

Me Too, He Too

It seems like being around the opposite sex has never been more complicated. From the puritanical ideals of the 1950s, to the sexual revolution and feminism of the 60s and 70s, to the *#MeToo* Movement of today, the rules continue to evolve. This says something about how far we've had to come to get where we are. But it also means decades of lessons have accumulated into what can be poorly-defined or even baffling do's and don'ts.

Even for those ambitious about getting it right, the answers can be elusive. If a 5 year-old boy tries to kiss a girl in his class, is that sexual harassment? How about the 9 year-old boy pulling her braids "because he likes her"? The 13 year-old trying to make out for the first time? Most of us might reasonably argue, "no," it's not harassment. It's normal age-appropriate behavior. But it can also be annoying, or intimidating, or even scary to a young girl who doesn't want that kind of attention. She shouldn't have to put up with it. What seems innocent or desirable to one person is deeply offensive to the other.

This is what throws off a lot of well-intended men these days, who live in fear that long-delayed justice for women can translate into punishments for actions that, rightly or wrongly, weren't thought of as a crimes or even offenses at the time. What seemed innocent or consensual on one side felt like coercion. The woman may have brushed it off as "not that big a deal" to prevent it from becoming a bigger issue, but internalized it as a traumatic experience. On the other hand, sometimes a man's behavior will be judged differently depending on if a woman likes him or not.

It isn't about lying or telling the truth. It's about two understandings of the same moment, and there is no easy, hard-and-fast solution to this. Everyone's perspective is unique. What we strive for are norms of behavior that evolved to minimize misunderstandings and send messages of interest (or disinterest) respectfully. It's called civilized behavior. Your freedom to signal interest in another and their right to live a life free of you if they choose. It's when these norms are violated, or never learned, that the trouble starts.

If an experience is traumatic, the brain will encode that memory quite differently than it would if an event were not traumatic. So the reactions by two people to the same event can be dramatically different. When those two people are just getting to know each other, it can be a minefield.

Young men tell me they have no idea how to date, even in the hook-up culture of Tinder and the like, where the expectations for casual sex seem pretty straightforward. But what happens during a hook-up when somebody changes their mind? The obligation is to stop immediately. But even if you do, have you entered a gray zone that can get you in trouble years down the road? Does one person's regret become the other person's offense?

Let's recognize that we live in a time of profound transitions, and that the rules will continue to evolve. For the moment, as unromantic as it sounds, getting verbal permission before touching someone, or getting too physical, is the safest and most honest. Yes, it sure lacks the mystique and subtlety of the non-verbal cues that dating is all about. But the outcome will be better than operating from the wrong assumptions. So, yes... ask each step of the way. Make sure you're both comfortable before taking the next step. Respect boundaries. It may not be the easiest thing to do at the moment. But you'll breathe a sigh of relief in the long run.

