

Jerk Alert! Is he a clown or a keeper? You'll know for sure if you heed these signs

by Pamela K. Johnson

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A few years ago, I got involved with a man I shall--to protect the guilty--call Thomas. (Names and potentially incriminating details have been changed throughout.) He was new to the small town where I lived, but I knew his cousin, so I took Thomas at face value. Besides, the place was short on Black-male prospects, and Thomas, who hailed from a chocolate city, brought with him a sexy street vibe that I took a liking to. We had lots of fun together, going to baseball games, to all-you-can-eat cafeterias and, eventually, to my place and to his for nightcaps. It wasn't hope-to-die love, but he was easy to be with and I started to think of him as my man.

A few months after we met, as Thomas and I sat in a laundromat chatting and watching my clothes chase one another in the jumbo dryer, a police siren blared. It got closer and closer. Suddenly Thomas hopped out of his seat, looking crazed.

"Relax," I said, "they're not coming for you."

"How do you know?" His eyes fixed on mine.

"Well, why would they?"

"Because I'm wanted in three states," he whispered.

"What?!" I squawked.

He told me the offenses, none of which had been violent. Still, three states worth of bad behavior was plenty for me. I started to imagine us as a twenty-first-century Bonnie and Clyde dodging round after round of police bullets. That's when Sistergirl had to step.

You know how it goes. You meet a guy and all the bells and whistles go off. He seems perfect until you discover the thing that you cannot live with. No way, no how. Once you

discover it, you realize that there were hints all along, and you wonder why you didn't pick up on them before you invited him into your heart.

Don't beat yourself up over it. We've all let a bozo or two spend more time than he should in our lives. But when we start to feel as if we've dated the whole Ringling Brothers crew, it's time to wise up and ask ourselves what role we've played in creating our own circus.

Too often we rush into romance. In our haste and hunger, we let ourselves get jerked around--not only by the guy, but also by our own gullibility. Slow down, suggests John Van Epp, Ph.D., a marriage and family therapist in Ohio. In his videotape series and forthcoming book *How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk*, he emphasizes the importance of taking relationships one step at a time. This means squelching the impulse to hurry up and get with him because (a) he's so fine, (b) he's so sweet, (c) he's such a firecracker between the sheets, or (d) all of the above.

Van Epp says that strong love connections--the kind that lead to happily-ever-after marriages--depend on bonding in five key areas: knowledge, trust, reliance, commitment and sex. These are the bricks with which you build the base of a good relationship. To keep the foundation solid, level and balanced, you'll want to make sure you're no farther along in one area than another.

For example, if you commit yourself to someone who hasn't shown you that you can rely on him, you've set yourself up for disappointment. You may find yourself deeply involved emotionally (and perhaps physically, financially and in other ways) with someone you can't be sure is there for you when the road gets rocky. Or if you sleep together after, say, two weeks, you're having sex before you've developed sufficient trust. (How can you trust him? You haven't spent enough time with him to know where he's coming from.) But when you're smart about whom you let into your heart--and how soon--you won't waste precious time on a guy who's not a keeper, greatly enhancing your odds of finding lasting love.

THE OUTLAW

Even some of my closest friends have never heard the story of my fugitive-from-the-law boyfriend. I felt too embarrassed by it, as if I should somehow have seen him coming.

But I shouldn't blame myself, Van Epp says. My experience just underscores why you can't skip ahead.

"There's no way to know someone outside of spending time with him and sharing experiences," adds Van Epp. "Instead, some people know a person at level 2, yet form attachment at level 8."

Instead of taking Thomas at face value, I might have asked him more questions over our buffet suppers. You don't want to interrogate a guy and intimidate him, Van Epp says, but you do want to inquire about things such as his childhood, his relationship with his family, his past romantic liaisons, the things that influenced him the most, his likes and dislikes. I could even have asked Thomas--in a completely casual conversation about, say, Black men and racial profiling--if he himself had ever had a run-in with the law. (I wish I'd thought of that one.)

And don't just rely on what a guy says; rather, make sure to watch him in action. Check his moods and the way he handles his emotions. Assess his level of maturity and his ability to put things in perspective. Look for patterns and find out what's behind them. You'll begin to get an image of the man that you can hold against the retouched picture he presents when he's trying to impress. If who he says he is and who you see are two different people, put on the brakes.

THE CONFIDENCE MAN

To Francesca, Jared seemed like a man you could ask to guard the gold at Fort Knox. And, unlike guys who can talk about themselves for six hours straight without taking a breath, he seemed to find her fascinating. "He wanted to know all about me. He asked lots of questions," she remembers of their initial meeting, when she was 31 and he was 33. He was refreshingly nonjudgmental as he listened to stories about her childhood, her family, even about past romances. His manner was so easy that she felt perfectly comfortable sharing everything with him including, eventually, the keys to her apartment.

"Without my knowledge, he would go over to my place during his lunch hour and go through my stuff," Francesca recalls. Digging through her closet, he found a cache of journals she had kept over the years. "He read them and took notes. Then he began to

drop names of old lovers." He would slip a former flame's name into casual conversation, or he'd say he had run into someone that she had been with intimately--people he could not possibly have known or seen. Francesca thought she was going crazy. Ultimately, Jared used her diary entries to intimidate her into performing sexual acts that shamed her. But by that time, she was too caught up in him to pull away.

"He was a masterful manipulator," she recalls. When she finally found the courage to sever ties with him, 12 years had passed and she had lost a large chunk of her confidence, which she has yet to regain.

"Francesca deeply needed to feel loved, feel special," Van Epp explains. Jared's attentiveness gave her the good feeling she craved. But his questioning also gave him insight into her vulnerabilities--a toehold for him to take advantage of her. "Jared centered all his attention on Francesca, giving him an easy way to hook her," observes Van Epp. She didn't see that he was asking all the questions and revealing little about himself. She trusted too soon.

Give your partner time to prove himself trustworthy, Van Epp says. Share small nuggets of who you are and wait a bit to notice the impact that has on the relationship: Does it bring you closer or drive a wedge between you? If you have consistent, affirming experiences with a person, you have the basis of trust.

THE LEECH

Donna's heart swelled with sympathy for Clayton. She met the handsome 41-year-old psychologist just as the custody battle for his children got nasty: His ex ran off with the kids, heading for the Canadian border.

Donna, 38, tried to ease Clayton's pain by helping him contact various authorities. She wasn't too hard on him when she invited him to dinner at her place and "he arrived half an hour late and a little tipsy." And she fronted the money for a little weekend jaunt when his credit card was declined. He seemed to appreciate her help and support. So she wasn't sure what to make of those times when she asked for his company because she was going through a rough patch, and he wouldn't make the effort to come over. "I began to realize that he was a taker," Donna says.

"Donna drew a mental picture of Clayton that was based more on what she projected onto him than her true interactions with him," Van Epp says. She assumed that Clayton was, at his core, an honorable man, so she kept making excuses for why he did the things he did. Had she let the relationship progress slowly, observing and analyzing his behavior, she might have realized that if Clayton didn't manage himself or his own life well, he wouldn't add anything but trouble to hers.

Reliability is measured in everyday interactions. If he says he'll call, does your phone ring? Does he constantly make dates and then cancel?

It's all about consistency. As time passes, you want to be able to say with conviction that you can rely on this man to have your back. Your relationship shouldn't advance to the next stage until you feel confident he's someone you can depend on in a pinch.

THE COMMITMENTPHOBE

Connie, 28, was thrilled when Roy finally popped the question. After four years together, she knew he was the man for her. But the engagement stretched on, with Roy, age 31, constantly delaying the wedding plans. His behavior was puzzling: He had said yes to the engagement, which certainly implied a commitment. But his refusal to plan the wedding was the sound of a siren growing closer. Every time she tried to set a date, he seemed to need more time. He wanted to get his finances together first, he said. Then he wanted time to focus on a big project at work. Finally, after two years, Connie saw the flashing lights. She became completely convinced that she would never see Roy at the altar.

Commitmentphobes come in all flavors: Some spend years with a person but can never bring themselves to jump the broom. Others engage in serial monogamy--a series of exclusive short-term relationships--but move on before they can get tied down. And then there are the flat-out players, for whom commitment to one woman is out of the question.

Van Epp suggests that Connie might have uncovered the roots of Roy's reluctance to commit by asking if there were things he still needed to do as a single man. Did he feel he had the right amount of space in the relationship? What were his feelings about marriage in general?

A person's inability to commit can have direct ties to his relationship with his parents, says Van Epp. Do you sense that your potential mate worries that his duty to his folks will conflict with his obligation to you? Does he have a controlling parent (or two)? That could make him fear being controlled by you. "Good relationships with the parents--and the resolution of early family problems--lead to better connections with a partner," he says.

Many commitmentphobes are afraid of losing their independence, of not being able to provide for a family, or of having the marriage fail. If you follow Van Epp's system, you'll have talked about his fears (and your own) and, one hopes, worked your way through them. That way your man learns he can trust and rely on you--which may ease his commitment phobia. And if he's not the commitment type? Well, at least you'll know sooner rather than later.

THE BOY TOY

Olivia was in her early 30s when her job transferred her to Spain, the fulfillment of her lifelong dream to live abroad. She hadn't yet mastered the language or the new turf when she met Carlito, a twentysomething construction worker with a gentle soul. He seemed to understand her isolation; he was estranged from his family and too shy to make many friends. The two found comfort in each other's arms.

"The sex was great," Olivia coos. "And Carlito was always there for me." Each day he came with a surprise for her: flowers, jewelry, tickets to a show. "The only problem," she says, "was that he didn't have much of a personality." But because he treated her so wonderfully--in the bedroom and out--Olivia ignored the fact that she was intellectually bored. Before she knew it, a year had passed.

One day as she and Carlito were strolling through the town square they happened upon a fortune teller who spoke perfect English. "Though you're lonely and I know this will be hard for you, you know what you must do," he told Olivia.

She had to admit to herself--and later to Carlito--that tender sex and oodles of goodies did not a relationship make. In fact, by stringing him along for the sex and gifts, she had been

acting like the real jerk in the relationship. With a heavy heart, she moved on. Eventually she found true love.

"Enjoyable sex helps minimize any negative thoughts you might have about a man," Van Epp explains. Had Olivia stayed out of the sack and explored what she and Carlito really had in common, she wouldn't have needed a psychic to tell her that Carlito wasn't the one.

Old-fashioned as it may sound, we may do ourselves a favor by keeping our level of physical involvement limited to holding hands, kissing and hugging for some time. "If you get a good man and practice self-restraint until it's clear that he's the one, you'll have 40 to 50 years of great sex," says Van Epp, who emphasizes that he believes sex should come after marriage--the ultimate commitment. But even if you choose not to wait that long, do hold out until you have clarity that your new man is a keeper--in all the ways that matter.

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In "Jerk Alert!" (page 174), ESSENCE contributing writer PAMELA JOHNSON helps us answer this essential question regarding our choices in men: "Is he a clown or a keeper?" What did she learn from those she interviewed--women who ignored the "this is not the guy for you" signal? "We have the power to make wiser choices and the ability to see little problems before they become big problems," she says. "Sometimes we fail to step up, allowing a sense of hopelessness to make us settle for whatever we can get. We can do better."

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