



“Don’t Make My Love Mistake!”

Romantic regrets are the most common kind of remorse. And, sure, yours may not be as bad as falling for a guy with scissors for hands (oh, Edward!). But we bet it taught you a ton about what *not* to do the next time. We’ve collected the four top relationship doozies, plus all the intel you need to avoid the same fate.

By Juno DeMelo

MISTAKE #1: DATING BOYS, NOT MEN

Despite having a graduate degree and a thriving career, Sarah,* 36, spent much of her twenties and early thirties “dating underachievers who didn’t have their act together,” she admits. Her “sweet, pot-smoking man-children” included a debt-ridden aspiring writer, a fantasy-sports addict, and a compulsive shopper. Sarah left each relationship within a year. Why the attraction? “They were all really kind guys,” she says. “And they offered an unconditional love that, as a perfectionist, I had a hard time giving to myself. It also took the focus off me and put it on someone who needed to be ‘fixed’ more than I did.”

Why It Happens: Being the high-functioning person in a relationship gives you power and control. And that’s kismet for perfectionists, who tend to judge themselves harshly. “If your own sense of worth is already low, being with someone more successful than you can feel threatening,” says couples therapist Jane Greer, Ph.D., author of *What About Me? Stop Selfishness from Ruining Your Relationship*.

Choosing someone who is *less* ambitious, on the other hand, can not only boost your ego but make you feel stronger and more secure in comparison.

Lesson Learned: To resist the immature charmer, says Greer, pay attention to your own needs, rather than his. What makes you feel good about yourself? Take a hard look at your self-criticism—that habit can drive you toward men who offer little more than admiration and a chance for you to feel superior. “Set more realistic expectations for yourself in your daily life,” Greer advises. Didn’t make it to the gym today? Don’t beat yourself up; just go tomorrow. Finishing a project at work a

tiny bit late? If the final product is good, it isn’t the end of the world. Once you start feeling more like your own friend and biggest fan, you’ll be more attracted to partners who are equals, not underlings.

MISTAKE #2: BLENDING YOUR FINANCES TOO SOON

At 34, Shelly bought her first home on her own. When her then-boyfriend of a year moved in, they split the monthly mortgage and utility payments. “But then another side of Mike emerged. He had to have everything his way, and he started tackling home improvements—things I hadn’t asked him to do. He installed a hot tub and built a shed in the backyard.”

When they broke up after two years, he said she owed him \$15,000 for what he put into the house. “We’re still fighting about it! Now he’s pissed if I even take a vacation, because he says I should be paying him back.”

Why It Happens: About 10 percent of unmarried men and women—or more than 7 million people—are cohabiting with their partners, and though they’re less likely than married couples to pool all their money, many roomies-with-benefits do share major expenses. That’s partly a matter of convenience, says Sonya Britt, Ph.D., an associate professor of personal financial planning at Kansas State University, but there can also be a wishful-thinking element: the idea that merging your finances makes you more of a couple.

Lesson Learned: Money and relationships, from

platonic to romantic, can be a volatile combination. The key is communication, says Britt. “Make a clear plan ahead of time about purchases and expenses—who’s going to pay for what, and how would things be divided later? In Shelly’s case, she could have said, ‘If I want something for my house, like a hot tub, I pay for it, and you provide the labor. If you want something for my house, that’s your gift to me.’”

MISTAKE #3: IGNORING THE SIGNS

Fresh from a long-term relationship with a fun-loving bartender, Jill fell for Matt: good-looking, smart, and sensitive, with an executive-level job. He was recently divorced and seemed gun-shy about dating, so she gave him

plenty of space and little pressure.

Matt was intensely private; Jill

People **rationalize** red flags for lots of reasons.

And if you’re contemplating sharing a big purchase, talk about what would happen if you don’t stay together. It may feel awkward to discuss the potential of splitting up, but—as with a preup—it means you negotiate when you’re friends, not enemies.



LOVE

met only one or two of his friends, and days would sometimes go by without contact. But she kept her cool...even when she found a thong in his bed.

"He seemed as surprised as I was, and I accepted his explanation that it must have been a mix-up at the laundromat." In hindsight, the now 32-year-old realized that she "chose to be dumb because I wanted it to be true." When a friend told Jill she'd seen Matt with another woman, it was clear that he had been cheating all along.

Why It Happens: People rationalize red flags for lots of reasons, some of them counterintuitive, says Terri Orbuch, Ph.D., author of *Finding Love Again: 6 Simple Steps to a New and Happy Relationship*. If you're not really ready for a serious relationship, for example, you might stick with a guy whose actions suggest he's also afraid of commitment, she explains. More often, though, it's the opposite: Feeling driven to settle down, or sure there's no one better out there, makes it tempting to dismiss doubts and overlook telling reveals—while assuring yourself it will work out if you give him enough space.

Lesson Learned: There are two kinds of jealousy, Orbuch says—the irrational "suspicious" kind that arises from your own insecurity, and "reasonable doubt," based on observable signs. To tease them apart, see if you reach these milestones after four months together: He introduces you to friends and family; he calls right back when you're in trouble (with, say, a flat tire); he's one of the first people you'd tell about something big like losing your job; *and*

you're comfortable talking with him if any of these aren't happening. Jill missed on all four points.

MISTAKE #4: FALLING FOR DRAMA

Marjorie met Elliot in her second year of college, where she was in theater production and he was studying acting. "When he wanted to get together, I said no because I didn't want to ruin our friendship. But he persisted, and after nine months, we got involved," says Marjorie, now 23. At first, dating him felt like starring in a rom-com—he was handsome, ardent, charismatic. But then things changed: Elliot started flirting with other women and ditching dates to go to cast parties, craving attention from everyone around him.

"It was over in three months. It was shocking that he pursued me for so long, and then that was it," she says.

Why It Happens: Elliot's MO screams "narcissist," says Greer. The giveaways: his magnetism and charm, combined with the constant need for validation. Narcissists also routinely put their own needs ahead of everyone else's, including yours. "It might *seem* like he's invested in you, but what he's actually invested in is simply obtaining you," says Greer. Once he has you, it's mission accomplished—and the last time you'll be able to count on him.

Lesson Learned: To tell a romantic from an egomaniac, listen to what he says about his past. Is it full of budding affairs that ended up surprisingly short? He lives for the pursuit.

Another sign: grand but generic gestures, like giving you chocolates or flowers the day after he stood you up, or a much-hyped trip to Paris that never happens. Beware, too, of constant crises. Narcissists feed on drama, so they're often in a swirl of chaos and "emergencies"—a friend in need, a last-minute but urgent meeting—especially when it's an excuse for canceling with you. ■

Want to fall out of love? A recent study shows you can consciously "down-regulate" your feelings to disengage. Take that, bad boy!

