

Falling in love again...

If you've had your fingers burned in the past, a new romance can be scary. How can you be sure you are not going to make the same mistakes? Ellen Tout finds out

Presently, I'm in that beautiful phase of dating where a message pops up on my phone and I can't help smiling, or we meet for dinner and end up talking for hours into the night. I love the feeling – the anticipation and the butterflies – but I can't help panicking, questioning if I'm ready for anything more. We met just over a month ago and, although I know it can't stay this exciting forever, trusting enough to commit really scares me.

I've been single for two years and I have enjoyed taking a break. I've learned how to be happy in myself and I've thought through what I would like from a future partner. Looking back, I realise that previous relationships have taken up a lot of emotional energy, leaving me drained, and I want things to be different next time. I feel ready to let someone in, to slowly share the things

I enjoy, but it feels overwhelming to allow myself to be vulnerable again.

I speak to Fe Robinson, a UKCP-accredited psychotherapist. When I explain my worries to her – that I want to take things slowly and feel scared – she tells me that's a great thing. She sums up perfectly what I want now: "To be able to stand alongside somebody knowing that you're complete and they're complete, and you can live life together, supporting each other, but without one person leaning continually on the other."

Knowing me, knowing you

But how do I know I am not making the same old mistakes? One of the first hurdles, she says, is 'to build up the ability to trust ourselves; really being able to trust your own wisdom, your own body and the signals it's giving you, and to take yourself seriously. If you don't have that,

then how do you trust somebody else?'

She asks me to list my values and the things I would like from a relationship – rather than fixating on my fears – and suggests reminding myself of these when dating. 'Having a list is something you can really hold on to. What's essential? And what are the things that would be nice, but aren't absolutely critical?'

I know that I would like somebody who is honest, thoughtful, values experiences over material things and is self-sufficient. And if I was being picky, then they'd love dogs and maybe be a vegetarian. The woman I've been dating ticks all of these boxes, and more. I didn't expect to find someone I really clicked with so quickly, and suddenly having that scares me.

Robinson explains that I need to trust myself in that, without getting too swept away. There is a balance to find, because new love is a heady time. 'The >>>

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>>> **“New love is a heady time. Retaming your ability to reason, while enjoying that lovely intensity, is important”**

process of falling in love is something that causes us to lose our mind – the hormone oxytocin takes over,’ she says. ‘Retaming your ability to reason and process, while enjoying that lovely intensity at the beginning of a relationship, is important. If you get swept away, then ‘unconscious matching’ [with someone you’re not actually well suited to] can take over, and you find yourself seven months down the line thinking “how did I get here?”’

I know that in the past I’ve been attracted to women who, unlike me, are quite rebellious, and I have a habit of trying to ‘fix’ them. When my last relationship ended, I briefly dated someone, until it hit me that she shared the same issues as my exes – and I’d instantly taken on responsibility for her. I don’t want to repeat my pattern, in fact, this is exactly what I’m scared of.

Trust your unconscious

Robinson says if I relax and take my time, then there’s no need to be so hyper-alert. ‘You don’t always need to be on top of everything – maybe it’s better to be able to say to yourself “it’s all right”. The thing about patterns is that they repeat themselves, so if you’re going nice and slowly, you’ll spot them. The unconscious does an enormous lot of processing, if we let it,’ she explains.

I feel myself exhale as Robinson says this – I didn’t realise how much I’d been trying to protect myself and stay on top of everything, searching for a flaw or something to trip me up. I recognise that I need to trust my unconscious more

and, with my dating checklist in mind, to listen to my instinct, which is saying that this feels different and right.

Robinson offers some more advice on how to spot someone who is right for you. ‘When we meet someone new, there is a tendency to want to minimise difference and to appear like the other person,’ she says. Rather than just offering information about yourself, ask questions and observe the other person. ‘It’s not just about listening to what somebody says, but watching what they do. With the best will in the world, people will tell you what they wish was true about themselves. What does the way they act tell you about what’s important to them? Often, when I sit down with a client and they’re really honest, they can see what the warning signs were, but they just hadn’t looked.’

In my case, dating someone who is self-sufficient and seizes opportunities is important – I’d want them to have more than just our relationship in their life. Most people would tell you that about themselves, but I can actually see this in my date’s lifestyle – she’s going to a festival this weekend, has travelled lots and mentions different friends, but equally seems keen to include me.

Robinson also stresses the importance of self-care. For me, this means yoga and walking. ‘Build those pauses in the week as times when you sit down and are actually honest with yourself. Step back and just be with what’s going

on in your mind-body system.’

Speaking to Robinson, I realise that my worries are largely rooted in a fear of allowing myself to be vulnerable again. When I admit this, it’s a big relief to hear her say ‘rightly so’ – I hadn’t appreciated that, of course, it’s natural to feel like this. ‘You’re talking about sharing your body, your closest thoughts, family and friends – all the things that really matter to you. That’s a huge gift to offer somebody,’ she says. ‘Emotions are messages and perhaps that’s your unconscious saying to you “be careful, I’m precious”. Anyone who’s a good match and is worth that generosity is going to understand and value that.’

Allow vulnerability to flow

Over the next few weeks, I remind myself of this – that yes, I’m scared and nervous, but that’s OK; that it’s normal to feel like that. Accepting those feelings allows me to experience them, but also to enjoy the butterflies and fun of dating without allowing my fears to run wild. I can feel myself relax into really being myself around her. We’re taking it slowly and I’m being careful to build in time to check in with myself, but with the right balance in place, whatever might happen another month down the line, I’m pleased I took the risk.

Fe Robinson is a UKCP-accredited psychotherapist, EMDR therapist, relationship counsellor and clinical supervisor working with private clients. To find out more, visit ferobinsonpsychotherapy.co.uk

Questions to ask yourself

- 1** What have you learned from your past experiences that you want to apply to dating this time around?
- 2** Is a new relationship something you want,

- rather than something you feel you need?
- 3** Are you clear about your values, and what matters most to you in a potential partner?
- 4** What from your current lifestyle

- is important to keep as you move into your next relationship?
- 5** What steps are you going to take to maintain a great relationship with yourself while you are dating?