

Available But Not Acceptable - Sticking to Standards and Dealing with Feelings

My most recent romantic relationship was one of the two best of my dating life so far. The relationship lasted over five years and it was not a difficult breakup in terms of parting. One phone call to say goodbye, a final "I love you" and that was it. Of course there was sadness, as there always is with any ending of any relationship - be it romance, friendship, or other loss. I was definitely vulnerable, somewhat cynical about romance and men, spending time reconnecting with myself and the way my world looks when I am on my own.

Along came a man who seemed to take an interest in me and in my feelings. He was someone I already knew a little bit as a possible friend through an organization whose meetings we both attend. When we first met, I immediately ruled him out as a potential romantic partner because we were both involved with other people, and I don't cross that line, nor did I have any interest in doing so. He crossed my radar as someone who seemed to have some depth of feeling and an emotional clue. Or so I thought.

Around the time that my romance was ending, I found out this man was also single again. We began talking more frequently on the phone and in person, emailing back and forth, and I know there was definitely some romantic interest going on between us, though we never discussed it. I found myself thinking loving thoughts about him, and definitely had romantic feelings towards him as our conversations and connections seemed to be deepening. There were conversations we had where I shared things with him about old feelings. I found myself able to cry easily with him, something I usually don't do with men, especially ones I may be interested in romantically. Somehow I was able to let down my barriers with him and it felt safe to do that. I don't know how or why that happened; I just know that it did.

There were bumpy points along this emotional road. This man frequently flirts with other women, and I felt heartache when I saw him being physically affectionate with other women at organization meetings. But we were 'only friends' so I kept these thoughts to myself. However, I found myself being upset with him when he would be distant from me if we ran into each other at the organization meetings where we had met. I found myself so caught up in watching him and his actions. Needless to say, I was allowing this to take up lots of space in my head.

At one point we tried a social outing and it was an uncomfortable experience. Even the plans for going on the outing caused a rift between us, because I was operating in codependent mode - wanting to please him so he would like me. At the same time he was operating in narcissistic mode - the plans were all about him and that's the way it should be, period. Each of us brought our own dysfunction to this relationship and that made it exhausting! I also found myself beginning to feel like his 'therapist for free,' in that our phone conversations were becoming all about him and less about me. That was my codependent self allowing my life not to matter in comparison to his - totally my fault.

Not long after our one social outing I realized I needed to take a step back from this relationship as it had become toxic for me. I did that by distancing myself, which was hard since we still saw

each other at organization meetings twice a week. But I did this to protect myself. I had seen my neediness and desperation around this man and it was hurting my feeling on so many levels. The only way I knew to deal with it was to disconnect, which I did. With a vengeance.

Since that time, I have been able to examine my feelings for this man, which I admit are still loving and romantic at times, even though I know how wrong he is for me and for so many different reasons. There is a side to him that I've seen and still get glimpses of occasionally which is open and honest, where he allows his feelings and his heart to guide him. That is his best side; the side I warm to, the side to which I long to connect. That's the side that seemed to be there for me on the phone or in person and seemed able to listen and really hear me when I shared certain things with him. Sadly, that's only a small piece of what this man is really about. The things that trouble me about him outweigh the things I see that I appreciate. And so as hard as it is, I am trying to maintain my distance and keep my head about me where this man is concerned. It's hard to do. The revelation for me regarding this man is to finally realize who he actually reminds me of and how scary that awareness is for me.

There are two important lessons for me with regard to this most recent experience. The first is that just because someone is romantically available does not mean he is romantically acceptable. Big difference there. My tendency is to go for men who are familiar or known, in terms of the fact that their patterns of behavior seem that way to me. In my own emotional head, I change those words to "comfortable" or "safe" when I really should not do that. Familiar or known does not always mean comfortable or safe. In fact in my relationship history nothing could be further from the truth. With the exceptions of my first serious relationship and my most recent serious relationship, in the twenty years between those two I repeatedly went for men who were emotionally toxic for me, men who all had "red flags" flying around their heads from the very first day. Yet despite the obvious signs, I went for these men anyway. As I reflect back, I can see how quickly the vulnerable side of my emotional head justified these men as acceptable when in fact they were anything but.

In truth, these men (including this most recent 'almost encounter' man) all had one thing in common - they behaved as certain members of my origin family behave toward me, which made them not "comfortable" or "safe" but rather simply "known." By that I mean the behavior of these toxic men seemed familiar to me because historically I was used to being treated the same way by others who had been close to me, particularly in my family of origin. That was a major revelation, and one that helped me see the importance of continued work on all relationships and the need for detachment from anyone in any area of my life who thinks it's all right to treat me in a less than respectful and reciprocal way.

What is far more important and emotionally revealing is how easy it is for me to fall back into old destructive patterns when it comes to all relationships, thereby choosing to abandon myself and my own standards, which on an intellectual level I know is not right for me. Here again, I need to stay aware when I feel myself being drawn into relationships based on those old patterns - be they romance, friendship, work related, colleagues, origin family members, etc. I have learned how important it is for me today to not ignore the 'red flags' and to pay attention to my inner self. At times I do a body check and ask myself some questions. How am I feeling inside my body?

Is my stomach doing flip flops? Does my face feel hot? Are my hands shaking? If I am having any of those physical reactions, then I know those are warning signals for me to back away as quickly and calmly as possible and don't look back.

Happily, my most recent romantic relationship was a break from this old pattern, so I know I am capable of stepping back from choosing the old familiar and very dangerous and hurtful road. It was such a gift to be with this man in my most recent romance, and to know that when I stuck to the standards I value the reward of this man came into my life as affirmation of that effort. Though the romance has ended, I am grateful for all that we had together, because for the first time in twenty years I was with someone who gave the adoration and admiration and respect and regard and acceptance I know I deserve, and that I try to give to myself every day. Since the end of that relationship, I also let go of some other relationships that were bringing some toxicity into my life. This helpful work lightened my emotional load and left me feeling lonely, but with time along came new people to whom I could connect and with whom I feel a better sense of my own value as it is reflected back to me from them. This demonstrates the reward for the ongoing daily work of remaining true to my standards as mentioned earlier in all relationships in my life.

The sadness still comes from time to time, especially when I feel myself slipping back into old patterns. I know where that comes from. Growing up, the messages from my family of origin taught me to accept unacceptable behavior from certain people. I then carried those messages with me well into adulthood. It was hard to allow myself to realize how wrong these behaviors toward me really were, and even harder still to learn about distancing and establishing healthy emotional boundaries. Hardest of all is to stay detached and distant from anyone who chooses not to accept or honor the boundaries I worked hard to create and maintain. But I have learned through many experiences how much better my life is when there are people in it who give me the value and regard that comes along with honoring my boundaries. I have learned that letting go of people who can't or choose not to do this leaves room in my life for people who can and who have no problem choosing to care for me as I deserve.

I put myself out into the world every day, and I keep myself open to possibilities with regard to relationships in all areas of my life. In striving to connect to others in healthy balanced relationships, I earn the happiness and contentment I deserve, along with the kinds of relationships that bring joy, hope, peace and love.