

'I'm Terrified of Getting Married!'

[The Cut](#) Sep 22

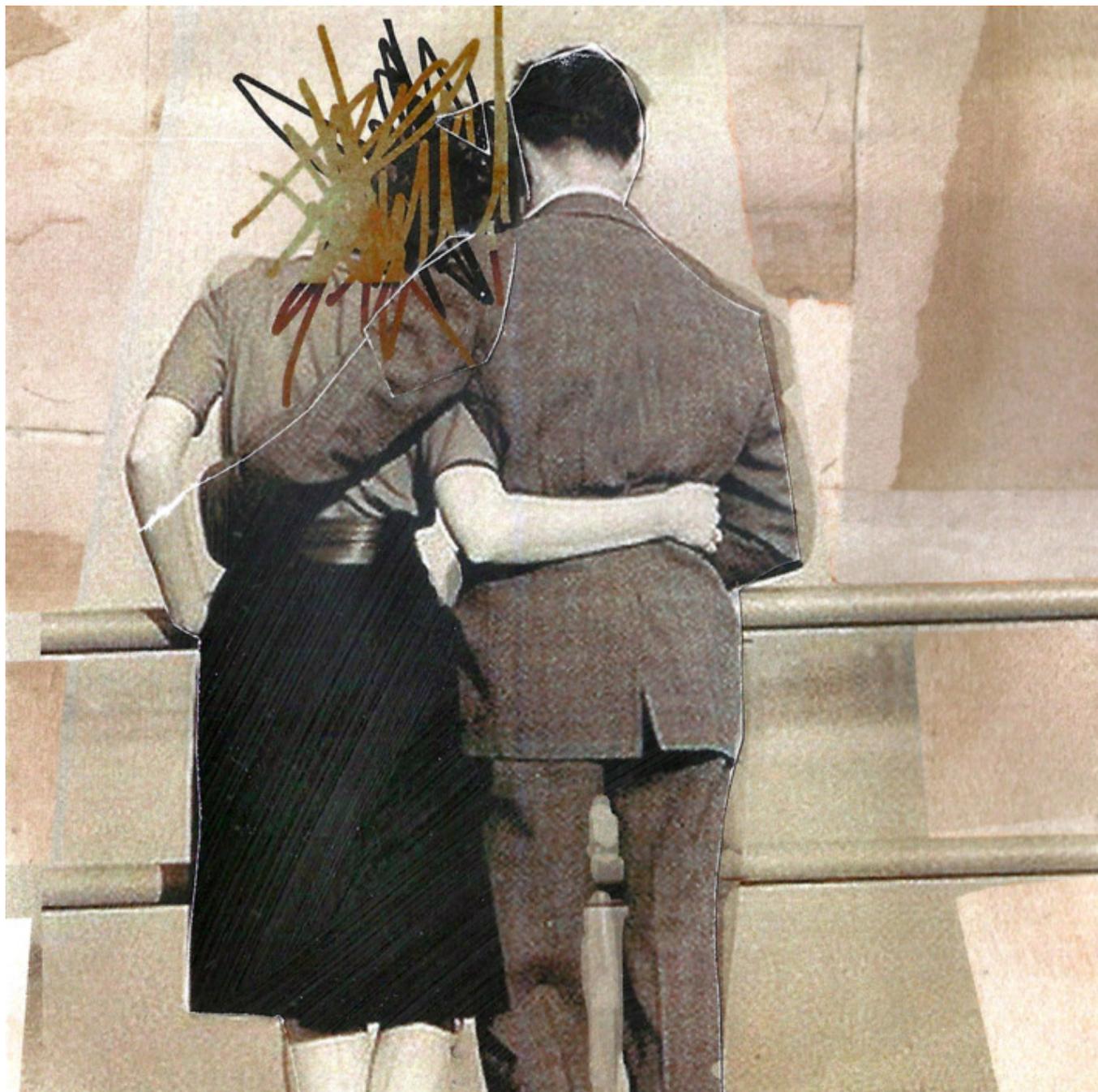


Photo-Illustration: James Gallagher

By [Lori Gottlieb](#)

Dear Therapist,

I'm 32 and I'm dead scared of getting married. Most women I talk to who have been married for a while aren't happy, and most of the men aren't either. I'm wondering why we even get married in the first place.

Everyone I've talked to seems trapped. They stop being themselves, they lose their passions, and become kind of owned by that other person. And doesn't everyone get tired of having sex with the same person? Especially men? If I'm with the same person for years, are they still going to have sex with me but always secretly want to be with someone else?

The prospect of marriage is overwhelmingly frightening to me. I think at the root of all this is the need to love myself; I think if you love yourself, you're better able to love someone else and not rely on their opinion of you to make feel you beautiful or wanted or lovely or enough.

Do you have any advice you could send my way?

Greatly Appreciative

Dear Greatly Appreciative,

Your letter reminds me of a phenomenon that therapists call a “doorknob disclosure.” It's not uncommon for patients to go through an entire session talking about this or that, only to disclose something important in the last ten seconds (“I'm having an affair,” “I think I'm bisexual,” “I want to kill myself,” “I drank again,” “My biological mother found me on Facebook”), with one hand practically on the doorknob on their way out. People do this for a variety of reasons: they're ashamed of the disclosure, they don't want you to have a chance to comment, or they want to stay longer.

Sometimes they do this to leave you feeling as unsettled as they do. They dump all their anxiety onto you, so that you, the therapist, can stew all week while they're just fine. *Special delivery, here's all my shit, sit in it all week, will you?* Other times their wish is simple: *Worry about me. Keep*

me in mind. Often, they're torn between dealing with what they know to be the real issue, and avoiding it at all costs. So they use filler for most of the session, then casually — “Oh, one more thing” — float it out there at the end.

You, GA, initially present your dilemma to me as an existential one: If marriage is a jail sentence, why should I even do it? You detail what you see as the various downsides of marriage — people feel trapped, lose their passions, get bored, and feel “owned” by their partners. You tell me that most married people you know are unhappy.

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At this point, I'm reading along and thinking, that's quite a dim view of marriage; I wonder what's behind that. Usually what's behind a particularly skewed perspective is fear and a perceived threat. The perceived threat here is marriage, but the *real* threat is ... what?

Then I arrive at your doorknob disclosure. At the end, you move the conversation from a general view of marriage to a personal view of yourself and your self-worth. Your doorknob disclosure says, “My real fear isn't marriage; it's that I might not be worthy enough to hold somebody's love for the long term.” Similarly, the threat you want to avoid isn't marriage — it's rejection.

A little-known secret is that many people, just after getting engaged, tell me they're afraid of getting married. They think they're going crazy because, after all, they're deeply in love with the person they've committed to, and can't imagine a better partner to go through life with.

And yet they worry.

They worry about a lot of things: disagreements between their families in the process of planning a wedding. Expectations from themselves and others, and being pulled in various directions. Accountability to a partner, 24/7, for life. Loss of their youth while moving on to the next chapter. Stresses that the marriage may one day face. Balancing individual and shared life goals. Navigating closeness and separateness. The intense intimacy of being known, and knowing a partner, over many decades.

But the difference between their fears and yours, AG, is that their concerns have more to do with hope for a good marriage than a belief that no such thing exists. They're taking what is undoubtedly a leap of faith, albeit an informed one, and grappling with the enormity of their commitment despite the enormity of life's uncertainties. Their fear is based in optimism (*look at this crazy commitment I've gotten myself into – and I'm doing it anyway!*), whereas yours is designed to keep any optimism at bay, because keeping your optimism at bay protects you.

Whether it's with marriage or something else, it's easier to devalue something we might not get than to acknowledge that we might want it. "I wouldn't want a house that big," someone might say when driving by a gorgeous home, when in fact the person would love to live there but feels she'll never be able to afford it. "That guy's not my type," a person might say of a guy she's attracted to but feels she can't have. Likewise, "I wouldn't want to be the boss, it's too stressful," feels better than, "I don't think I'm good enough for that job." For you, "Marriage sounds dismal," might be more palatable than, "I'm not lovable enough for marriage." If you doubt your own appeal, better to convince yourself that marriage is what's unappealing – not you.

Of course, many people find marriage highly appealing, or nobody in a free society would choose it. Most marriages are neither rom-com fantasy nor celebrity disaster, but something in the comfortable middle. Even in your self-selected group of unhappy couples, why are they all staying? By what

are they “trapped”? Could there be positive aspects to their marriages that keep them there? I don't know their situations, of course, but is it possible that you're listening for the “bad” parts, or capturing them on a bad day, or simply preventing yourself from keeping the company of people who don't feel the way your friends do at all?

You asked for advice, but I have a feeling that you're wanting reassurance. Maybe you want me to provide evidence that there are all kinds of marriages, some like the ones you describe, some quite the opposite, and everything in between. Maybe you want me to reassure you that you can hold somebody's attention for half a century by just being you. Maybe you want my vote of confidence that you can tolerate the reality that you and your husband will sometimes fantasize about other people — not just physically, but emotionally as well — without your going into full-blown he's-going-to-leave-me abandonment mode.

I can't really do any of that, though, and besides, what would help you most lies in your doorknob disclosure. None of us can love and be loved without the possibility of loss, but there's a difference between knowledge and terror.

If you don't address your underlying terror, you won't get close enough with anyone to consider the prospect of marriage. And if you don't get close enough, you'll never be able to make a clear-eyed decision about whether or not marriage is something you want.

In order to get close enough, you'll need to find out why you rely on others to feel “beautiful or wanted or lovely or enough.” You'll need to stop making marriage the enemy, and look at the ways you've made yourself the enemy, the one who's not worthy. You'll need to acknowledge that you fear less that marriage will become boring and tiresome than that *you* will become boring and tiresome to the person you love.

And you'll need to lead with that — make it your opener — because it's not

incidental at all. All the other stuff is just noise.

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