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Why the Business of Love is Bull\$hit

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It was 9:00 pm on Thursday night and I was in bed binge watching my latest Netflix series when I got a text from my friend Anna. “We should get together. I need some guy advice.” I texted back right away saying, “Absolutely! How about this weekend?”

That Saturday I met Anna at a Thai restaurant in Harlem for the lunch special. When I walked in she had a brooding look on her face while toying with her napkin and straw.

I ordered a mimosa, and we got to business.

Anna begins to tell me that she recently started dating her ex-boyfriend again, but to her dismay, he no longer wants to be in a committed relationship.

The desperation in her voice made me want to tell her that maybe the aphrodisiacs of red pepper flakes, ginger, and coriander in her tikka masala had pumped her hormones and she’ll be over him after her food digests.

Instead, I asked her some questions. “Do you want a monogamous relationship? Could you be okay with him seeing other people? What are your expectations of him? What would you miss about him and the relationship?”

Anna had a choice to make, either she could handle the casual relationship, or she could decide it wasn’t the arrangement for her and break things off with her ex and overcome heartache.

For most singles, real love and relationship security are not easy to achieve. This causes many singles to turn to sources such as online dating to find their match. There are over 54 million singles in the U.S.—of that number, more than 90 percent have tried online dating. Match.com has almost 24 million users. eHarmony boasts 16 million followers, while Tinder has over 54 million users swiping left or right a billion times per day. There is now a dating site that caters to every type of relationship you could imagine to help you find a better love connection.

But once you’ve found it there are still times of self-doubt and pity, also moments of uncertainty, anger, and abandonment; but those struggles all seem inconsequential once you’re blissfully in love with your ideal person.

It was the Psychologist Abraham Maslow who created the Maslow hierarchy of needs, which said “Humans need to love and be loved – both sexually and non-

sexually – by others,” he forgot to mention that romantic love can be a bitch to find.

If you're having a relationship slump it's second nature to seek solace, or in Anna's case, advice. The \$11 billion self-help industry makes its money telling the life-challenged how to live. Dating apps alone account for almost 2 billion dollars a year, using algorithms to predict compatibility. eHarmony creator Dr. Neil Clark Warren found that most successful marriages were between people who were highly compatible and shared a core set of values. He created the predictive model of compatibility, which has 29 dimensions some of which are curiosity, temperament, traditionalism, and adaptability,

Come Sunday night I was on the phone with my friend Katherine, a personal trainer in Los Angeles. As we were doing our weekly “where are all the good men?” discourse, it dawned on me—she didn't necessarily have a hard time finding men, but her issue was keeping them. Katherine always seemed to be on a love roller coaster. She often called to ask my advice on what to do in one situation or another. One minute she was in love and on top of the world and the next, she was disheartened. We had spent many nights thinking of ways to find her a decent guy—online dating being a last resort.

It is no longer shocking or humiliating to admit to not having all the answers. When we share the details of our secret love lives, romantic fears, and neuroses, there is usually a glimmer of hope that it's not all in vein. There is a particular person that is sought after to help you navigate love and relationship issues.

Sure, you can go online and click on any forum, news publication, or social media platform to ask for relationship advice. Most of these online sources are so popular because people don't have a clue when it comes to love.

The Love Guru on the other end who's giving advice has to be equipped with the knowledge to tell these hopeless romantics what to do when to do it, and how. I'm going to show you the path I took to become this expert; I've given advice, hope, and truth to those seeking guidance when it comes to matters of the heart.

The English proverb “advice, when most needed, is least heeded,” couldn't ring truer in the world of love. It essentially means that wise people don't need advice and foolish people won't take it.

It's funny to think of all the ways we pursue information: columns, horoscopes, friends, and professionals. The business of love has always been open to interpretation, and who better to consult than a trusted advice columnist?

The act of giving advice is not a new concept. One of the first advice columns dates back to 1691. The Athenian Mercury, a British periodical, was credited with creating the now widely publicized format in which so many columnists have gained success replicating over the years. Though the type of advice people sought at the time was mostly scientific and theological. The current has shifted, and the kind of help people look for range from extramarital affairs, to sexuality and dating conundrums. The idea that you can talk about whatever is troubling you anonymously, free of judgment is a liberating act for people who have issues that they wish to keep secret from close friends and family. By asking a stranger for advice, it removes the feelings of shame and infamy.

It should come as no surprise that most uncommitted people have no clue how to attain or retain love, and that's where they seek guidance from the experienced.

Perhaps considered one of the most popular advice columnists to date. Dear Abby has been around for 60 years. Founded in 1956 by Pauline Phillips under the pen name Abigail Van Buren. Her daughter Jeanne Phillips began helping her write the nationally syndicated column when she was only 14-years-old to earn spending money. In 2000, Pauline recognized Jeanne as co-creator, who by this time had fallen in love with the work. Jeanne took over the business that year and has been in charge ever since. By being consoling yet direct when needed the mother-daughter duo was able to appeal to audiences old and young, eventually becoming an American staple in newspapers nationwide. Today Dear Abby receives 10,000 letters per week and has a daily readership of 110 million.

The column Dear Sugar, created by Steve Almond and made famous by the writer, Cheryl Strayed is featured online at The Rumpus, and has a cult following. Strayed's show-and-tell method is how she connects with her readers. Through sharing her personal experiences and lessons learned through her advice column, she managed to build a loyal fan base. By reading between the lines and getting to the heart of the issue, Strayed frames her response in a way that shows the reader how to be honest with themselves, and that ultimately they have the power to make the changes they want. In December 2014, Dear Sugar Radio premiered via podcast with both the original sugars, Almond and Strayed, where they chitchat and give advice to the "lost, lonely and heartsick" according to their website.

One of the main questions I had at the start of my love guru journey was what qualifies someone to be a love guru?

My initial thought was by no means am I qualified to give love advice—I have enough trouble trying to figure out my own shit. Could I be as lucky as Dear Abby or as thoughtful as Dear Sugar? Have I had enough life experience?

After speaking with professional love and life mentor Susan Winter, I gained more clarity on how to be an expert. She was honest in that anyone can give him or herself a title in the age of the internet. “What should qualify a relationship expert is someone that has a keen understanding of human nature and has really done the work to observe past experiences themselves and study human interaction,” says Winter. “Ninety-nine percent of the questions are not “What am I doing wrong,” but “What are they doing? How can I get them to love me more? How can I get them back? It’s about the other person.” She compares the position to being a therapist for dating.

Winter, a former opera singer, turned corporate spokeswoman, and financial news host says that she’s always been the go-to advice person for people. At age 40, Winter entered into a relationship with a 19-year-old man and the rural community where they lived treated her disdainfully because of this. She credits that situation for her change in career fields, and by sharing her story she created an industry for herself.

Enlightened and committed to my love quest, I created an account on Reddit.com and started to give advice under the moniker Ask Anne. I figured I could use the practice.

Looking at the forum and seeing the endless list of people writing about their situations and asking for help felt invigorating to me. The idea that I could help someone find a bit of resolution was comforting and made me feel important.

I started off with a relatively straightforward question from a young woman who had been spending time with a close guy friend and wanted to ask him out. Simple enough.

As I scrolled, reading more stories, shit got real. I heard from a woman who was a mistress, a boyfriend who was emotionally abusive, a woman whose jealousy was driving her husband insane, a young lady who thinks her boyfriend of three years is about to cheat on her, and the list goes on for endless pages with people writing in every minute.

There were many issues that I was not qualified to answer. They dealt with drug and alcohol abuse, physical abuse, emotional instability, mental health concerns and even statutory rape. I could only attribute the reason people in situations of this magnitude decided to ask for advice from a columnist instead of a certified professional is that they were not ready to resolve the issue or deal with the consequences.

Closing my laptop for the evening, it seemed that I had barely survived my first day as a love guru. So many questions were intense and dealt with real life issues.

I had more respect for the Dear Abby types who could answer the hard questions with grace and ease. I decided I needed more insight, so I sought out some professional training by attending a seminar with a real dating expert.

I found myself in a 500-square-foot room with two rows of chairs and a video camera set to record. Among the intimate group of seven, there was a mature woman with coral-colored lipstick interested in networking tips. An older gentleman was looking for suggestions on how to approach a lady on the street during rush hour. A millennial-seeking advice on how to overcome his stage fright, and myself, a clueless love guru attempting to see how the pros do it.

Moments later Mike Guerrieri, 24, introduced himself and his mission for the night. Wearing a tailored navy blue suit, a crisp white dress shirt, and a pair of cognac colored shoes, he began to tell us his list of qualifications: he was an image and dating consultant, inspirational speaker, and a tailor.

Curious, I asked about the number of people inclined to take love advice from a suit maker. “Not everybody is gonna go to a dating and relationship consultant—it takes a particular kind of person.” Guerrieri says that if a potential client is seeking him out, then they are inclined to evoke change in their habits. “People that would go about this are people who usually have put a lot of effort in this area before, who’ve tried almost everything on their own and nothing has been successful.”

Seeking advice is not necessarily a terrible thing. It is healthy to be somewhat conflicted when making important decisions. Studies have revealed that the art of giving advice is more self-serving to the giver than the seeker. Often the advice is given based more on morality than what the applicant wants to know, which is what steps to takes to resolve their problem.

Ellie Tehser, advice columnist of the syndicated column Ask Ellie, and Susan Winter both told me life experience made them qualified to give advice. But other columnists like Sugar, Amy Dickinson of Ask Amy and Dear Prudence writer Emily Yoffe have all expressed their reservations about being an authoritative voice on handling the personal matters of others. In an interview with [Refinery 29](#), Strayed revealed that she gets a lot of questions that reflect her own life situations and she likes to answer as much for herself as she does for her listeners.

Guerrieri maintains that what he is offering is valuable. “I believe that whenever you sell anything you should feel harmonious about the price. Just because somebody might be willing to spend \$300.00 or more an hour, is that the value that you’re providing them?” He goes on to explain that ultimately you shouldn’t

take advantage if you're not providing them with the best services—"that's not the correct thing to do."

If you need help trying to be less awkward on the dating scene, under Guerrieri's instruction it could cost you \$100 to \$150 per hour. Susan Winter charges a similar fee. Other experts, like Erika Christensen the Love Conductor, gained notoriety by hooking up singles at train stations. She makes up to \$500 per hour.

Twenty-five percent of singles will never get married. And that number is steadily rising. Some factors that contribute to that figure are the ratio of men to women in some states, as well as financial stability, age gaps, and sexual preference. It's no wonder that singles everywhere are willing to dish out the moolah in desperation for a suitable match. The average amount spent on dating profiles is \$243 annually. Couples are paying \$250 an hour to work out their issues in couples counseling, presumably, so they won't have to go back into the dreaded singles pond.

When Katherine called me to talk the next day she began to tell me about a guy named Avery that she met online and was starting to like. They were texting throughout the day and began to FaceTime regularly. She was really into him. Things took a slight turn when he suggested she fly into Tennessee for a girls' trip and see him while visiting. I told her to be optimistic and give him the benefit of the doubt—she didn't want to be in the twenty-five percent that'll be single forever. But my bullshit detector was high because it seemed like he wasn't being honest. Eventually, I told her to talk to him about how she felt.

Advice should be a mutually beneficial experience. In an article for the Harvard Business Review, David A. Garvin and Joshua D. Margolis explored the possibilities of that kind of interchange.

"When the exchange is done well, people on both sides of the table benefit. Those who are truly open to guidance (and not just looking for validation) develop better solutions to problems than they would have on their own." It continues, "Those who give useful advice wield soft influence—they shape important decisions while empowering others to act."

But in cases where the exchange isn't exactly what it should be, it leaves people with a bad taste in their mouth. In a featured post on [Blogger](#), Joelle Pittman says she spent 15 percent of her annual income on a dating coach. "What I thought would be an intensive three-month program that would completely change my life was really six one-hour long phone calls, a CD, and a handful of emails." She says that she was more upset because everything the dating coach told her was stuff she already knew.

The issues of baffled people on love forums were hard to take seriously, some of the questions they asked were so comical, but I did my best to give thoughtful advice. I thought back to my conversation with Susan Winter about the use of precise language. “I do unbelievable breaking down of step-by-step. I can isolate every fraction of movement that goes on; human nature is ultimately predictable, and if you watch people you know how to answer what the possibilities are.”

Are love and relationships so predictable that any person or algorithm that pays close enough attention can figure them out?

I again became enthralled in the relationship advice forum and started to read the questions. It was like watching reality television, as terrible as it was—I couldn’t look away. I was hooked. A common thread in every matter I read was the last phrase of most questions, “should I do this or that.” It became easier to detect when someone was looking for reassurance, logic or confirmation.

People are usually leaning towards one side of the fence. It’s like when a friend tells you a story about two co-workers having a confrontation; chances are your friend has already taken a side.

In romantic relationships it’s no different, people lack faith in their ability to figure it out when it comes to love, hence the need for experts and books. Someone isn’t going to break up with his or her partner because an advice columnist suggests it. If there’s anything I’ve learned from playing love doctor, it’s that people are going to do what they want no matter what anyone else thinks. Instead of trusting gut instincts, people would rather write to a stranger and include all the details deemed relevant to the situation. Then wait weeks to hear feedback, if at all. All they want to know is, what I should do?

I log out for the evening. I’m exhausted.

When falling in love, the body has a chemical reaction. Endorphins and dopamine are released, triggering positive feelings like those associated with addiction. Adrenaline kicks in, producing more sweat, increasing heart rate, blood pressure, and metabolism. Oxytocin, the cuddle drug that makes us desire closeness (kissing, hugging, having sex), goes to work and pheromones, a scent produced by animals that influence the behavior of the opposite sex. It mostly makes us attracted to a mate based on the way they smell.

I’m confused.

There has to be more to love than animalistic dating rituals. There's no turning back now; I'm in too deep. I decided to act like an anthropologist for a night and watch the subjects in their natural habitat.

Saturday night at Ginny's Supper Club the DJ begins to play a mix of 50 Cent "Candy Shop" and Beanie Man, "Girls Dem Sugar." The bar was jam-packed with women dressed head to toe in high-end Zara outfits. They sipped prosecco quickly hoping to get buzzed enough to numb the pain in their feet from the 4-inch heels. Their male counterparts were on the prowl eager to impress them. As time passed and more drinks were poured, it was evident that the singles were in the wrong place if they were looking for love. A loud, busy club where the guys were under the influence looking for their quarter-to-one girl (the person you settle for at the end of the night) wasn't ideal. In Ovid's book *Ars Amatoria*, the original love guide, he warns against drinking while looking for a partner. "Bringing love and wine together are adding fuel to the fire. If you really want to know what she is like, look at her by daylight, and when you're sober."

Ovid was really on to something here, as the night wore on and people drank more it was apparent that lust was the dominant factor in the room.

If our bodies do all of the work for us or at least lead us, in the right direction, then the self-help industry is just selling hope. These experts play on people's fears of being lonely, having low self-esteem, and not feeling loved. In an interview with Forbes, Steve Salerno, author of *Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless*, says "[The gurus] aren't selling you the features—they're selling the image." "Whatever they think you're deficient in, they're selling the solution."

The avenues to self-advancement and self-awareness are plentiful. You can purchase a ticket to a detox and de-stress seminar at the Chopra Center for \$5,000, or you could read the *Secret* to figure how to achieve all of your heart's desires. Seventy percent of the self-help industry's clientele are well to do, middle-aged women living on the east and west coasts. Experts insist that they can sell you a book or class to help you attract true love by inducing a change within.

The self-help industry isn't regulated and is designed to keep people dependent on how to achieve something that isn't "within reach." There is no way to prove effectiveness other than testimonials. The promises for spiritual, financial, and relationship happiness are only as successful as their gurus.

Advice columnists, gurus, and experts that say they have the "key" to having the relationship you've always desired don't work for everyone.

They are human and not exempt from life's ups and downs like the rest of us. There isn't any way to know if they truly practice what they preach. Even Dr. Neil Clark Warren had to admit that not everyone fit his algorithm—there are outliers.

It doesn't matter how many books you read to tell you how to do this and be that—real change is like a 12-step program. You first have to admit that you want to be better, and take steps to get you closer to your goal. We all do what we want when we're ready. We don't listen to our parents, bosses, or even the ten commandments in the bible, so why take advice from someone just as clueless as we are?

In the time I spent taking on the role of an advice columnist, I learned it wasn't for the faint of heart. It takes sympathy, patience, and a backbone. I concluded that most people already had the answer they were looking for but just needed that push in the right direction. I decided that being a love guru wasn't for me, despite the fact that I'm understanding, patient, and resilient. I realized none of that mattered because the truth is: I didn't want to listen to people's problems all day. I was exhausted by the pettiness and too saddened by problems that I had no clue how to solve. After coming to this conclusion my phone rang, and it was Katherine. I was reluctant to answer, but I did.

She was obsessing over her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend. There seemed to be another hiccup for the lovebirds. It was after 15 minutes of her asking me what I thought he meant by this comment or that statement when I finally snapped. "Just do whatever the hell you want to do." She seemed shocked at this response. "You already know what you want to do, so just do it."

I was genuinely annoyed by the redundancy of it all. After finding out that advice columnists were just winging it like the rest of us, I realized that no one had the authority to tell you what to do with your life. Isn't the best part about life supposed to be living and learning from it? We don't need anyone to tell us how to do that.

I hung up. I'm not good at giving advice.