

When it comes to dating advice, why is it always women who must improve?

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

"[Therapy-speak](#)" advice on relationships and dating is widely available outside of the psychotherapist's office. Much of this advice places responsibility on women for managing their emotional reactions to problematic dating and relationship experiences.

The advice women are given about dating, relationships, and finding love largely falls into three categories.

1. How to not attract emotionally unavailable men

Instagram is full of [relationship](#) advice that tells women to take responsibility for their "healing." It advises them on attachment styles, co-dependency, and emotional wounds, as well as how to deal with avoidant and narcissistic partners. Such advice varies in quality from patronizing and exploitative, to nuanced and compassionate. Some of this advice is helpful, much of it is not.

One example that falls in the latter category is the cliché that in order to find love, you must first love yourself. Psychiatrist and trauma expert, Dr. Bruce Perry, notes that in reality you cannot love yourself unless you have been loved, [noting](#), "the capacity to love cannot be built in isolation."

"Loving yourself" is valued by [modern society](#) if it helps you to get ahead. Constant self-improvement is what matters in a performance-focused society that positions people as objects of [enhancement and optimization](#). Neoliberalism assumes women's lives are shaped by [deliberate choices](#) for which they, as individuals, are responsible. Little attention is paid to the contexts that constrain women's choices.

Being responsible for self-love and self-healing only furthers the responsibility that women already shoulder for their health, well-being, careers, and relationships.

2. How to get a man to commit

Women are instructed on how to develop "[a huge advantage over other](#)

[women](#)" in the "battle" to "[get him to put a ring on it.](#)" For example, dating coach Benjamin Daly tells his 500,000 Instagram followers that his book reveals "[the secret to getting any man begging for commitment](#)."

Not only are women encouraged to strategize their dating moves, they must also self-monitor to avoid emasculating men, with authors encouraging women to observe the rules of traditional femininity and let men "[lead.](#)"

The strategies underpinning such advice are, at best, confusing. To quote author, [Emily Brooks](#), "We are told to lean in at work, but wait for him to call." It's OK to hustle at work, but don't overreach in your relationships.

The dating advice outlined in this category pits women against each other, polices women's femininity, and reinforces a performance-centric framework of thinking about intimate relationships.

3. How to navigate toxic behaviors online

Online dating, [while positive in some respects](#), is a [minefield for toxic male behavior](#).

This behavior varies from [rejection violence](#), where women are confronted with violence when turning down a man's advances, to unsolicited graphic images, to more subtle forms of damaging behavior. These include but are not limited to [lovebombing](#), where men bombard women with attention in order to gain control, and [breadcrumbing](#), where a person leads someone on but remains noncommittal.

These behaviors are not exclusive to male dating app users, but advice around how to handle such behavior is largely directed at women.

Why are these trends a problem?

Modern dating advice often implies women can and should fix themselves, and their relationships. This creates feelings of shame, and is particularly harmful advice for the vulnerable women in our communities.

Telling women to love themselves before they can have a relationship is at best, nonsensical, and at worst, cruel, especially for those who have suffered the [mental violence](#) that accompanies sexual assault and domestic violence.

As of [2021](#), 23% of women in Australia, a total of 2.2 million women, had experienced sexual assault, with women eight times more likely than men to experience [sexual assault](#) by an intimate partner. In 2020, Australia recorded its [most dangerous year](#) for domestic violence.

One in six Australian women have experienced [sexual or physical violence](#) at the hands of a former or current partner, while [one in four](#) women have experienced [emotional abuse](#); over a quarter of the women in Australia.

[Lowered self-esteem and a diminished sense of self-worth](#) are just some of the psychological effects of sexual, physical, and emotional violence that may make "self-love" difficult.

Women need safety more than dating advice

Teaching women how to react effectively to emotionally dysfunctional behavior may help women to cope, but it doesn't address the fundamental issue of intimate interpersonal relationships: safety.

Rather than upskilling women to deal with the harm they risk in dating men, the self-help industry should focus on male behavior—not the reactions of women to this behavior. Women need safety more than they need advice.

We need to redirect the focus to male behavior

The most important dating [advice](#) the self-help industry can offer is for a male audience: do not harm the women around you.

Mateship is revered in Australia, yet male friendships are often devoid of [vulnerability, openness, intimacy, and self-disclosure](#). This likely has to do with [toxic expectations around masculinity](#) that may manifest in emotional suppression and masking of distress, misogyny and homophobia. [Research](#) has found male attitudes towards masculinity, feminism, and homophobia are predictive of date-rape-supportive attitudes and self-reported histories of sexual coercion.

Rather than teaching women how to respond to dangerous dating behaviors, the self-help industry should examine what men are taught about dating and relationships. The self-help industry could play an important role in educating [online dating](#) app users about how to avoid perpetrating harassment, discrimination, and [sexual violence](#).

"Teaching" [women](#) how to deal with the men they're dating is not the solution to the problems of modern dating and relationships.

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