

A romantic couple in winter clothing embracing in the snow. The man is wearing a brown jacket and a dark beanie, and the woman is wearing a dark jacket and a dark beanie. They are standing in front of a building with a sign that says "1057". The scene is filled with falling snow, creating a soft, romantic atmosphere.

RelationshipRX

WITH LAURA DABNEY, MD

THE TOP FOUR
“GET OUT NOW”
RED FLAGS
WHEN DATING

RED FLAGS WHEN DATING

A disheartening number of my male patients have either gotten divorced or suffered through long and painful relationships because of a single, core issue: They failed to act on a Red Flag before it was too late.

A red flag is any issue that causes major disruption to a relationship – they are serious problems that require professional help. Yet the mistake I've seen hundreds of men make is that they believe, without foundation, that they have either the skills or the commitment to help a woman overcome her serious challenges. He believes he can be her savior, her knight in shining armour, that he can love her enough to overcome anything.

Yet there is a much more bitter truth: When you spot a red flag, it's best to get out.

The most serious red flags fall into 4 main categories:

1. Addiction or severe psychological issues
2. Legal or financial trouble
3. Lack of empathy
4. Boundary crossing

Let's take a look at why each one is so damaging.

Addiction or severe psychological issues:

Many of the men who come to my office are grieving over the trauma and stress brought on by a wife or girlfriend's addiction or severe emotional issues (such as eating disorders or suicide attempts). Very often, they tell me they knew about the issues before the relationship got serious but couldn't bring themselves to leave, to desert her when she was down.

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They tell me, too that the concept of leaving left them heartbroken and alone.

Yes, good people struggle with addiction and other issues. The fact that alcohol or gambling or drugs or bulimia play a controlling role in a person's life does not define their worth as a human being. In fact, I argue that it's a sign of their humanity, that everyone struggles with something. We cannot fairly define people by their challenges.

Nor, however, does another person's challenge dictate our responsibilities. Addiction, in particular, is a powerful force that requires professional intervention, treatment, and often years of hands-on assistance. Simply being a woman's boyfriend does not demand that a man to put his life on hold for her. Neither does it mean that he is in any position to help cure her. In fact, people who are actively overcoming addiction and severe psychological issues are not ready to be in a relationship. Their attention must be squarely focused on recovery; for many, that process will take nearly everything they've got.

Legal or financial trouble:

Another common predicament in which men find themselves is trying to deal with a girlfriend's legal or deep financial trouble. Maybe she has a history of arrests or extensive debt. Again, like addiction and psych issues, legal/financial trouble does not necessarily reflect a person's character.

However, a pattern of trouble demonstrates a lack of respect for people and boundaries.

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It does not matter whether those people are police officers or family members or the boundaries are realistic financial limitations – when a person habitually crosses them, they are showing that they have no respect for boundaries in general.

If you begin a relationship with a woman in trouble, the best-case scenario is that you distance yourself. But even then her issues will consume her, leaving her less time and energy for your relationship. In the worst-case scenario, you end up paying emotionally and/or financially for troubles that were never yours to begin with.

Lack of empathy:

This flag is so red it ought to be on fire. I can't tell you how many men tell me stories about women who expect emotional and financial and practical support from them, but who offer virtually nothing in return. Happy, lasting relationships are built on a foundation of intimacy, and that requires an ongoing give and take by both individuals. Relationships that are built on anything less are headed for heartache.

Don't settle for anyone who gives less to the emotional health of the relationship than you. You deserve to be fully supported and cared for. If you experience anything less, let her go without further ado.

Boundary crossing:

As a society, we don't pay much attention to men who suffer physically or emotionally at the hands of their wives or girlfriends, but it is more prevalent than you may imagine.

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I have worked with men who tell me they were raised to “never strike a woman,” but who have been slapped, bitten, hit with heavy objects and generally attacked by their significant other. Being the attacked is much different than being the attacker, but those differences are not assigned by gender.

Abuse can be verbal, as easily as it can be physical.

Verbal abuse is characterized by any attempt to make another person feel weak or powerless, to minimize or humiliate them. It can be as simple as her saying, “You’re so dumb” or swearing and calling you names, and as complex as a need to “one-up” your accomplishments whenever possible.

I encourage you to exercise a zero tolerance policy when it comes to verbal or physical abuse. One time is too many. End the relationship immediately.

Ending a relationship is never easy, especially when you care deeply for your partner. Red flag issues, however, are serious and complicated. You owe it to yourself and to your partner to move on—either to a happier relationship or until the existing red flag issues have been fully and professionally resolved.