

There could be more to relationship-hopping than you think



Blake Lively has bounced between Penn Badgley, Leonardo DiCaprio and Ryan Reynolds.

DO YOU NEED AN

interMEN

Who doesn't know a girl – or *is* the girl – who bounces from guy to guy, always searching for that special chemistry? For a generation of us who learnt dating rules from *Sex and the City*, the idea of try, try, try before you buy isn't just normal, it's smart. But could something deeper be at work?

"There are many issues that might drive women to continually change relationships," says psychologist Lissa Johnson (lissajohnson.com.au). "She could have a fear of being hurt; her self-esteem may be low, so she assumes any man who is with her must be flawed; she might be chasing the mirage of a 'perfect man'; or it might simply be a misunderstanding of what's normal in a relationship, such as arguments and conflict."

Worryingly, you could also be subconsciously gravitating towards the exact relationship you don't want, adds Johnson. "We can tend to choose people who confirm our negative beliefs about ourselves and others," she says. "For example, a belief that no one will ever meet your needs can foster attractions to men who are unavailable."

Yep, this is a mother of a problem. Who wants an interMENTion?

If you're a fairytale hunter...

Meet Stacey. She's 23, gorgeous, and more often than not, she's got a guy on the scene. Stacey's love-life has always been full – and dramatic.

"I'm a hopeless romantic," she says. "My exes have told me that love isn't how we see it in the movies, but I refuse to adjust my expectations."

According to relationships counsellor Désirée Spierings (sexualhealthaustralia.com.au), many women

get hung up on the fantasy of a fairytale ending. "When the honeymoon phase is over, you start to see your partner's flaws, and that's when you need to start working on the relationship. Instead, these women go from one honeymoon phase to the next."

We're not saying ignore warning signs; just look at them in a new light. "See problems as potential vehicles for greater intimacy and approach difficult topics with a goal of learning about each other," advises Johnson.

If you totally hate going solo...

For some, the idea of being alone is terrifying. Tamara, 22, started dating at 16 and hasn't been single for longer than a few months since. "I do regret it in a way because I feel like I didn't really give myself the chance to figure out who I was," she admits.

While it's natural to want to test-drive different relationships, it's vital to maintain your identity in the process, says relationship psychologist John Aiken (johnaiken.com.au). "Relationship junkies often lose themselves in their partners," he says. The solution? "Create independent goals and interests, develop your own group of friends, spend time on your own and get comfortable in your skin," he advises.

Look at potential partners as an "added bonus", adds Spierings. "It's important to realise you don't need anyone else to complete you."

If you're easily bored...

Narelle, 33, says the excitement of new romance motivated a past relationship-hopping habit. "I enjoyed the thrill of

DOS & DON'TS FOR RECOVERING "BOUNCERS"

- ➡ **DO** give yourself time after a breakup to assess what went wrong. "You need to gain some insight to stop repeating mistakes," says Aiken.
- ➡ **DON'T** rush big decisions. "Talk with a friend, family member or counsellor to get some perspective," he adds.
- ➡ **DO** accept uncertainty in life, says Spierings.
- ➡ **DON'T** stress! "There's no formula for when to settle down," says Johnson.

the chase," she recalls. "When I had them, it was no longer fun."

If you're ready to split before your date orders dessert, ask yourself what's really going on, says Johnson. "It can be tricky to know when a relationship just isn't right, or whether we're running from our fears," she points out. "Be honest with yourself and ask, 'Am I trying to protect myself from something?' If so, it's worthwhile facing those issues. Talk to a trusted friend, write them in a journal, or simply think about them in new ways."

Over time, Narelle discovered a lot more than boredom under the surface. "I think I was looking for a man to replace my father," she says. "I needed someone to want me around and shower me with affection I never received from my dad."

Becoming a parent herself has helped Narelle face her fears, and she's found lasting love with the father of her children. She still worries, though, that her issues will resurface. "We have a great relationship, happy and content, but I do wonder if it's enough to keep us together for a long time," she says.

The key, according to Johnson, is to remember that relationships aren't just about the good times. "See them as opportunities for learning and growth," she says. "Growth can be uncomfortable, but it's important for your relationship's wellbeing." Penny Carroll **COSMO**

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