

I'm falling for a man who is still living with his wife

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15 September 2023

Couples Therapy

This week, our reader has fallen for a married man a year after ending an abusive relationship. Couples counsellor and psychosexual therapist Cate Mackenzie offers her advice



Getting physical with someone too quickly can mean we overlook their negative traits (Photo: Getty)



By i Team

September 15, 2023 6:00 am(Updated 6:02 am)

Each week i asks experts to answer readers' questions about love, sex and relationships

I am a year out of a long-term relationship. The past 12 months have been the first time I've ever lived on my own and it's been challenging but rewarding. After five years in a psychologically abusive relationship (when I left him I also walked away from the friendship group who were mostly his friends), I've made a couple of new friends and am building a life.

I just recently started going on dating apps and have met a man who I like. The only problem is that he only split up from his wife four months ago and still lives in the family home with his two kids.

I believe him when he says that he and his wife are over, but I don't know if it is a mistake to get involved with someone who is in such early stages of separation.

I don't know many people in the town I've moved to and I enjoy his company, but I also know that in the past I have not made great choices with men and tend to fall hard and quickly. Should I walk away?

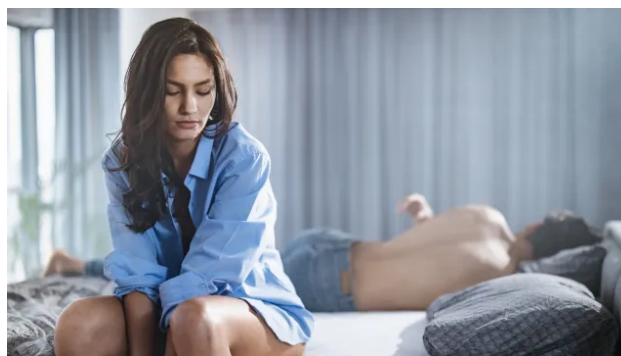
Couples counsellor and psychosexual therapist Cate Mackenzie says

First of all, well done for being brave, dating again and finding friends and new things to do. It is not easy to rebuild yourself after the end of a relationship, particularly one that was abusive and one which has resulted in you having to walk away from a circle of friends. The main priority now is for you to take care of yourself and to keep tending to your life.

It's wonderful that you have met someone whose company you enjoy. I wonder if you are able to date slowly and see him once a week ? That can increase to twice a week further down the line but, for now, the most important thing is that you keep looking after your life, finding new friends, creating a new home and doing all the things that will boost your wellbeing, whether that's dancing, exercise, creativity... whatever it is that makes you feel good.

After a big break-up, it's always a good idea to get some counselling, particularly if you think you have things to learn around boundaries, as so many of us do. I recommend checking out The Psychosynthesis Trust for low-cost counselling and maybe join Co-Dependents Anonymous so that you have compatriots to check in with if you feel you are losing your boundaries.

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Codependency is a phrase that gets used a lot these days, but here are some of its core symptoms, according to Pia Mellody's book, *Facing Codependence*: difficulty experiencing appropriate levels of self-esteem, difficulty setting functional boundaries, difficulty owning your own reality, difficulty acknowledging and meeting your own needs and wants and being interdependent with others, and difficulty experiencing and expressing your reality moderately.

As well as beginning to learn about patterns you may have in relationships, start to get in touch with your body in a way that you will learn to trust your thoughts, feelings, sensations and also trust when your body wants to say yes and no.

Our body will reveal when we know something is off and not good. Fantasy can feel amazing, while real intuition can feel really uncomfortable – which is why sometimes we don't wish to listen to it – but, if we are listening into our bodies, feelings, emotions and minds and checking in with trusted compatriots, then we can put some safety mechanisms in place.

You deserve not to fall into the same trap as you have in the past and you can be more sure of this by not rushing in, and by observing his behaviour over the coming weeks and months. If you space out the dates, then you may have time to think this through. The key with dating generally is to notice how you feel on the date – are you enjoying yourself, do you feel present and can you relax?

The scenario you paint does not sound ideal but, if you take your time, you may be able to find out what is actually happening or at least see what you feel. I often ask people to imagine that they have protective aunties or uncles who are watching over them, who would check if someone is being nice enough to you and so that you imagine being protected and looked after.

After a date, you could ask yourself, 'What would my aunt say about him?' We so often know the answer. That said, coming out of an abusive relationship can leave us with a lot of shock, and shock often causes numbness and confusion, which means we might not be aware when we are attracting the wrong person again.

Try not to get too physical with him if you can, as the erotic hormones can make us overlook any faults – ideally you would date and chat and get to know him. You don't have to know all the answers now but you can get resourced – whether that's with therapy, good reading or good friends. You deserve a great life. If you do all this and you discover he's a hero then it's all good – and if he's not then you will still have a great life.