

## DOWN, BUT NOT OUT

Being rejected by a woman is a bummer—but it's also your chance to emerge a better man.

**"I'M NOT IN THE MOOD." "I'VE MET SOMEBODY ELSE."**

"I'm just not interested." Romantic rejection comes in many forms, and the side effects are never welcome. "Your heart races, your palms sweat, even your sleep suffers," says Nathan DeWall, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Kentucky. "Men often say it feels as bad as being punched in the stomach." In fact, those guys are onto something: Researchers at the University of Michigan found that the consequences of social rejection can feel similar to being physically hurt.

Why is that pain so tough to shake off? "Men associate their status with whether or not women like them," says Brandy Engler, Psy.D., a Los Angeles-based sex therapist and the author of *The Men on My Couch*. "If women don't like you, your social status is lower. It affects the way a man sees himself."

And once you've entered that dreaded cycle, it's hard to escape. A study from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine found that rejection affects the same regions of the brain linked with addiction. Recovering isn't always easy, either. But managed properly, a rejection could signal the start of a stronger, more confident, more resilient you. Flip these five romantic turndowns into your chance to step up.



#### REJECTION 1

### Your online dream girl backs out of a first date.

#### ▶YOUR FIRST MOVE

If her excuse sounds legit or she seems to have the jitters, it's worth going out on a limb: "Send her a message saying, 'I really think we should meet each other. How often do you find someone who has so much in common with you?'" says Engler. By emphasizing your potential as a match and not just the fact that you're attracted to her, you'll set yourself apart from the other dudes clamoring for her attention.

#### ▶YOUR LONG-TERM PLAN

Online dating's upside—so many singles!—is also its Achilles' heel; many people feel overwhelmed by choice. "If the first 10 women turn you down, your expectation about the 11th will be low," says Jeff Cooper, Ph.D., who has done dating research at Trinity College Dublin. So if that's affecting your confidence, remember that it was her profile—a facade, not the whole person—that drew you in. Search by common interests, not physical attributes. And consider switching venues while you're at it. Sites like JDate and eHarmony, for instance, appeal to people with specific desires, unlike apps such as Tinder that emphasize looks.

#### REJECTION 2

### You go in for the kiss... and get the dreaded cheek.

#### ▶YOUR FIRST MOVE

She may not be saying no forever, but respect that she's not interested now. Smile and say, "Too soon?" and drop it—even if you're dying to demand answers. "With a sexual issue, it's often better to relax than to turn it into a big discussion," says Helen Fisher, Ph.D., author of *Why We Love*. So why did she deny you? "It could be that she's not attracted to you," says Engler, "or maybe she's being coy." In fact, Fisher adds, "she may want a real relationship and doesn't want to start too fast."

#### ▶YOUR LONG-TERM PLAN

Send her a text later asking why she dodged your kiss. If you caught her off guard or she wasn't ready, lay the groundwork well before your second attempt. "Don't move in for a kiss as a test of whether she wants you or not," says Engler. "Wait until you've built a little tension." Prepare her by incorporating small acts of physical intimacy—reach across the table to briefly hold her hand, or touch the small of her back as you open the door. By the time you say good night, her signals will reveal whether or not she wants you to plant one.

#### REJECTION 3

### Weeks into dating, she says, "This isn't working."

#### ▶YOUR FIRST MOVE

Shocked? You probably just missed the signs, says Justin Sitron, Ph.D., a professor of human sexuality at Widener University. "Maybe there wasn't physical chemistry," says Engler. "Or maybe she found someone else." If chemistry is the problem, address it head-on: "Say, 'Maybe we don't feel it now, but we're enjoying each other's company. Let's go out again and see if anything builds,'" suggests Engler. "Sometimes if people are a perfect match on paper, they feel pressure to have chemistry, which actually dampens it. The chemistry will build when you start to relax."

#### ▶YOUR LONG-TERM PLAN

Ask her on a date that caters to her interests—and puts her in control. For example, if she prides herself on her cooking, propose an evening during which the two of you tackle a complicated meal—and you bring the wine. Or if you're both golf nuts, challenge her to 18 holes. "These are things a woman does when she really likes somebody," says Engler. Which means the simple act of doing them could subconsciously help her shift from "I don't know" to "This guy is great!"

#### REJECTION 4

### Your girlfriend turns you down for sex... again.

#### ▶YOUR FIRST MOVE

When things go cold, try another way in. "Suggest foreplay that doesn't involve genitals, like a massage," says Engler. "Once she relaxes her body, she's more likely to be interested." But the better tactic, at least in the long term, is to say, "That's fine, babe. Want to watch a movie instead?" Respecting her refusal can be a turn-on for her, Sitron says. "It shows that you value her." And by suggesting an alternative activity, you prove that it's real intimacy you're after, even if it's not sexual.

#### ▶YOUR LONG-TERM PLAN

There are only so many nights that movies can stand in for sex. "You might have what's called a 'sexual desire discrepancy,'" says Justin Lehmler, Ph.D., a social psychologist at Harvard. In other words, your libido may far outsize hers. Engler's advice: Kickstart her sex drive. "Tell her about your fantasies, and describe what you like about her body," she says. But don't make a move right away. "Tease her and then pull away." This keeps a sexual undertow flowing. Over time, you'll reawaken her sexual mind, and her body will follow.

#### REJECTION 5

### You're in a serious relationship. Then she dumps you.

#### ▶YOUR FIRST MOVE

Don't harass her in the immediate wake of your breakup. "Rejection can lead to obsession, where you idealize the person and devalue yourself," says Engler. You may have an overwhelming desire to call her constantly or to stop by her office. This "falling off the deep end" phase is not attractive. So wait a couple of weeks, and then approach your ex once your intense drive to win her back has weakened and you're thinking more clearly, Engler says.

#### ▶YOUR LONG-TERM PLAN

Start with a benign text, like a link to a video she'd enjoy. If her response is positive, ask her to lunch to deliver your spiel, says Tom Stevens, Ph.D., a psychologist at California State University. But if she cites real differences—say, she's very religious and you're not—it may be time to cut your losses. Breakups happen, and they don't always unhappen. "She saw that it wasn't a good match before you did," says Stevens. But if it's a behavior that bugs her, set a new goal for yourself instead of obsessing about her or what's wrong with you. That way, Engler says, "you'll have something positive to take forward." ■

## ▶HOW TO LET HER DOWN EASILY

Ensure a clean break with these smooth exit strategies from Paul Hokemeyer, Ph.D., a licensed marriage and family therapist.

#### TELL HER THE TRUTH

Don't say, "It's not you." Of course it's her. If it weren't, you two would still be together. The most respectful thing you can do is be completely honest. No, that's not a license to be malicious; it simply means you can't lie.

#### CREATE DISTANCE

In the immediate aftermath of the split, it's okay to avoid phone calls, texts, and e-mails. Consider unfriending her on Facebook, too. She might search for clues indicating that a reconciliation is possible. Be careful not to leave any.

#### DON'T DRAG IT OUT

Couples often agree to "take a break" when one person really intends to terminate the relationship forever. That's just prolonging the inevitable. Use the word "end." It'll hurt, but odds are she's stronger and more resilient than you think.

