to get him out of the house and keep him away from the kids," Sharon says. "That is one area where women really still have the advantage based on gender. I've seen women outright lie and accuse the man of physical, sexual, and child abuse. That's really hard to defend against."

A permanent protection order or a domestic violence conviction can have far-reaching consequences. Although not in and of itself a criminal offense, a permanent protection order often appears on a person's criminal history. That can directly interfere with your future.

Sharon explained that in addition to never being able to own or possess firearms, a permanent protection order may result in being hassled at the U.S. border if traveling internationally. A permanent protection order or domestic violence conviction can result in job loss or job ineligibility. A person could lose or be denied a security clearance, be turned down for an apartment rental, or be denied a job that requires entry into a person's home.

The best thing to do if an argument gets heated is to simply leave the premises until emotions cool down. If the woman blocks your exit, which happens with some frequency, Sharon advises simply calling the police. Don't push past her or touch her in any way. "If he touches her then he's most likely going to be the one to be arrested," she says.

Sharon points out that men and women have different emotional reactions to divorce. Once a man emotionally comes to terms with the divorce, she says, he generally is able to set aside his hurt feelings and approach the division of property, assets and debts in a fair, businesslike manner. Not so with women. "Women hang on to their hurt feelings for years, and seek revenge by entitlement. They demand a majority of the assets, expect the man to support them for the rest of their lives, and use the children as pawns."

Sharon says men often express disbelief and astonishment that their soon-to-be ex-wives became so vindictive or vengeful. She warns her clients, "The woman you married is not the woman you are divorcing."

Is this frightening you? I hope so, just a little. It pays to be aware of the horror stories and cautionary tales. Personally, I believe divorce is a great

institution... for other people, I mean. Not for the likes of you or me. The fact that we can divorce is incentive to be kind and cordial in a marriage. Imagine what some marriages would look like if there were no escape and people could mistreat each other at will.

Divorce is something to be discussed before marriage, and that discussion needs to include whatever assets each of you may need to protect. The time to consult with attorneys is when you're combining your assets at the beginning, not when you're dividing them at the end.

There's one more action you can take to reduce the chances of divorce, and it's remarkably simple: premarital counseling. It has been shown to substantially increase marital quality and reduce the odds of divorce, though for some reason fewer than 30 percent of engaged couples capitalize on this easy safety measure (Tambling and Glebova 2013).

I'd wager most couples ignore it because they see no point in counseling when the relationship is running smoothly, as is usually the case just before the wedding vows. That's like wondering why a person should buy auto insurance *before* they get into an accident.

What Only You Can Give Her

A few years ago, I posted an online survey asking for women's thoughts on men. Their frustrations were predictable. They told me it hurts when we give them the silent treatment, that we are sometimes overly focused on finding solutions rather than listening, and that we too frequently stop trying to impress them after they fall in love with us.

What caught me off guard was the amount of appreciation they expressed for masculinity in general. The compliments far outweighed the complaints. Here are a few things they like about men:

- "I like the serene and effortlessly sexy way they carry themselves when they feel like they're in control. Here are some examples: carrying a big load of groceries into the house, checking the oil of the car, arranging his fantasy football league, killing a creepy bug in the basement, opening a jar for me, or driving a stick shift. When he's in this relaxed state of control, all I can do is melt and admire."

- “What do I like most about men? Their simplicity... sex and food.”
- “They tend to be less catty than females, and often present themselves in a way closer to that which they really are.”
- “They’re easygoing and uncomplicated.”
- “Their boyishness. The sense of humor and play that some men have is by far what I like most.”
- “Humor. Protectiveness. Strength.”
- “I like that men are usually more forthright about their thoughts. I like that men can disagree with each other and that doesn’t seriously endanger their relationships. I like how men are more free to express their sense of humor. I like more than anything else the combination of power (with the inherent potential to destroy) coupled with the man’s choice for tenderness.”
- “Their confidence, strength, and tendency to be easygoing.”
- “I actually love that men are ‘doers,’ that they want to help you fix your problems and offer solutions. If I want to just bitch about something, I tell them that up front, but otherwise it’s nice to have some fresh perspective about what to do.”
- “I envy many of the abilities that seem innate to men. They often seem to have better control of their emotions, to forgive quicker and easier.”
- “I like that men are logical thinkers, that their world is usually black and white. I like that they are daredevils at times and overprotective at other times.”
- “Their sense of humor, their masculinity and strength.”
- “Men don’t understand how very much we need them. It is so in vogue nowadays to act like we are so independent and have no need of men in our lives, but it simply isn’t true. We are lonely without you.”

Most of this book has been about risk management. This chapter was about adding to your security by seeking greatness in relationships. A list of expert tips is a good place to start, but what these women told me suggests they want something more fundamental. They want us to be *men*, and researchers are beginning to take note. One researcher, Andrea Meltzer (2017), found that women report greater marital satisfaction when their

husbands are more masculine, powerful, and assertive than those wives whose husbands had fewer masculine traits.

The same researcher found that women enjoy improved self-esteem and marital satisfaction when their husbands value them for sex—objectification, in essence—provided they know their husbands appreciate their minds as well as their hips (Meltzer, McNulty, and Maner, 2017).

In other words, research supports the seemingly obvious idea that women generally appreciate unrefined masculine attention when it comes from men to whom they are lovingly committed. Why else would women spend so much time, money, and effort trying to look good? (Andrea Meltzer has been quick to point out that few women want to be catcalled by strangers on the street, and who can blame them?)

Women who are worthy of our devotion don't want us to conceal our masculinity. It's the one thing they can get nowhere else. This reminds me of an old fable.

There was once a lion cub who was separated from his mother and raised by a flock of sheep. Knowing no better, he began to imitate the flock. Instead of roughhousing and growling like a normal cub, he would stand timidly in one spot and bleat.

One day a pride of lions approached, hunting their next meal. They saw the cub among the sheep, bleating and cowering. Aghast at the sight of a lion acting like a lamb, one of giant males strode up to cub and roared, "What's wrong with you? Why are you acting like a sheep?"

The cub didn't answer. He just shivered and bleated, so the lion grabbed the cub by the nape of his neck and dragged him to the water's edge where he could see his reflection. That mane... those teeth... the eyes of a king. He finally saw himself as he truly was. The cub raised his head, roared, and claimed his place in the world.

That's where the fable ends, but I'll bet that cub went on to live a very good life. If your good life includes having the right woman by your side, then carry yourself proudly and settle for nothing less than a woman of clarity, maturity, and stability. When a man's romantic house is in order, the good life is always within reach.

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