

I just started seeing someone who has recently lost his mother. I worry he's not ready for a relationship. What should I do?

▶ DEAR JOE

I've been seeing this guy for a few weeks and he's going through a real tragedy: His mother passed away a couple of weeks ago. He will often just break down and I'm not sure how to respond. We've just met recently and I am afraid of getting too attached in case he isn't ready. Am I doing the wrong thing in considering breaking things off? I know he's going through hell right now but I've also got to protect myself.

ROBBIE, HASTINGS

▶ HI ROBBIE

I don't think you are doing the right thing by considering breaking off the relationship. I think you are being too hasty breaking off things at this time simply for the reason that his mother died. You have only dated him a few weeks and you don't know enough about him, in terms of how he has dealt with deaths in his past, or how he deals with loss in general. You need to know more about him before you know if this is the right guy for you to be dating or not.

You say you are worried that he is not ready for a relationship. Maybe it isn't the right time for *you* to be dating *him*?

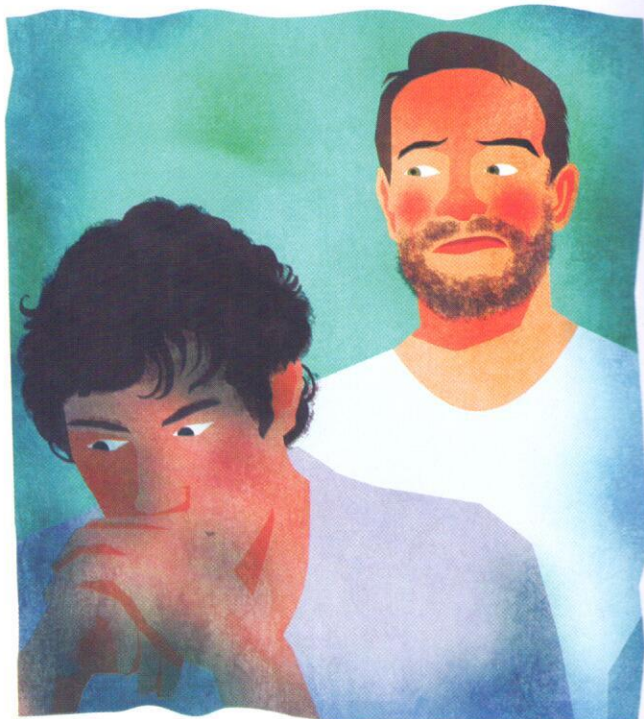
I am more concerned that you might not be ready for a relationship more than him, given you want to break up so quickly. When you say you have to "protect yourself", I think you mean protect yourself from him dropping you because he is overwhelmed with grief of his mother's death.

It is true that everyone worries about being rejected early in the dating process. Every little detail becomes magnified about yourself and about the person you're dating. You are establishing trust and safety, so everything from the smallest to the biggest things, can add to your feeling insecure and unsure. Naturally we all protect ourselves in the beginning. None of us know where the relationship is going and there are no guarantees. We look for signs that it will or won't work but we really don't know.

It makes sense to worry that he might be distracted since his mother just died. Gay men are often very close to their mothers and have a different relationship to her than the rest of the siblings. When a gay man's mother dies this can definitely be the most devastating and tragic thing in his life. So it makes sense to me that he is having a hard time and probably will for a while.

A question I have for you is what is this bringing up for you? When we are around someone in great emotional pain, it can bring up our own current and past pain. How have you dealt with loss in your own past? How did you learn to deal with grief in your family? How did your parents deal with their own grief? Many families just move on and don't share their thoughts and feelings about the death of someone because it brings up too much emotional pain. Other families never get past it and it becomes the only thing they focus on.

What is your relationship like with your own mother? Perhaps this is raising questions of how attached or detached you are from her, or she is from you. This is a great opportunity to explore this.



When you say you are worried about getting "too attached", I wonder about how your other attachments look in your life. Have you been hurt in the past? How did you handle that? Do you attach too deeply or too fast and then find yourself getting your heart broken?

You said you don't know how to respond to his breakdowns. The best way to handle it is to be there for him and be empathic and sympathetic. Empathy is when we can sit with another person and feel their pain and validate for them that it makes sense they are feeling the way they are. This is different from sympathy, which is about feeling sorry for the person. You can give him both by telling him you are there for him and understand his loss.

The death of his mother may be the very thing that attaches you both to each other. It could possibly make you a stronger couple from the beginning over something real and deep. This is different from the initial illusions we have of our partner in the beginning which are often not real and based on projections of hopes and dreams. You will get to see the real man and how he copes with his problems. You will get to show him how you are when the chips are down and he needs you. It is a great opportunity for both of you.

Relationships offer emotional growth opportunities, for better or worse, whether they are early in the dating process or years later as it matures. We learn a lot about ourselves in the experience of relating to this other person. We can heal our pasts by making different choices and playing with different ways of being in a relationship. It might be a good choice and an opportunity to step into your fear that he might not be ready for a relationship and do it anyway.

We are all taking risks by deciding to date and becoming a couple. There are no guarantees. You can play it safe, break it off and not be hurt and always wonder if this could have been the right guy for you. Or you can jump in with both feet and give it your best shot. I say, go for it!



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