

# Emotional Labor: The MetaFilter Thread Condensed

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## I. DEFINING EL

### A. The overhead of caring

I often talk about emotional labor as being the work of caring. And it's not just being caring, it's that thing where someone says "I'll clean if you just tell me what to clean!" because they don't want to do the mental work of figuring it out. Caring about all the moving parts required to feed the occupants at dinnertime, caring about social management. Caring about noticing that something has changed - like, it's not there anymore, or it's on fire, or it's broken.

It's a substantial amount of overhead, having to care about everything. It ought to be a shared burden, but half the planet is socialized to trick other people into doing more of the work.

posted by Lyn Never at 4:33 PM on July 15

### B. The full weight of a double-standard

...[This thread] also made me think about my Dad, and how he is good at emotional labour, and when he and my Mum split up when we were small he visited us every week and took us all weekend every weekend without fail and took us on holidays every year with no other adults. I've always been really proud of him for that, especially as he is from an older generation and would have been brought up in a very traditional role. But I remember how people would say how good he was - and he was, he learned to cook for us for example - but I don't remember anyone saying that about my Mum, who had us the rest of the time. Because, hey, that was her job. I'm still grateful to my Dad because he's probably why I've only ever been in relationships with good guys who can really listen (he's a great listener) and don't have some idea about what constitutes "women's work", but again it brings into relief the difference between what is expected of women and why men get cookies for doing the same thing.

posted by billiebee at 7:18 AM on July 22

### C. There are no gnomes!

To quote the late great Douglas Adams: *"An SEP [Somebody Else's Problem field] is something we can't see, or don't see, or our brain doesn't let us see, because we think that it's somebody else's problem.... The brain just edits it out, it's like a blind spot. If you look at it directly you won't see it unless you know precisely what it is. Your only hope is to catch it by surprise out of the corner of your eye... it relies on people's natural disposition not to see anything they don't want to, weren't expecting, or can't explain."* You see that you just used the last of the toilet paper (you're not dumb). Your brain registers that this is a problem. But it's not an immediate problem, and it's a problem for the hypothetical next person, not for you. So you file it away into a SEP, probably with half your brain saying "yeah, I'll grab another roll and put it on when I finish," and part of your brain going "and if I forget to do it, the next person will get it, what's the big deal, it's just grabbing a roll of toilet paper." Now obviously, I actually do change the damn toilet paper - even if I'm only in there to use the sink and wasn't the one who used the last of the paper - because the next person in my house on that toilet will not be a hypothetical person, it will be a real person and most likely a person I love. And I do it at work because I dunno, Kant's Categorical Imperative plus it's the right thing to do -- even though some weeks it seems I am the only woman at my workplace who ever does so (WTF - but it's more proof, I think, that this really isn't a cut-and-dried men vs. women thing).

I think the thinking really is as simple as "I am bad at X, other people are good at X, therefore I will leave X to them." Which often is accompanied by the assumption that people who are good at X actually enjoy it. Which is possibly true for some people, and some variations of X. But when I ask my son to help empty the dishwasher or some other chore and he responds "I don't want to," or "I don't feel like it," my response is always, ALWAYS, "Nobody likes it. But it has to get done." To me that is the insidious thinking that has to be overcome -- that somewhere out there is the Helping Fairy who enjoys washing dishes and cleaning up pee and making sure there's always milk in the fridge, and who rushes in to do so because it's fun for her.

posted by Mchelly at 3:23 PM on July 21

## **D. Getting the meal and the calm is male privilege**

At some point I realized I was being a huge nag about dinner, because I cooked dinner every night, because when my boyfriend cooked dinner it took forever (see: not cooking for himself his whole life) and we were dieting and I didn't want to eat snacks all evening waiting for dinner to be done at 9:00 o'clock. Then I realized hey-- I can just let go. I can ask him to make dinner, and I can eat a peanut butter sandwich or something, and save my leftovers for lunch the next day. It was a great revelation in terms of my personal mental health-- I got fed, I didn't have to always be the cook, and I didn't have to be mad at my boyfriend. But even in that situation I was just saying, "hey, if I completely let go and eat like a kindergartener, I don't have to be mad at my boyfriend!" It's just so sad that that's the solution. I don't get a warm, homecooked meal at a regular dinner time. That's not how heterosexual reciprocity works. I get a peanut butter sandwich and "peace of mind" (i.e., freedom from domestic/emotional labor). Getting the homecooked meal and the freedom from emotional labor is male privilege.

I love him very much, but I don't think he bought Christmas or birthday presents for his family until he met me and realized that I (and all my sisters) did that. So he's actually a really good guy in the sense that he wants to do that labor and be helpful and kind. But even the best kind of guy didn't have it beaten into him since he was a kid and I feel like we're lightyears apart in that sense.

Anyway, this thread is sooooo excellent.

posted by easter queen at 10:09 AM on July 16

## **E. Even many good men don't understand: they don't have to**

...But I think the point I wanted to make (and which other women in this thread have made much more eloquently and less rantily than me) is that my partner is in almost every other area a legitimately fantastic feminist ally. He gets it. He takes action in many ways, large and small, to make the world a more humane and equitable place for women. He is wonderful, and I love him. But he does not understand the value of emotional labour, because he has never had to do it except when by choice, and he does not understand the consequences of neglecting that labour, because he is not the one who suffers them. He is not a monster. He is not a boor. He is insightful and proactive about many feminist issues.

But he is deeply and willfully blind in this area. He (like many men) is convinced that engaging in an emotional economy is voluntary, because for him it always has been.

posted by [username] at 8:16 AM on July 16

## **F. When will we have earned a turn?**

How much of this labor has a woman got to pay out before dudes will do anything in return? Seriously, what's the price? Because we've been doing this shit all our lives, yet we've never saved up enough goodwill to have our needs acknowledged. We've asked politely and waited patiently, but we're made out to be the bad guys for even bringing it up.

posted by gueneverey at 10:29 AM on July 20

## G. My heart just falls

Count me in as someone who loves doing emotional labor if it's acknowledged. But omg, maybe one of the saddest things ever for me in relationships is when I do something and put a lot of effort into it and am so excited to do so because I just know it will make my partner feel so happy and loved - to do all that and then have the recipient literally not even notice or not say one word about it - omg. My heart just falls. I mean, it's like I can almost feel it falling. It makes me SO sad. This is also a big trope in movies. The wife who goes out of her way to make herself look nice or make a nice dinner and set the table or whatever, and she's so excited at the expectation of his reaction, and the husband just sweeps in and doesn't even see it and you see the wife's face fall. That never, ever fails to make me tear up. I'm tearing up just thinking about it. I don't know why this thing in particular makes me so sad, but it really, really does. It's just so hurtful.

posted by triggerfinger at 1:51 PM on July 21

## II. ANSWERING THE TYPICAL OBJECTIONS

### A. Why 'Just say no' actually doesn't spare us any grief

#### 1. Back to school

- a. Yeah, you guys act like women can just opt out of emotional labor consequence free. If we opt out of doing the expected emotional labor, then we get to deal with the generalized opprobrium for opting out! My husband and I have been together for 20 years and when I finally asked him "Why is your father's wife calling me to arrange for the two of you to go hiking together?" he said ". . . because the patriarchy. Just tell her I'll call my dad directly." So now I have to deal with her calling me 18 times a day and texting me "CALL ME ASAP" until my husband finally remembers to call his father 10 days after the barrage and onslaught starts. I could block her number, but that would probably have even greater consequences, not just for myself but for my husband and children.

I've told this story here before, but the year our older child was entering first grade, I had a gig the night of the Parent Curriculum Night at the school, so my husband went instead. When it asked for contact information, he gave only his email address and phone number, because he is used to thinking of himself as one person, not as a representative of the family. So it was his email address and his phone number that went out in the "get to know your classmates' parents" email, and he got every birthday invitation, every teacher email, every playdate invite, every Wacky Hair Day or Wear the Regalia of Your Favorite Sports Team Day email. And not me! Suddenly, he was in charge of managing our daughter's social life and school interactions. And even though what he did most of the time was just throw it over to me, he found it absolutely exhausting.

"NOW YOU UNDERSTAND," I told him. "Except that for me, it's not just like this for the school, it's like this for EVERYTHING."

posted by KathrynT at 5:40 PM on July 15

- b. For a bunch of practical reasons, Atropos Jr's dad ended up being the one who took her to ballet class, did her hair in a bun, made sure she had her ballet slippers etc. Fast-forward to her recital one year and I introduce myself to one of the other mothers as I'm dropping off some costume piece. She stares at me for a second and says, "we all assumed Atropos Jr *didn't have a mother.*" At first I thought she was just being snotty, and there was definite disapproval there, but she was also completely sincere. For this woman, the only possible scenario in which a kid's dad did that job was one in which the mother was dead or otherwise absent. My husband got either pity or adulation from women for doing this stuff; once it turned out I was alive and just not doing "my" job, I was treated with a lot of hostility. Yeah, dance tends to be gendered but this kind of thing happens all over.

posted by atropos at 6:50 PM on July 15

## 2. Others' expectations & shaming

Why is it MY job to keep track of my husband's mother's birthday, when that I the sort of thing I am terrible at and he is reasonably good at? Because even my lovely husband unconsciously offloaded a bunch of familial emotional labor on me when we got married. Worse, why does my MIL get mad at ME when he forgets her birthday? Because the whole WORLD expects me to be the birthday rememberer!

Actually, the one that annoys me is Christmas presents, because it's fucking exhausting to think of presents for him, our kids, and all the members of my large extended family. Then I remind him we have to get something for his parents and he looks at me helplessly and says, "I don't have any ideas, can you think of anything?" NO. I HAVE USED UP ALL MY IDEAS AND THEN SOME AND MY BRAIN IS TIRED OF THINKING OF GIFTS.

posted by Eyebrows McGee at 4:30 PM on July 15

## 3. Daughters expected to drop all-clear

c. ... But I too have been shouldering the emotional labour as my parents have aged, and so I'm dropping off my story here. It's this: when my mother came out of the hospital after having both hips replaced, I left my apartment and slept on her living room couch for three weeks so that I could help with her recovery, and cook for her and be available in case she needed anything during the night. And everyone thought that this was the correct and appropriate thing for me to do, despite the fact that my brother *was already living there*. So yes, this thread is one that resonates a great deal in my own life, despite everything.

posted by jokeefe at 5:06 PM on July 22

## 4. Layering

[re: mom nagging me to call my brother]

The layers here are fascinating. If you focus on the unfairness aspect, it's easy to miss that your mom is not only asking for you to perform emotional labour unequally based on gender, she's also performing her own emotional labour by reminding you in the first place, and if she corrected the gender imbalance by reminding you both, she'd be taking on an even higher burden. One that neither you nor your brothers seem to want, but that she feels is necessary for whatever reasons.

I'm sure this layering of emotional labour (enforcing/training other people to perform emotional labour) happens in many other situations as well. Teaching your children emotional labour skills (and teaching them to be aware of gender imbalance there), figuring out how to ask your partner to increase their emotional labour without hurting their feelings, etc etc.

posted by randomnity at 11:30 AM on July 21

## 5. Holding the line is exhausting, and results in loss

I started a relationship 20 years ago where I vowed not to do it out of step or proportion with my partner. I verbalized this notion at the first missed birthday: "it's on you dude, to remember your family members' birthdays/ and also, while we are at it: you can also: make appointments to see a doctor/lawyer/dentist/ choose your own shoes/shirts/pants/shampoo / write job applications/ know when your bills are due/pay them / clean your own shit off the toilet bowl/ buy us all loo paper etc" Doing all this stuff for a bloke is exhausting and invisible in its expectation - from the guy himself and the family and community he inhabits. Yet, fifteen years on, the It's Probably Just Easier To Do It Anyway aspect of holding this line, or breaking my line, killed the relationship.

## II. ANSWERING THE TYPICAL OBJECTIONS

As was so quickly and earnestly contested early in this thread to abdicating blokes (“Well, duh Ladeez, stop doing it if you hate it so much”) there are consequences of losing this core Kin Keeping work. If you stick to this line of behaviour you have to do without all those things you’d love for yourself. You close off that labour supply and hopeful expectation of reciprocity and maybe, like me, you realize you’re better off alone.

posted by honey-barbara at 8:09 AM on July 20

### 6. **The consequences aren’t just rebuke/shame for the woman who says no: they land on vulnerable people**

The grandparent-birthday example cited above was what happens when a person (almost always a woman) stops doing the unacknowledged and Unrewarded emotional labor: someone vulnerable and without alternatives gets hurt, in this case a child. I refused to do the work for that grandparent relationship so it doesn’t exist. Recently post-separation I said I would no longer be the point person for the kids and the in-laws cousin, that the ex would have to handle those play dates, party invites, phone calls etc. Result? No relationships any more. The kids miss out on relationships because adults can’t be arsed to do emotional work and then wonder why their kids are lonely and upset.

posted by [D] at 2:36 AM on July 17

### 7. **Falling on your sword... and the cost of being last in line**

- a. My favourite line this week from my ex has been him musing on how he plans to go to therapy because he’s come to see that after a decade of my asking him to go to therapy that he needs help beyond (his original plan) my reading the self-help books and preparing an executive summary with instructions for him.

The reason, after telling me that I’m selfish for throwing away our long and happy marriage, why oh why won’t I go to marriage counseling (I have agreed to, I’ve just refused to be the person who schedules the appointments as I have for the last decade, and refer to them as divorce counseling) is so that “I’ll want to get married again of course and not have these problems with my next wife.”

I don’t think he’ll actually go to therapy - I mean, I can hope, but I’d be deeply surprised. But get remarried? Definitely. He’s barely functioning as a human being after a decade of telling me I was the incompetent one in our marriage. I hope she’ll be okay, but I expect to wind up being the person who looks after him in his old age because he’s managed to isolate everyone else and it’ll be me or our kids, and I don’t want my kids to bear that burden.

posted by [D] at 9:42 PM on July 21

- b. *“I expect to wind up being the person who looks after him in his old age because he’s managed to isolate everyone else and it’ll be me or our kids, and I don’t want my kids to bear that burden.”*

It goes upwards too in the generations - the daughters writing here about being expected to do work for their families and when they don’t, that their mothers and mother-in-laws have to take over or get blamed for their daughter’s failures.

And sometimes the cost of saying no can be borne because you have enough support, you have alternatives. But sometimes, especially when vulnerable children and elderly are involved, caregivers who are overwhelmingly women, get trapped as the final decision makers. Everyone else has been able to say no, but the woman who is the caregiver, her No is treated as the worst of all the no’s possible, visible in a way that the rest of the no’s from the people and society around her who failed to help so she finally had to say no, is held as a judgement on her. A judgement with punishment - social isolation, the withdrawal of practical support, down to outright misogynistic attacks because she’s “such a cold bitch”.

posted by [D] at 10:54 PM on July 21

## **B. Why it's not a feminine frivolity we should just set aside**

### **1. These tasks are actually necessary**

They are necessary, though. All of these things, perhaps small in isolation, are basically social glue. At its most basic level, all of this emotional labour is saying to another human being "you matter. I will take my time to show you that you matter." And maintaining that glue is something that devolves mainly onto women, 24 hours a day.

It feels like most men are taught (ex- or implicitly) to do emotional work only when it gets them something they want now, whereas most women are taught to do emotional work as part of an ongoing exchange that benefits everyone.

posted by feckless fecal fear mongering at 11:30 AM on July 16

### **2. It's not the cards**

It's really weird that people are honing into the detail of birthday cards and dismissing it as unnecessary without realizing what they represent - the maintenance of social relationships. Okay, yes, maybe you or your mom or your fourth cousin doesn't really care for birthdays. But even if you aren't sending birthday cards, you're phoning them or bringing over flowers for their big occasions or sharing recipes with them or shopping and sending them gifts for Christmas and sending them thank you notes for the gifts they sent you. And then maybe you'll argue that the person in question doesn't care about any of THAT shit in isolation, and maybe it's true that you could drop one or two of these things and not see a big change in your relationship - but try dropping literally every token of social interaction and then seeing how far your relationship gets on radio silence. Like the whole point is that relationships are built upon hundreds of small interactions, none of them essential, but all of them important in cumulation. Honing in on one aspect and going "pfft that's trivial" doesn't make sense.

posted by Conspire at 5:39 PM on July 15

### **3. It's not the gift**

I thought of this thread yesterday after getting the mail, because I got a thank you note from a friend/neighbor who lives a five minute walk from my house. She recently had breast cancer surgery. When I was going to see her for the first time since the procedure last week, I thought "oh, I should take her something— right, I have that relaxation aromatherapy lotion/soap gift set, that works." I ran upstairs to grab it (I always have a stash of gifts on hand just in case), I gave it to her (unwrapped), she said thanks.

And in her thank you note (she had already thanked me in person, which I would consider more than sufficient, by the way), she said thank you not only for the gift, but for the thought behind the gift, the feeling it gave her that she is going through this scary time in community with people caring about her/caring for her/trying to signal their love for her.

To a lot of the people saying "ugh, cards, who cares" or "just skip it, no one I know cares about getting presents for [X] occasion," this is why these things matter. The present itself is secondary. The thank you card itself is secondary. They matter as vehicles for messages of love. They matter as ways of saying "I value you, I am thinking of you, I treasure your place in my life and my community, and I want this tangible object to be a talisman of my care for you."

The gift itself is not the thing. The card itself is not the thing. The relationship is the thing.

(I know that there are families/groups where the gift or the card become obligations and/or weapons, but the assumption that this aberrant dysfunction of certain social spheres makes the practices unnecessary in the rest of the world is flat-out absurd.)

## II. ANSWERING THE TYPICAL OBJECTIONS

A lot of the behaviors that people here have framed as “pointless” or “a waste of time” have almost magical powers, when they are used correctly. I got that card in return for a last-minute “feel better” gift, and the glow from it lasted all night, and on through today. I’m not glad she sent the card NOT because people who get gifts are supposed to send thank you cards, but because it allowed us both to feel loved.

Part of the invisibility of emotional labor is that its tools are so often damned as absurd or frivolous. Listen to the scorn so many men show for women who “gossip”, for example. How often is “gossip” a shorthand slur for “discussing their lives, their hopes, their dreams, offering one another advice, support, affirmation”?

posted by a fiendish thingy at 8:05 AM on July 17

### 4. **Avoiding EL hurts men**

The thing about “but I don’t care about cards” is that they kind of don’t care about this stuff, and as a result they don’t have very many real, strong relationships. This really is a patriarchy-hurts-men-too situation, because reciprocal emotional labor is necessary for real intimacy, and life without intimacy sucks for most people. I don’t particularly care about actually sending cards, but the basic emotional labor of listening empathetically, attending to other people’s needs, keeping in touch, etc.? That stuff is really important. It’s unfair that women have to do most of it, but it also stunts and hurts men when they don’t do it.

posted by ArbitraryAndCapricious at 7:40 PM on July 15

### 5. **\*The hard data on men’s health and EL**

Yes, but widowers are notably more socially disconnected than widows, because when men don’t do the work of social connection (of which birthday cards are merely a subset) and don’t have a wife to do it for them, those social connections wither and die, with statistically notable ill effects on the health of older widowed men:

[“The evidence indicates that the aged male survivor experiences a different impact from spousal loss than his female counterpart](#) and that he encounters severe difficulties in adapting to the single status. Adjustment problems are especially compounded by the loss of his occupational role, which abruptly removes him from meaningful contact with friends and co-workers. Social isolation among aged widowers leads to a precarious condition which is reflected in unusually high rates of mental disorders, suicides, and mortality risk.”

It’s super-great if bros in their 20s don’t care if their old roommates send them birthday cards or not, but a lifetime of skipping out on “emotional labor” and the pernicious social expectations that turn it in to women’s work (so that men who DO do emotional labor are sometimes bypassed by social structures that push it onto their wives) creates real and significant negative outcomes for men who suffer emotionally and physically from their social isolation -- most notably for widowers, but divorced men also have a drop in well-being when they lose their spouse.

“Loneliness, depression, and social isolation also contribute to the excess mortality associated with bereavement, divorce, or never having married. A Harvard study reported that socially isolated men have an 82% higher risk of dying from heart disease, compared with men who have strong interpersonal relationships. And the New England Research Institute reported that [66% of men rely on their wives for their primary social supports](#); only 21% rely on other people, and 10% have no such supports. Clearly, subtracting a wife greatly increases a man’s risk of isolation. ”

You may be in the 21% of men who have social supports other than a spouse. That’s great! But a huuuuuuuuuge proportion of men rely almost entirely on their wives for social connection and that is a) a significant form of work for the wife (or same-sex spouse) who must manage not only her own social-emotional health but her husband’s; and b) really dangerous for men who then end up totally disconnected from social and emotional supports through the loss of a wife by death or divorce.

## II. ANSWERING THE TYPICAL OBJECTIONS

Part of what creates that is the societal expectation that women are the “social arrangers” and that’s what we’re trying to talk about in this thread.

And now that I’ve underlined #WhatAboutTheMen and given evidence that a) women do actually do the bulk of emotional labor and b) it has negative effects on men, can we go back to talking about women and emotional labor? Instead of men complaining that women are just doing things that nobody gives a shit about? WE GET IT, YOU DON’T GIVE A SHIT, BUT WE STILL CARE BECAUSE IT MAKES YOU MEN DIE SOONER AND THAT’S JUST THE KIND OF EMOTIONAL LABOR SERVICE WE WOMEN PROVIDE FOR YOU.

And go send your college roommate a goddamned “thinking of you!” card so he doesn’t croak.

posted by Eyebrows McGee at 5:45 PM on July 15

[See also, **III. A. 1. I was going to get you flowers...**, on page 15]

### **C. Why we don't 'just need to communicate better about our needs' (God, we have tried)**

#### **1. Do you seriously think we haven’t tried that?**

[re: suggestion to ask for reciprocity instead of cash]

Are you under the impression that we haven’t tried this already? Because many of us have tried this. As a result, we have been told that we’re imagining the imbalance, that the man buys all the stuff and thinks that’s a fair breakdown, that he feels like a terrible person when we ask him to step up (which leads to him sobbing and her back patting, but no change from him), that other men are so much worse and really he’s awesome, that we nag too much, that we don’t remind him often enough, that we should use a different tone when we ask, that he does perform emotional labor and we just don’t notice, that he knows he has privilege, but it’s not his fault he was born male.

But before even getting there, you are also suggesting we ask men to notice when we need support. Which (not all men) men are already not doing, and must be taught to do. Or you are suggesting that we request emotional labor at the time we want it. (The classic example of woman complaining about her day at work and the guy offering “solutions” instead of saying “wow that really sucks and it sounds like you handled it well. Can I do something to help you feel better?” Or better still, he just does a thing he knows will make her feel better.)

Many women already/still do these things. Many women have given up because the arguments and assorted emotional labor that stem from such requests are painful and time consuming. Many women never did these things because they saw what it amounted to in the lives of their forebears.

Many women would consider it a great achievement to simply have our emotional labor recognized with any regularity.

posted by bilabial at 9:20 PM on July 19

#### **2. Regarding a story of tone and word choice policing**

This is the worst mindfuck because there are no magic words, yet you can spend years (in my case) trying to find them. I stopped caring whether I’d brought something up at the right time and in the right way with the right words because they were literally never right. But it took years of trying to finally stop caring.

[username]: there are no magic words to make him understand. It’s extremely hard to accept that either he does not care to understand, or he does understand and doesn’t care to admit it. But assuming he speaks English fluently, those are your only two options. I’m sorry.

posted by desjardins at 11:50 AM on July 27

**3. I literally could not be clearer... (also, It's relaxing?! Do you even hear yourself?)**

- a. [username], I am so glad you showed up here. Your story (and the resulting thread) has been a revelation for me and finally - finally! - given me words for something that has bothered me for so long and that I could never articulate. Count me in as another person who's life this has changed.

I haven't read all the way through your second article yet, but so far it's reminding me a bit of my own marriage breakdown. I had a good husband that I loved but because of one major issue, I had to leave him. He continues to this day to be confused about why I left. Which is nuts, because, being a big believer in open communication, I told him more times than I can remember - "Hey, [this issue] is a real problem for me. I feel scared/sad/worried/depressed when you do it. I can't live like this. I love you but if something doesn't change, I will have to leave." I was that direct. I told him this multiple times. Then, when I finally did leave we had multiple long arguments about why I was leaving because as he said, he was a good husband! He never hit me, he never messed around with other women, he helped around the house, etc. I was like - that is BASELINE behavior. You don't get awards for things you are or are not supposed to be doing to begin with! I reminded him I told him multiple times what my problems were and what I would do if they were not addressed. I actually reminded him of this MULTIPLE TIMES AS WELL. It was insanity. I was like, THERE IS NO WAY FOR ME TO BE MORE CLEAR ON THIS. He still doesn't know why I left and that encapsulates it for me. He heard what he wanted to hear, what was convenient for him. If it didn't cause him any issues, he had no problem listening to me and hearing what I said. If it did, he mentally disregarded it.

Anyway, that was five years ago. Fast forward to now and I've gone out a few times with a guy that I like. I know he really likes me too. I know he loves being around me. He is a very progressive, liberal guy and seems to be a feminist in every other way without even trying. Super respectful of women, takes them seriously, all of it. He told me he wanted to take things slow. Fine. We recently had a talk and he told me again that he doesn't feel ready for anything serious but he loves hanging out with me and he's not dating anyone else. I know both of these things are true. He said he's trying to figure out why he doesn't feel ready (he's a few years out of a long term marriage), but he thinks it's because he's not ready for the emotional commitment of a relationship. When I asked him to elaborate he said he really likes hanging around with his guy friends because nothing is expected of him and he feels like he can relax. So I asked, then why even date women? Why not just hang out with your guy friends? And he said that he loves being around women because they're kind, and soft and comforting and they make him feel relaxed and good in a way that men don't. And I was like - you mean nurturing? And he was like - YES, nurturing. And so I then took the opportunity to tell him briefly about your article and how emotional labor is the glue that ties things together and makes things feel safe and comforting and everything else, but then he was distracted (conveniently) by a really bad storm that was going on outside at the time and I dropped it.

But essentially, this guy told me that he wants all the good things that come from being with a woman - the comfort and the care - but that he wasn't "ready" to reciprocate in any way, i.e. he doesn't WANT to do it. And the thing is - he's actually an otherwise really nice and smart guy. He was super unaware of what he was actually saying. I think if I told him a similar story, but framed it as just some man who wanted to take from a relationship but give nothing back, he would be horrified by the guy's behavior. And the reason is that I don't think he sees it as actual WORK that women do. I think he hasn't ever thought about it and just assumes that maybe being comforting and nurturing is just a part of a woman's essence or something and that it's natural and always just kind of magically there. Like a lot of people, he doesn't see that there is effort behind it. Because he's never had to see it.

Anyway, thank you again for putting words to this and getting it out there. You've empowered me and countless other women and I hope this is the beginning of a huge awareness-building era in our society around the invisible work that women do.

posted by triggerfinger at 2:48 PM on July 20

## II. ANSWERING THE TYPICAL OBJECTIONS

- b.** “When I asked him to elaborate he said he really likes hanging around with his guy friends because nothing is expected of him and he feels like he can relax. So I asked, then why even date women? Why not just hang out with your guy friends? And he said that he loves being around women because they’re kind, and soft and comforting and they make him feel relaxed and good in a way that men don’t. And I was like – you mean nurturing? And he was like – YES, nurturing.”

You know, my husband for the most part is one of the stellar ones in picking up on emotional labor. He deals with his family, remembers dates, pays attention to what I like, etc. etc. etc.

But he said he could totally relate to the above sentiments.

So, I laid it out flat for him, and he said he’d never really thought about it that way. (Excuse the all caps)

BEING SOFT AND COMFORTING AND NURTURING IS REALLY FUCKING HARD WORK. IT IS NOT SOMETHING THAT COMES NATURALLY JUST BECAUSE I IDENTIFY AS FEMALE. IT TAKES EFFORT AND TIME AND IS EXHAUSTING AND DRAINING.

So, to be effectively told that you want to reap the benefits of someone else’s hard work and then not reciprocate at all, because it’s hard work for you (no fucking kidding) is... well, it can be devastating. It’s an indication of how little you are valued. The complete lack of empathy where you can’t even conceive that the thing you don’t want to do bc it’s not relaxing is also not relaxing for the other person.

Oy.

posted by [username] at 9:20 AM on July 21

### 4. The catch-22 of being upset enough

The catch-22 of being upset *enough* sucks. I’ve had to explain over and over that I don’t like the way that things have to reach breaking point, where I’m crying uncontrollably and forgetting to eat in order for my needs to be taken seriously, since asking and voicing my concerns isn’t enough. I don’t like having to slap my hand on the table and say ‘stop’ because all my ‘ugh’ and ‘ew’ and ‘no this is gross’ isn’t *enough* to signal that the conversation is going places I don’t want it to.

I hate having to explain that this isn’t silent treatment, as if I want to talk but I’m refusing to out of pique, it’s that I genuinely am *done talking*. I have *tried talking*. It didn’t work. Now I have to do emergency mental healthcare, so yeah, your sudden need to talk can wait.

posted by [GA] at 5:39 PM on August 13

### 5. When men react defensively

- a.** [...] to take criticism and learn from it and be told it’s not a personal attack and try not to cry if heaven forbid you’re one of the sensitive ones. As opposed to immediately getting your hackles up and going on the defensive.

posted by fiercecupcake at 12:18 PM on July 24

- b.** Ours always went like:

him: you think I’m such an asshole \*pout\*

me, trying to soothe him: no, I never called you that, I said I had a problem with [behavior]

I guess I would have saved us both a lot of time if I’d just called him an asshole.

posted by desjardins at 12:24 PM on July 24

## II. ANSWERING THE TYPICAL OBJECTIONS

- c. Oh that “fragile male ego”. I hear it very often, you know. Including from women who have been taught that hardly anything in this life is more important than protecting men’s poor defenseless egos.

I once told a female friend about my then-boyfriend. He was steering me towards the bedroom way too fast and I told him as much. He was not happy with me and got all upset and defensive, and when I told my friend about this, she said, “But of course he was! It was like you told him he was doing something wrong!” Honestly, no comment.

posted by Guelder at 1:40 PM on July 22

- d. I [a man] have to assume it’s subconscious (or maybe not even all that sub) attitudes about taking any criticism or direction from women. I’ve probably spent about half my professional life answering to a female boss. Which is probably not something I would have given one thought to if I hadn’t fielded questions about whether that was a problem for me. Multiple times. In forms like “and you don’t have a problem with that?”

There’s just no way to interpret that question from another man in any way other than an accompanying message of “because you should.” Unless I’d earlier run off on some excessive anti-woman screed, I guess, and they thought this was a contradiction; You’ll just have to take my word that such was not the case.

If criticism from X strings more than that’s a pretty clear indication that one thinks X is not qualified or within their rights to criticize you. Maybe it’s not always internalized misogyny but absent a reason someone can vocalize that sure seems like a reasonable go-to assumption.

posted by phearlez at 12:29 PM on July 24

### 6. Reflexive apologizing...

My mother reflexively apologizes to inanimate objects she drops/knocks over/offends. We laugh about it, but in light of this thread it’s slightly horrifying.

posted by restless\_nomad at 4:13 PM on July 26

### 7. You thought they were running to meet you, too

Hey [username], it took me two days to realize that my ex’s rage because I wouldn’t comfort him over failing to pay child support was not only crazy, but that oh hey, he didn’t even think to apologize for not paying child support or notice that it might be a tad stressful for me with the far less well-paid job and full-time parenting to hear that there’s no money for groceries, so can he borrow some money to pay the health insurance....

You get trained to think handling all this is what A Good Woman does. That it’s selfish and cruel to be angry and unhappy about someone you love hurting you, and God forbid that you express that aloud or make them feel any more distress for what they’ve done. But that’s because in your head, you’re running towards them and imagining that they’re running towards you too, that the path to recovery will be short because both of you are running towards each other.

But really, they’re just standing there checking their phone and waiting for you to run a marathon over to them while they complain that you’re always late, why does it take you so long to get there, you get enough practice after all...

He [username’s cheating husband, just busted again] can run the fucking marathon to Crone Island. You can sit on the beach and read a book and drink something with an umbrella in it and nap.

posted by [D] at 9:18 PM on July 20

## D. Why 'Aren't you just over-reacting?' misses (and worsens) the enormity of our pain

### 1. Freud's kettle

Whoever linked the Harper's article "[Cassandra Among The Creeps](#)" upthread, thank you (ah, it's by Rebecca "Men Explain Things To Me" Solnit, of course it would be):

Still, even now, when a woman says something uncomfortable about male misconduct, she is routinely portrayed as delusional, a malicious conspirator, a pathological liar, a whiner who doesn't recognize it's all in fun, or all of the above. The overkill of these responses recalls Freud's deployment of the joke about the broken kettle. A man accused by his neighbor of having returned a borrowed kettle damaged replies that [he had returned it undamaged, it was already damaged when he borrowed it, and he had never borrowed it anyway](#). When a woman accuses a man and he or his defenders protest that much, she becomes that broken kettle.

That article focuses on sexual abuse, rape, and sexual harassment, but the joke applies more broadly too. "Emotional labor? What's that? ...But that's what females are biologically programmed to do, so doing it daily unthanked and unnoticed can't qualify as 'damage.' OK the unnoticed and taking it for granted qualifies as damage, but it's the way things have always been and will always be, so why pick on \*me\* to change something that's never going to change. Look, i don't agree that emotional labor exists, cuz I never benefitted from all those petty things you do that you're calling 'labor,' because you had the nerve to forget my craft beer. Seriously you want me to thank you for forgetting my craft beer?"

posted by cybercoitus interruptus at 1:53 PM on July 23

### 2. What the term "venting" implies...

- a. I think the thing that irks me about calling it venting is the implication that it won't change anything, which tacitly states that nothing NEEDS changing. Steam just builds up and needs to be let it off the system every now and then, nothing to see here.

posted by stoneweaver at 10:08 PM on July 23

- b. stoneweaver pretty much summed up my feelings about the word "venting" as used in the context of what's going on in this thread. Calling it venting trivializes the way people are just offering up huge pieces of their souls. I have made keeping up with this thread a priority this week, because I don't want to let anybody's pain go unwitnessed, even if I can't possibly respond to each individual story. Our feelings and struggles matter, and this work we're being largely unassisted with and uncompensated for is the fucking glue that holds society together, and coming together to talk about it is something that rarely happens for the vast majority of us. I can hardly believe this thread exists, that it's gone so well, with so few derails, with no acrimonious MeTa reacting to it. I am not exaggerating when I say it feels miraculous.

posted by skybluepink at 12:34 AM on July 24

### 3. Men: can we learn that someone being upset is enough to act? (\*great note on consent)

*"Why do you need to understand anything other than that it bugs me?"*

It all boils down to whether it's okay to just shrug off stuff other people care about. We men are getting a cultural message that it's okay to not care about something other people care about, even if making a change for their sake costs us no physical and only minimal mental effort. That's (in my opinion and in privileged world I inhabit) stupid, so I don't really need to do it.

## II. ANSWERING THE TYPICAL OBJECTIONS

I see otherwise smart people do the same thing about consent. They mock affirmative consent because they don't get the way that *ask/push* till you get a yes is wearying (emotional labor!) for women.

posted by phearlez at 9:50 AM on July 22

### E. Why we don't 'just walk away' from unequal relationships

#### 1. Not so easy to just "find a better man"

One of the things I've struggled with as a male feminist is understanding why women so readily put up with male bullshit; of course I'm not talking about cases where they live in fear of violence, but about those "normal" relationships in which the guy basically lets the woman do the housework and emotional labor. I'm guessing women tend to be far more worried about the relationship breaking down than men (and thus afraid of putting it at risk by confronting their partner), which makes sense because the guy is likely to have an easier time finding another partner, and he is far more likely to find a woman willing to let him get away with shit than she is to find a guy who's significantly better than this one.

posted by languagehat at 8:17 AM on July 30

#### 2. You aren't asked to make that painful choice

[re: advice to just walk away from people with unrealistic expectations]

SHUT THEM OFF. WALK AWAY. YOU ARE AN ADULT."

Which is exactly what some of us do. I've done it more and more over the years. About 4 seconds after my mother's corpse was cold, I told my sister, "I am never ever attending another family Christmas. Adios, muchacha." And I'm perfectly fine with accepting the fallout of that. The thing is, most men not only don't have to deal with the fallout of "walking away" or opting out of various emotional chores, but they are very, very often never expected to have done The Thing in the first place.

In US culture at least, there are certain people within a family or relationship who are going to be asked or automatically expected to step up in situations like an elderly relative needing in-home care or support or company, a niece or nephew needing a last-minute babysitter or someone other than a parent to attend a school play, hosting a holiday event or reunion, visiting someone in a hospital, providing goodies for a playdate, mending fences between arguing parties or keeping lines of communication open, etc., etc., etc. and other people who aren't asked or expected to do those. And we know the general gender breakdown of those two groups.

posted by FelliniBlank at 5:52 PM on July 15

[See also, **V. A. I'd rather be single**, on page 27, for some who have permanently walked away from romantic partnership]

### III. EXAMPLES OF EL

#### A. Keystone stories

##### 1. I was going to get you flowers...

I've been reading this thread incessantly and it's like something I've always known has finally been put into words. I still haven't reached the end and I have a lot of thinking to do, but had to comment when I read [the comment about a boyfriend wanting credit for thinking about, but not buying, flowers]:

When I was a teenager I had a boyfriend who used to say this exact thing, and I remember being charmed. And a few years later I found this poem and I cried when I remembered the scraps I had been so grateful for...

[Flowers, by Wendy Cope \[poetryarchive.org\]](#)

[...]

posted by [username] at 7:43 AM on July 29

##### 2. The address book

Dear gods, you guys. This thread. So much resonates.

When the husband and I first married, his grandmother gave all of the sisters in-law an address book for Christmas one year. It had all the addresses, birthdays, and anniversaries of the entire family, including extended family. The husband is number 6 of 7, all 7 are married and have kids. Many of the cousins have similarly large families. I looked at the book and said "Jesus christ, that's a fucking lot of family."

And never did a godsdamned thing with it, because it was not my family.

The nagging started pretty much instantly. "Why didn't you send Jan and Steve a card for their anniversary?" "Who?" "Jan and Steve, my cousins in Elyria." "Never met 'em. Not my family." And there was grumbling. The next event came around. Why didn't I send a card to this person for their birthday? "Never met 'em. Not my family." This went on for a couple years, with him nagging me about using the address book, and me finally getting fed up and pitching it in the trash.

Time passes, various bits of the family moved around, and he started complaining about never seeing his family. We had a screaming row about it one night, and he threw a huge tantrum about how I never send cards or call people, and it was upsetting to those people, and he never sees his brothers, and why don't I ever make any plans? My screaming response was "THEY ARE **YOUR** FAMILY! If they're mad because they're not getting cards and you're mad because you don't see your brothers, that is 100% on your shoulders, because they are **YOUR** family, **NOT** mine, and I am not your fucking social secretary." It had never occurred to him that it was HIS responsibility to maintain relationships with HIS siblings!

He does not make friends of his own. The few friends that he has, he has because I talked to them first. He's very proud of the work that we do for a small MI winery, and likes to make a big deal of the fact that we are now on the Board of Directors, but the fact is, we would never have even started volunteering there if I hadn't been the one to become friends with the fascinating and hilarious vintner and his wife. When I want to do things with my friends, he wants to be included. When I want to do things with my friends and I don't want him along, he sulks. And when he's upset with me and fussing because he doesn't have the same kind of relationship with my friends that I do, he refuses to understand that it's because I have done ALL the work of maintaining those relationships, and he has done none. When he's feeling especially sorry for himself, he complains that if we ever split up, he wouldn't have any friends any more, and that my friends would be right there to help me move out. Well, duh. That's because I'm the one who makes plans with them, talks to them about everything and nothing, makes them feel welcome and happy in my home when they visit.

It has only been in recent years that he has finally gotten it into his head that my emotional needs matter, too, and that he needs to get out of the habit of expecting me to be his everything. He is finally understanding that I cannot fulfill his every want and need, and he needs to take responsibility for his own social life.

The notion of women as the Caregivers of the Entire Fucking Universe is so deeply ingrained in some people, and it weighs heavily. Performing this sort of work only when I **WANT** to, rather than when it is expected of me helps ease the burden somewhat, but stars and stones, it is still a heavy burden when your partner is willfully clueless.

posted by MissySedai at 9:12 AM on July 20

## **B. Pets and euthanasia**

### **1. My pets, your pets**

*"This makes me curious: Heterosexual couples, who is the one who takes the cats and dogs in to be euthanized?"*

[...] when I was a kid, I had a dog and a cat. The dog was given away when I was in my early teens and the cat ran away (I think someone let it out on purpose) and I never saw either of them again. I heard later that the dog got mean because the new owners left her outside and overfed her and generally mistreated her. Even thinking of it now (and the fact that now she is either quite an old dog or dead) fills me with this deep, awful sorrow and feeling that I should've been an obnoxious little kid and done everything possible to save my dog and cat, even if it wouldn't have changed anything. Instead I just let it happen to me, because my parents were going through a divorce and my grandmother had just died and I was used to the knowledge that awful things were inevitable and that I had to deal with my emotions myself, and also feeling that abdicating control made these emotions easier to deal with. Just letting bad things happen with my stone face on instead of fighting it or letting anyone know I was sad. (I had younger siblings and my mom left suicide notes around the house when my grandmother died, so I felt like I had to "be strong" for them.)

Anyway, putting aside the massive amount of female conditioning in that paragraph alone, my last ex was such a broken mess about his cat who had died... ten years ago. Of course it's awful, of course it's sad, but if I spoke of his cat in anything but hushed tones he'd get rather mopey and upset if he thought I was being glib. Did we ever talk about my childhood pets? Did he ever bother to process those emotions and think of them as his own to deal with and not to unduly burden others? No, of course not. There was no maturity in how he dealt with the situation. Whenever I mentioned the name of a local town that contained the name of his cat, there was always a hushed "moment of silence" to reinforce how important his emotions and attachment were and that I was responsible for fielding them at any opportunity.

I just thought about at least three other adult men in my life who deal with the death of pets in the same way. I think it ties in with the idea that women experience menopause and empty nest syndrome (it's all about children and fertility, naturally) but are incapable of existential crises. No, we are not. We are just used to processing them and realizing that no one else will be there for us when life goes on.

posted by easter queen at 12:13 PM on July 20

### **2. Shamed by a 9-yr-old**

*"who is the one who takes the cats and dogs in to be euthanized?"*

When my sweet and lovey Murphy fell ill with epilepsy, the entire family was a complete wreck. But on what turned out to be his last night on Earth, I was the one who dragged a futon mattress into the basement to lie with him on the floor while he recovered from a particularly awful seizure and I was the one who covered him with a wet towel and turned the fan on to get his temperature down. And when we rushed him to the emergency vet at 4AM because the seizures just kept coming and coming and coming, I was the one who demanded that the vet let me stay with him while he was sedated.

The next morning, when the vet called to tell me he was locked in status epilepticus, with very little hope of recovery, I was the one who had to make the decision to show the sweet boy love and mercy. The husband “couldn’t”, he said. So the Monsters and I went to be with him, to hold him and pet him and cradle him and tell him how much he was loved. We were with him when he breathed his last, and it was devastating.

The husband made a big show of slamming his fist into the wall and railing at the heavens about “his” dog after we came home. Younger Monster bluntly told him to stop making an ass of himself, if he loved Murphy so much, why wasn’t he there to help him leave this world peacefully?

We have lost three well loved pets since then. He goes with us now.

It took being shamed by a 9 year-old for him to grasp what a burden he had expected us to carry.

posted by MissySedai at 3:07 PM on July 20

## C. Managing health

### 1. He’s lucky I hadn’t found this thread yet

So I lost a shitload of weight going on for a decade ago. I have kept it off, so yay me, I guess. My husband, after being diagnosed with Type II Diabetes, embarked on his own weight loss and exercise regime, and he’s doing well. He’s finding it easy, and guess why?

Yes, I am his (qualified only through my own experience) in-house dietician. All he has to do is go to the gym, and eat what I give him. (And yes, consistently going to the gym isn’t all that easy for a lot of people, but he actually enjoys it, so it’s not really a challenge for him, personally) All tasty, nutritious, pre-portioned, calorie-counted, Fitting His Fucking Macros. Which he changes all the time, incidentally, depending on what he’s reading at the moment. And oh god, the endless conversations we have about this. I am over it. I am glad to help, and I want him to succeed for my own selfish reasons (i.e., I love him and want him around for a long time to come, and he really is a great guy most of the time) but I only was able to get my own shit together through a lot of effort and FINALLY fighting my ever-morphing eating disorder to an uneasy truce. Something I did quietly and with little fanfare, beyond it being kind of obvious what I was doing, because, of course, I was shrinking.

I totally internalized all the bullshit about women being neurotic about their diets, their bodies, etc., and made a huge effort to keep my struggle to myself, so I wouldn’t be one of those women constantly talking about being on a diet. I made a point of not being a pain in the ass or a bore. And I did it, so yay me, I guess. Now I really don’t want to talk about it, I just want to get on with my life and eat and exercise in this moderate and healthy way I have fought SO HARD to achieve, and while I mostly don’t mind helping the spouse out, it’s impossible for me to stop thinking about food and exercise so much when I now have to do it for a minimum of two people, and often many more than that, since I seem to be regarded by far too many people as some kind of free diet consultant. (This doesn’t even get into how I feel about people I barely know commenting on my body, which is not at all happy, thanks.)

So where I’m going with this is to say on Monday, as my husband was getting ready to travel to an on-site job for a few days, I asked him if he wanted a protein shake with his breakfast, because I knew he had a karate class later that night, and wouldn’t really have much time to eat properly during the day. (I don’t even want to get into our differing opinions on The Protein Thing; I am humouring him totally on this, because it’s his body, and if he wants to supplement with that disgusting whey protein isolate, so be it. I don’t have to drink it.) There was some agonizing, and then yes, he wanted the shake. Awesome. Great. Then he said to me, as he was eating and I had sat down at the table to do some kind of crap household paperwork, that he wished he could avoid making decisions about what/when to eat. That he found it mentally tiring to be asked these questions and it would just be wonderful if I removed the element of choice entirely, and just gave him whatever it was he was supposed to eat. Because thinking about food all the time, when there are so many other things he needs to be thinking about is just too much sometimes. (But of course, he didn’t offer never, ever to complain or offer opinions about it, either.)

He's really goddamned lucky I hadn't found this amazing thread yet. That luck is going to run out at some point this weekend.

posted by skybluepink at 10:35 AM on July 22

## 2. **Diabetic men without their wives**

*Then he said to me, as he was eating and I had sat down at the table to do some kind of crap household paperwork, that he wished he could avoid making decisions about what/when to eat. That he found it mentally tiring to be asked these questions and it would just be wonderful if I removed the element of choice entirely, and just gave him whatever it was he was supposed to eat. Because thinking about food all the time, when there are so many other things he needs to be thinking about is just too much sometimes.*

There's a thing with diabetic men where they frequently get very sick or even die after their partners leave/die because their wives have been taking full responsibility for their meals and they have no idea how to cook or choose foods. Not only should you dump that emotional labor for your sake, he should be doing the mental work of knowing what's in his food for his own sake.

posted by immlass at 11:33 AM on July 22

## 3. **"Takes care of herself"**

Not to beat a dead horse, but it has always made me laugh when men say they want a woman who "takes care of herself" (i.e., diets, works out, does her hair, makeup, nails). Meanwhile, so many of these men *literally cannot take care of themselves.*

posted by easter queen at 11:36 AM on July 22

## D. **EL and sex**

### 1. **An even more unthinkable complaint than housework: Sex, the final frontier**

Speaking of consent, the emotional labor of sexual labor is just... oh god. The expectation that women should "fake it" (or else men will feel bad that they couldn't perform well enough), that we should have sex all the time when we don't want to\*, that we should "take care of ourselves" (i.e. diet) so that our men don't stray or feel like less of a man, that we carefully modulate our "no's" so we don't hurt anyone's feelings OR put ourselves in danger, that we make our man cool with the idea that we won't always come, but can't necessarily ask for them to try something different if there is a way we will come, that we explain away our sexual desires as selfish, that we tell women to try dating older men but never suggest the reverse for men, blah blah blah...

\*Some degree of this, reciprocated by both partners, is necessary-- but when you're female there's a whole dimension of pain/roughness that men do not have to experience.

This is a whole thing I've never acknowledged before-- that being a female partner in a straight relationship means a BUTTLOAD of emotional labor around sex, that you really really can't talk about, because there is so much male fragility on this issue. In some ways it's the final frontier. Say what you will about housework, but do not speak of orgasms!

posted by easter queen at 10:00 AM on July 22

## 2. Postpartum sex...

The husband asked about this while I was getting THIRTY TWO STITCHES after a deep perineal tear delivering Elder Monster. Can I tell you how much I LOVE my OB-GYN? LOVE! He stared at the husband and said “She just suffered a deep perineal tear that is going to take several months to heal. If you so much as THINK about sex in her general direction before she is 100% healed and feeling frisky herself? I will tear your testicles off and give them back in a ziploc.”

Dr. Shah was perfection incarnate.

posted by MissySedai at 11:19 AM on July 22

## 3. Why you only hear about sex being soothing for men

And yes, the whole “but when can we bang again??” thing after giving birth... I will be like, never. Never again can we bang. Goodbye forever. (jk I will be like “let me manage your expectations gracefully and carefully, I am a woman.” Also jk because this is something my boyfriend is quite chill about! Men, it is possible.)

It really hurts me how much emotional management women have to do around sex (also forgot to mention like, not asking for toys or anything in the bedroom that will actually allow us to orgasm, because again, ego damage, even though it helps so many women). Like did it occur to anyone that we might want to enjoy sex? That it might be relaxing for us and not another venue for constant performance? All those times people insist on how men and women are just different-- maybe during this one time, sex, where men and women are frequently DEMONSTRATIVELY different, we could treat women the way they'd like to be treated sexually and not shame them for not being porn actresses (i.e., pretending to be a giant, male-ish erogenous zone)? We could remember that their sexuality is special and that they have a clitoris? And that what works for men might not work for women, for obvious physiological reasons, which men just don't want to think about?

We spend so much time and energy as a society talking about how men are comforted and affirmed and soothed by sex and never stop to think about why the same isn't true for women. It's because women efface their own needs to satisfy those of men. Sigh.

Also, w.r.t. pregnancy and parenting and giving birth, it drives me CRAZY when women post to the Green about how their husbands/male partners are freaking out about becoming a new parent. Acting distant and defensive and claiming they're not ready. As if the woman is not freaking out, as opposed to just literally having no option to run away and hide. The idea that “daddy angst” (that manifests in checking out, cheating on their partner, etc.) is like this special, specific thing that needs to be acknowledged instead of just the same old shittiness that is frankly ridiculous.

posted by easter queen at 10:47 AM on July 22

## 4. My pain “ruins his mood”

easter queen: *This is a whole thing I've never acknowledged before-- that being a female partner in a straight relationship means a BUTTLOAD of emotional labor around sex, that you really really can't talk about, because there is so much male fragility on this issue.*

HELL YES. I hadn't even thought of this. Yet as soon as I read your comment, there he was popping up right in my head: Mr Previous, complaining that I 'was ruining the mood' if I told him that it hurt when he was rough or clumsy (or just impatient) during sex. So, never mind MY mood, whenever he did something that hurt me, I couldn't just go 'Ouch, that was a bit too rough, sweetie', no... I needed to word my pain in a gentle and, I guess, sexy way, in order not to ruin his precious, precious mood.

Of course, this was the same guy who got impatient during foreplay, and asked me if he couldn't just stick it in every now and then, without all of that hoopla? And then I had to be gentle again while I tried to explain that that's not how vaginas work. Or at the very least not mine.

posted by Too-Ticky at 10:50 AM on July 22

## 5. **There is no place for our lust, and you call us frigid?**

You know, I also think this is part of the unvocalized censure from women about sex work. Of course there's also the jealousy component and pearl-clutching and all of that, but subconsciously I've always felt that it's just so massively ridiculous that not only can women not have the sex we want, without an excess of emotional labor, with our male partners, but we can't even pay for someone to give it to us. At least not in the casual way a man can. Meanwhile, men can demand it from their partners and garner sympathy for cheating because "needs" and pay for it any time they can afford it.

There is no strip club I can just go to and creep about and let men utterly gratify my senses, not because I don't WANT that (we're animals!! I want it like I want to pig out on snack cakes!) but because I'm socialized to pretend I am better and more virtuous than that and will do the sex work for my partner and ignore that I would like someone to do it for myself. The only way I can actively objectify a real man who is physically present is if I do it with a wink, at a kitschy club-- certainly I can never do it with a partner (men have too much dignity to let us objectify them for our pleasure in any way that doesn't resemble male worship). Meanwhile, women are being told they should shave and do anal. Women's needs are so utterly invisible.

I remember during my sexual awakening as a teen how voracious I was-- I read the smuttiest smut, about women doing things to men and men doing things to other men. Men were sexual objects! I was a huge pervert! I was a voyeur\* and a leerer, like any teenage boy. As I got older and the pressure to be "marriage-material" grew in my life, I basically suppressed my sexuality-- it was too embarrassing, too ridiculous, too impossible. The effort to enjoy that was not consonant with my identity as a woman. Most straight men are NOT down with that stuff.

And men wonder why so many women are sexually distant. They think that if women just "woke up," they'd enjoy the sex that men want to have and be more open to the kinks that they themselves enjoy. Not only does it never occur to them that women have flattened out their own sexuality in service of male sexual dominance (they have been objectified within an inch of their own feelings), it also does not occur that the sex women want to have might be totally foreign, alienating, and overwhelming to them (much like the male gaze/porn culture is to women). Objectification might take its toll on them. In a future utopia that I can only imagine a million years from now.\*\*

I would be a supporter of legalized sex work if it ameliorated the horrible humanitarian fall-out of the current industry, but I am also profoundly uneasy about a culture that makes it so easy for men to get what they want, commodified and utterly divorced from any emotional effort or attention, while denying that thing to women at almost every turn (and making us labor to provide it for free).

\*Not only that, but I was not a seasoned voyeur, because I didn't watch porn, I read erotica. Because women are just verbal and emotional and prefer erotica? No, because I could not FIND pornography for myself. It didn't exist. I tried!

\*\* (Also I feel bad about calling a world where we objectify men til they can't feel a "utopia," it's not a utopia, there's a better way! There has to be!)

posted by easter queen at 11:24 AM on July 22

## 6. Why some women turn down oral sex...

- a. *"that being a female partner in a straight relationship means a BUTTLOAD of emotional labor around sex"*

Adding to this, how about the fact that a man who does not perform cunnilingus won't get any shit from society (though he very well should from his partner, if that's something she's into), but a woman who won't? Boy howdy is she a bad girlfriend/wife.

And it just occurred to me, I wonder if it is more common for (heterosexual) women to not be into receiving (more common than heterosexual men) because it is sexual emotional labor that is performed by their partner when women are socialized from birth to take on all that responsibility and like easter queen said above:

*women have flattened out their own sexuality in service of male sexual dominance*

(Sorry if that's not coherent. This is the first I've tried to put this idea into words.)

posted by LizBoBiz at 1:31 PM on July 2

- b. "I wonder if it is more common for (heterosexual) women to not be into receiving "

Oh yeah, I've definitely excused dudes from going down on me solely because I did not want to deal with how much work it is for me when a dude is performing oral sex on me for any reason other than that he's super into it. The last guy I had sex with made big claims about how much he loves performing oral sex, can't get enough of it... then he gets down there for five minutes and is like "ugh could you just come already". I wanted to grab this twice-married middle-aged fool by his ears and shake him until his teeth rattled... but looking back on every way this guy shirked doing any EL at all, ever, it's no longer surprising to me that this guy is on his second divorce and has few friends he can turn to for actual comfort and support.

posted by palomar at 1:50 PM on July 24

## 7. Basic science: women are biologically disinclined to have sex with their caretake-ees...

- a. Someone got shirty with me in an AskMe recently because I pointed out that women are biologically disinclined to have sex with their caretake-ees so, you know...if you act like a toddler don't be surprised if you get the sex life of one.

posted by Lyn Never at 12:15 PM on July 22

- b. *"I pointed out that women are biologically disinclined to have sex with their caretake-ees"*

You have no idea what framing that in a way I've never seen before, succinctly stating something I've tried to sort out in my head about "maternal" feelings and love for a partner and the impact on desire, has done to begin to shift a massive burden of guilt I'm carrying. Thank you.

posted by billiebee at 12:28 PM on July 22

- c. Just wanted to pop in and say that after some reflection time I realized that this:

*women are biologically disinclined to have sex with their caretake-ees*

explains so much about how some my past relationships had evolved into. I always thought that the 'losing desire' thing is just what happens or that it was always me having some sort of issue with some sort of hang-up. Like I don't get how super hot and bothered I was for this dude before, I mean I know about the honeymoon phase and all but the drop-off seemed pretty quick.

Huge ah-ha moment. Like holy-moly, wtf I can totally see the progression and correlation now!

### III. EXAMPLES OF EL

It makes total sense, especially now that I'm older and think of things that I do find sexy and a turn ons. Most have to do with some sort of competency related to so much emotional labor skills that have been brought up in this thread.

posted by Jalliah at 12:08 PM on July 24

## E. EL in the workplace

### 1. Performance review

I once had an annual performance review where I was told that I was good at my job, good at managing deadlines, good at helping out in multiple departments.

BUT. (My boss told me this shamefacedly, which is how I knew telling me was something she had been forced to do.)

The important dude from an upstairs office (who often gave speeches about the importance of empowering women) thought it was rude that I never stopped working to smile at him when he walked by my desk. Not even when he came to my desk to ask me for something-- when he walked past me on his way to talk to someone else. I was supposed to stop doing my actual work, give him a big smile, and say "Hi, [dude's name]!", as if it was such a treat for him to visit our part of the building.

This was at a well-known progressive institution in a major city, and yet "hey girl, give me a smile" was an unspoken part of my job requirements, and my non-compliance with that secret requirement had to be mentioned in my annual review.

posted by a fiendish thingy at 6:01 AM on July 22

### 2. Valuing EL: concierge banking

This thread reminds me somewhat of the work that private bankers do for wealthy people. It's been described to me as "emotional concierge" - the actual money stuff is 10-20%, and the rest is reassuring them about their decisions, knowing their family and personal issues, arranging personal crap like birthday presents and tickets, and listening to them endlessly. It's understood that you're being paid to make your client happy, because the actual financial service you provide is replaceable and minor. Surprisingly, the female private bankers I know tend to be pretty tough outside of work - they won't put up with it if they're not getting paid either.

posted by [D] at 5:05 AM on July 16

## F. A day of one's own

### 1. I just want ONE day

*That moment, to me, is the absolute ideal of what a partner of any gender can ideally do: providing a time that is exactly what your partner would like, without asking. And what that takes is simple-and-complex: pay some goddamn attention.*

YES YES YES

Marry me. OK, I'm already married, and you don't go my way, but marry me anyway. OMG.

You would think that paying attention is hard or something. "Hey, what do you want for Christmas?" I always ask for some kitchen gadget or other, because cooking makes me happy, it's how I chill. Christmas comes around, and I'm hoping for the requested kitchen gadget or something like it...and it's a ring. I HAVE RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS! I stopped wearing rings after I had to have my wedding band cut off for the 3rd time. I asked for [kitchen gadget]. "Well, [kitchen gadget] isn't very romantic!" WTF? It took YEARS to break him of that.

### III. EXAMPLES OF EL

Mothers Day, all I want is to sleep as late as I please, have a hot bath with fancy bubbles, and I want to go out for sushi or something with the fam. In the bits in between, I want to fuck around on the internet or watch Doctor Who or just lie on a blanket in the yard with the dogs and read. I say this explicitly every year. For YEARS, he would wake me up at ass in the morning to go hither and thither, and then be upset because I was unhappy. Well, dammit, none of this is what I wanted. I just wanted a really chill day where I didn't have to do anything except eventually get dressed for sushi out. The Monsters are older now, with jobs and schedules and such. They buy me nice Tequila, fancy bubble bath, and dramatic eyeshadow, and leave it on my computer with an obnoxious card before they go to work in the morning. There's usually a note to the effect of "Reservations at [sushi place] at 8PM, should probably not wear the leopard print jammies." They get home from work, tell me the eyeshadow looks fantastic, and we go stuff our faces with fishes and sake until I can barely move. The husband doesn't get it. Even when I explain that I just want ONE DAY where I only have ME to take care of, he still does not understand. Why don't I want [thing on TV that advertisers say every Mother wants]? It is genuinely upsetting to him that I want what I want, and what I want is to do not much of anything.

It shouldn't be hard to pay attention, but I seem to be wrong in that assumption, because so many people just don't.

posted by MissySedai at 8:10 AM on July 21

#### 2. "Vacations"...

...and he didn't lift a finger to help with the kids, it was, after all, a VACATION, and why should he have to do a damned thing?

I feel you, Sister. Twice, I planned "vacations" that involved me doing EVERYTHING, him doing nothing, and me being so angry and stressed out because everything had to be what he wanted, and nevermind what I wanted. I very nearly pushed him off a bridge, and refused ever after to plan another "vacation" while the Monsters were small.

I started going to Chicago by myself every few months. I let him come with once. Once. "But I don't want to go to the Art Institute. I don't want to go to the Field Museum. I don't want to go to Gino's East for pizza. I don't want to go to Navy Pier. There are too many people here. This isn't relaxing at all." I told him tough shit, he was tagging along on MY vacation, and we were going to do what I wanted.

WHY is this A Thing? Why does "vacation" mean "the man gets doted on, the woman needs to suck it up and deal"?

posted by MissySedai at 7:48 PM on July 21

## IV. THE CURIOUS PUZZLE OF MEN AND EL

### A. Why aren't men drawn to the satisfaction of EL? (Spoiler: toxic masculinity)

#### 1. Allowing men to care: the next frontier

I agree with [username] that emotional labor, at least in US society, is so inextricably coded feminine that men are discouraged (at best) and punished (at worst) for an interest in it.

It makes me think about how women and men are supposed to react to children. Women must love children - all children. Even if we don't have any of our own, we are expected to shower attention on nieces, nephews, godchildren, and/or children of friends ("honorary nieces and nephews"). We are expected to say stuff like, "I don't have any children of my own but I LOVE KIDS anyway!" If you dislike children, or even are indifferent to them, you are unnatural, unwomanly, a harpy and a monster.

#### IV. THE CURIOUS PUZZLE OF MEN AND EL

Men, on the other hand, should only love their own children or children of family or close friends. A man who loves children not related by blood - unless they are offspring of very close friends - is a creep, and suspected of nefarious motives. Men should only love a select few children, and definitely shouldn't try being a kindergarten teacher or anything. [Only about 2% of kindergarten and preschool teachers are men.](#)

I think that nurturing, caregiving, and emotional labor is the next big obstacle to conquer for gender equality - and I think it's just as important as getting women into career jobs was during the 70's.

posted by Rosie M. Banks at 1:39 PM on July 21

### 2. That can really sap any enjoyment (the guff I take as stay-at-home dad)

I'm not "Average American Male" by any stretch (I'm the one that stays with the kids all day, does the cleaning and cooking, and the work I do is split evenly between music and part-time retail work), but I enjoy wide swaths of it. I take pride in being a thoughtful host and get excited about giving gifts. I even enjoy a lot of the day-to-day logistics planning of parenting and family-ing in general.

But you know what? In order to get to the point where I can admit that without some sort of explanation, I had to overcome the fact that at least 1/3rd of my family thinks I'm a loser because I chose raising my kids to have a full time paying job or career, and think I'm less of a man because care about stuff like "hey it hurts my kids\wife\friends when I do X". Heck, I once got crap from a brother because I called home to let my wife know when I'd be home from fishing. Then there's the people whose opinions of me shift a little (for the worse) when they hear I'm a stay at home dad. I honestly don't think most of them are even aware of it. That sort of thing still can really sap any enjoyment out of it.

posted by [username] at 2:31 PM on July 21

### 3. Special dispensation for Major Moments in a Man's Life...

a. I think [username] and Rosie M. Banks and Mchelly made excellent points.

I would add, though, that when emotional labor is somewhat culturally acceptable for guys, it's in the context of Special Occasions, things that happen a handful of times a year or a lifetime - birthdays, Christmas, weddings, graduations, death of a family member, lost your job, etc etc etc. So I think that (some) men *can* feel and understand the pleasure or value of emotional work . . . . . but we haven't learned that it's a daily process. We can understand the pleasure of finding the perfect Christmas present; the idea that you could give & receive similar pleasure on any random Wednesday isn't even on the radar.

posted by soundguy99 at 6:20 PM on July 21

b. *it's in the context of Special Occasions*

So true - and it's why the Best Man Speech and the Last Minute Pep Talk and the I've Always Admired You Dad and that sort of thing are such common movie and TV tropes. Like, it's a huge payoff when the usually checked-out male suddenly shows up and does the needed thing and makes an incredibly touching statement - not a dry eye in the house, when they crack that membrane, but just once or twice.

posted by Miko at 6:38 PM on July 21

## **B. It's not an intrinsically female "gift"; it's a learned (and learnable) skill**

### **1. Not the opposite of rational & analytic**

*"This thread has been so enlightening. I'm actually seeing more of myself in the "male" group here, contrary to my actual gender, and hearing people talk about why all this emotional labour is important, I'm feeling a little guilty for not making more of an effort to improve. Somehow I've escaped the pressure to learn these skills so far, very luckily because they absolutely aren't natural for me - very analytical/practical, ADHD-PI, introverted, independent"*

This is from way, way up-thread, but I just wanted to address the notion that emotional labor is somehow the opposite of being analytical, practical, and/or independent. That idea seems born of the insidious stereotype that women are these emotional, helpless creatures who need the help and protection of the menfolk with their rational minds and practical ways.

In my experience, performing emotional labor day in and day out takes a lot of analytical, practical, intellectual skills. Just read all of the stories in this thread from women detailing the ways they've silently, invisibly performed emotional labor on behalf of their families (and others). One great example is the idea that a man says what he wants done, and the woman then figures out all of the intricate details to make that thing happen (including a million logistical things that never cross the man's mind).

Thank you to everyone who has been sharing their stories; this thread has been a revelation in a lot of ways. I see myself, my mother, and so many other women I know in so many of the stories.

posted by JenMarie at 2:59 PM on July 21

### **2. There isn't a "female" and a "male" way: there is trying and not (an absence of work)**

Honestly I find all these theories about male answer and fix-it syndrome and needing to be "rational" and understand a problem before sympathizing to be overelaborate... on one level, yes, of course men are no more rational than woman, and I know that's not what you were implying, phearlez. But on a deeper level, no need to label this stuff "male" or "problem-solving" or any of those words we use to rationalize away the problem. The reality is that men are either too lazy (privileged) or too blind (privileged) to the issue to learn how to be emotionally supportive. No woman is born knowing how to listen or be emotionally supportive all the time. We're not born with an innate desire to put ourselves last. We all learn it\*. Men don't-- they refuse to or fail to-- and it has nothing to do with being a man and everything to do with just not. doing. it. It's not a separate, male way of being-- it's an absence of effort. An absence of work.

I am just as "fix it" as the next man-- when I don't want to listen, or make an emotional effort, and I just want the problem to go away (i.e., don't want to offer emotional support).

\*unless we don't, and then we're punished for it

posted by easter queen at 9:50 AM on July 22

## **C. The one time men willingly do EL**

### **1. The backbone of relationships, not the entry fee**

I was thinking more about this last night, and it struck me that part of the reason a great number of women have so much buried resentment about these issues is because men actually do perform emotional labor so willingly at the beginning of a relationship, which shows that they can do it and they are aware that it exists, right up until the relationship is secure enough that they can designate it "not my job anymore" and tap out.

#### IV. THE CURIOUS PUZZLE OF MEN AND EL

Setting up special dates based on her preferences, wanting to talk about feelings (because the feelings are all rosy and nice at the beginning, but still), calling just to hear her voice, finding out the little things she likes so he can surprise her with them, being kind to her friends and family, we can watch whatever you want to watch (and meaning it), and on and on. But for a lot of men, these are the means to an end, where the end is a relationship where they never have to do any of these things again.

But for women who end up in relationships that start this way, it is hardly surprising that they feel cheated and duped when the mutual emotional labor disappears and she's left handling it all by herself. She thought that this man was promising to live this way. She thought being noticed and validated would be long-term. Women consider emotional labor to be the backbone of relationships, not the entry fee.

posted by a fiendish thingy at 5:47 AM on July 20

## 2. Rocket boosters

*I think it's tied in with slut shaming and the Madonna/Whore complex.*

*I know many guys who are completely befuddled by -and won't date- women who date casually.*

I've reflected on this a lot too. That's *absolutely* part of it, but i always see guys trying to get to the cohabitation stage as quickly as possible and i can't help but think that yes, it's an EL thing more than anything else.

Men want to stop doing the initial hard work of EL as quickly as possible. It's basically like the stages of a rocket taking off in to space, where space is the homeostasis of a full committed relationship. They want to ditch those big heavy "extra" rocket boosters of doing lots of EL and move on to just passively orbiting and not having to constantly do that "hard wooing stuff" like buying presents and planning cute outings and grinding their mental gears on "hmm, from what i know about her and what she likes, would she like this?" and having to do things like keep track of what music she mentioned listening to so they can go "oh, it's that band she likes! i should get tickets and surprise her!".

The more i reflect on it i think it isn't even about having someone to mom them as that's generally something you slide in to over time. Although i will admit i've watched guys i know clean up their house, and keep it clean when they're first meeting and tentatively dating someone then just... stop(or they have a come to jesus moment of "fuck, she commented on my house being a sty, now i have to CLEAN it!!! OMFG I'M GONNA DO THAT RIGHT NOW" but they see it as like a relatively one off thing, not a regular maintenance task).

Because nah, it's about having to do the emotional lifting and easing off that ASAP.

I'm interested to see and hear others opinions on this though. But this thread made that jump out at me watching friends short relationships that either they(if they're guys) or the dude they were dating went official on super fast and then flamed out as soon as the guy ditched those solid-rocket-boosters of EL.

posted by emptythought at 1:27 PM on July 30

## 3. 'Budgeting' for decline

So that's fascinating to me, fiendish thingy, because it taps into another discussion I've been having recently with a group of female friends elsewhere. Some of them have been divorced and are in the dating world again, involved with partners for several months, and trying to figure out whether these are people with whom they should try marriage again. As they talk this through with other people in the group this theme keeps coming up that these boyfriends should be dancing as hard as they can now to be the best possible partners and prove they're worth marrying, and that obviously after that they'll get lazy, that's to be expected, but they should be on their very best behavior right now until they can get a ring on my friends' fingers.

#### IV. THE CURIOUS PUZZLE OF MEN AND EL

That conversation is confusing as hell to me, probably because I'm the only one of the group who has opted out of marriage in favor of a long-term (15-year) unmarried partnership, so I don't have the same framework for understanding marriage as those who have experienced it personally. Emotional labor has changed in my relationship over time in ways both good and bad, but not in relation to some specific milestone like a wedding.

So I'm pretty seriously weirded out to find that my good friends explicitly expect and plan for the men in their lives to start off acting one way to get married, and then to change after marriage and become a less-good partner, and that's just...the way it's supposed to be? It feels like something I don't have standing to challenge in these conversations because I know jack about marriage. But I really thought this pattern was something to expect men to break, not to just deal with it by expecting them to dance twice as well as you need them to before marriage so that when they slack off after marriage they'll still be somewhere in the realm of acceptable partners. I want better for my friends and it makes me sad watching them tie themselves into these knots for people they fully expect will let them down later.

posted by Stacey at 6:09 AM on July 20

#### 4. **Low bar**

*"I want better for my friends and it makes me sad watching them tie themselves into these knots for people they fully expect will let them down later."*

It IS sad. Because a man who is cognizant of and fully invested in developing his role in emotional labor is *so rare*. And there are a lot of women who do not want to fully opt out of relationships, because there are a number of pretty big consequences in doing so. I won't speak for other women, but I know for me a man just showing signs that he is trying and open to being guided is huge, because they take this SO personally and get SO defensive and as mentioned countless times above, the emotional labor required to soothe their feelings and tell them that they personally are not bad people, that it's just a bad system, is VERY draining. I think lots of women just don't even bother. It is less draining for me personally to just carry on in a relationship doing all the emotional labor while the guy remains happy and clueless about my needs, than it is to try to soothe the hurt feelings and resentment that he gets after I attempt to suggest that he maybe could do more.

posted by triggerfinger at 8:03 AM on July 20

#### 5. **Imagine**

Now I can't stop thinking what the world would be like if men started treating everyone with the same care and concern they show women they're trying to get into bed.

posted by sallybrown at 5:37 AM on July 16

### V. (RE)EVALUATING RELATIONSHIPS

#### A. **I'd rather be single**

##### 1. **Yep, I'm done...**

- a. Having been single now for over three years and increasingly doubtful that this will ever change, I still oscillate between gee, it would be so nice to have someone to do nice things for me and I could do nice things for them and we could snuggle and maybe even have sex, crazy thought and NO NO MORE RELATIONSHIPS CAN'T RELY ON ANYONE ELSE TO LOOK AFTER ME AND I'M DONE WITH PUTTING IN FOR OTHER PEOPLE AND NOT GETTING IT BACK.

posted by Athanassiel at 7:30 PM on July 22

- b. Being single is awesome, y'all. Never say never I guess, but I'm not sure I could go back to living with a dude again. If you're already doing the majority of the emotional work, you're kind of on your own already. It's much better to actually be alone and not have to deal with managing and/or tiptoeing around someone else. You can always hire someone to do the physical labor.

posted by desjardins at 7:22 PM on July 23

- c. *I'm 46 and single. I don't even miss it most of the time and I thought I was broken for that. Thank you all for telling me I'm not.*

Can we bronze the thread?

posted by [username] at 5:17 AM on July 23

## 2. I remember the precise moment I was done

*Also, I would like to gently suggest to straight dudes who grumble about how hard it is to find a partner and who wonder where all the interesting, fun, smart women are? Maybe they walked away.*

I'm moderately smart, occasionally fun, and seldom interesting, but I can tell you the precise moment ten years ago when I finally swore off any form of dating or romantic partner stuff for good and never looked back (I was already not very into it by then; this was just the "OK, I'm done now" event). This guy I was dating flew to my state to visit me for a few days, and just before he arrived, I came down with a monstrous case of laryngitis, of the Must Scream to Produce Even a Raspy Whisper variety. So I drag myself 50 miles to the airport, pick him up, drive back, stop for take-out, and come home to collapse. Between the take-out joint and the house, I said, as loudly and directly as I could, "OK, I know that you're the guest and I'm the host, but I am sicker than all fuck, and all I'm capable of doing for the next few days is lying on the couch in a stupor watching bad TV between naps. I cannot do the host stuff. If you want something to eat or drink or a clean towel or something, you'll have to get it yourself and find ways to entertain yourself because I am just not up to it."

So we get home, and I take the Chinese food out of the bag, grab a plate, and throw some food on the plate before staggering semi-consciously toward the couch. . . . where the guy is already sitting, and as I approach him not 5 minutes after making that speech, he holds out his hands in the assumption that I'm going to hand him that fucking plate and then go make myself one. And he has the nerve to look startled and disappointed when I don't.

[follow-up post:] And of course, this was a perfectly nice fellow -- not some spoiled, selfish manchild but an adult man who regularly cooks really fantastic serious meals for himself, etc. He just grew up in a world where "women bring food to men" is the ingrained norm to the point where it's in people's body language and they have to consciously make themselves unlearn it.

posted by FelliniBlank at 7:37 PM on July 15

## 3. My gold-plated extravagance...

- a. Being single can be a welter of negative economies of scale but I would rather pay thousands of dollars a year than have a "partner" who isn't one. I had a FelliniBlank-esque come to Jesus moment many years ago and it changed me.

I think there are nurturing men out there who tend to their own emotional and spiritual lives but none of them have come my way.

posted by Sheydem-tants at 7:49 PM on July 15

[See also, **II. E. 1. Not so easy to just "find a better man"**, on page 14]

- b. I want this thread to not end until the pain and anger and frustration that's fueling it ends.

It's illuminated so much from my past, and I was born with a more than the average amount of NOPE when it comes to this bullshit.

[...]

The other [thing I'll always remember from this thread] is the "rocket boosters" of Emotional Labor metaphor. A man I was mildly interested in recently said "good luck finding a guy to sign up for a LTR or committed dating if you're not going to move in and marry him." Hahaha. I live pretty frugally and realized this week that my one solid gold-plated extravagance is forgoing the economic benefits of Living With A Man. I'm lucky enough to get laid or have an activity partner pretty much whenever, and then send those nice (usually younger) men on their way until the next time. Not ruling out capital-L love, but no way in hell is anyone rushing it, ever again.

posted by [username] at 3:33 PM on July 30

#### 4. I can embrace singlehood! (aka, First I must dance)

I have very little free time to read MeFi these days. But yesterday, when I saw this incredible thread, I knew I had to set aside my other responsibilities. I spent the entire day voraciously devouring all the comments in one greedy gulp. From breakfast until bedtime. It was so compelling that I didn't do anything else. I even made myself quick microwave meals just so I could get back to the computer as soon as possible to keep reading (and favouriting) MORE MORE MORE. I kept thinking: It's another thread where women tell their stories, like the "["Hi, whatcha reading?" thread!](#)" Yes! I love MetaFilter!

The insights from this thread, and the stories you all have told so candidly...they have changed me. In a way I have longed for so deeply, for so many years, but was never able to achieve on my own. And while my heart feels heavy at how little things have changed for women in the emotional labour department despite all the work done by our feminist foremothers and the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, I feel like I have crossed some kind of threshold of liberation in my own life because of this thread, and FINALLY there will be no going back this time. I know it. I can feel it in my bones.

Not long ago I wrote this in my personal journal:

I can't do *this anymore*. I can't take being dragged through the emotional wringer anymore because men just can't be bothered to meet me halfway. I am done with dating men, even if it means I must go to my grave without ever having partnered sex again. (And although I'm bi, I can barely even remember the last time I felt genuinely attracted to a woman.) I will probably never marry again. I'm just...done. Done with a capital "D". Our toxic patriarchal culture just doesn't equip men to be what I need emotionally, and I've lost all hope that I'll ever find a compatible man who makes being in a relationship seem more attractive than being single. I cherish my solitude anyway, and I really have no reason to settle. So I hereby declare myself "married" to my creative life.

I'd love to have a committed helpmate in my day-to-day life, though - someone I could trust to take care of me and pick up the slack for me if I needed it, and who trusts me to do the same for them in return. But it's clear that this isn't going to come about through romance and dating men. Hmm...I know a couple of women who are Pagan polytheist nuns, married to their respective gods, who live together as platonic life mates. I wonder if I could ever find another Pagan nun who was that compatible with me?

Today, my dear fellow MeFites, after reading this thread, I feel free. *Liberated*. That journal entry - there's still a sense of resignation in it. But that's gone now. The last remaining emotional thread connecting me to the hope that I'll find a man someday is now gone, and this thread catalysed the process of emotional alchemy that did the trick. But I'm not feeling sorrow, or resignation, or frustration, or anger, or anything like that. Quite the opposite, in fact. I am feeling JOY. Delight. I am dancing around the room, as if I'm in love! But what I'm in love with - genuinely! - is MY OWN LIFE. My dreams. My plans. My creative pursuits. The richness that I find in solitude. The fact that I don't have children, and am healthy enough to live alone. The way I've decorated my humble hermitage exactly as I wish to - in the ways that nourish my soul - without having to consider anyone else. The fact that I know who I am, and who I am not. All of that, and more. So much more.

I'm 47 years old, and I've never felt this way before. Not for this reason, at least. It is glorious!

Thank you. All of you. I love MetaFilter.

I will have more to say in this beautiful thread, I think...but first, I must DANCE.

posted by velvet winter at 9:30 PM on July 23

## 5. Gallup data...

- a. I remember reading either a Gallup or a Pew soundbite about remarriage - men over 40 were eager to remarry, but women, not so much. This was, apparently, news. The Gallup people need to read this thread!

posted by Rosie M. Banks at 12:23 PM on July 16

- b. I wonder if there is any research on how long men stay single after a breakup vs. how long women do. Purely anecdotally, it seems like many men find another vic partner very quickly because they are unable or unwilling to take care of themselves.

posted by desjardins at 9:14 PM on July 21

## B. Planning for when we're old

### 1. What really wrung my heart

This thread made me remember a long-ago conversation I had with my spouse. where I tried to express my frustration with the weight of all the tasks that were left for me to do: the mission critical tasks necessary to the functioning of our daily lives and how sucky it made me feel that if I didn't do these tasks, they were left undone. I said that what really wrung my heart was the worry that someday I would be too old to take care of all these details and there would be no one who would take care of me. He insisted that I shouldn't worry about such things, that he would step up. And I cried, "So what's stopping you from stepping up now?"

No answer.

posted by [username] at 11:32 PM on July 21

### 2. Cohousing as a better plan...

- a. For a lot of people, the answer to that is becoming [cohousing](#). Single women [baby boomers](#) are doing a lot to develop options in this department so I expect there will be more standard choices like this when I get to that age. [The women in these clips wrote this book about it](#). Basically, it's Crone Island at the household level.

posted by Miko at 7:19 PM on July 24

- b. That's true. At the same time I think everyone kind of does need a plan for safe, supported aging with contingencies for reduced mobility, financial challenges, etc. A shitty relationship shouldn't be your plan...

posted by Miko at 7:27 PM on July 24

## C. The good ones

### 1. No more camping!

Still reading all the comments, but I just wanted to thank you all from the bottom of my heart. For years I blamed myself for the divorce. The ex who said if I loved him I'd go tent camping with him, even though I despise tent camping. The ex who, when I was going off the antidepressant that gave me brain zaps and made me sleep 12 hours a day, yelled that the only thing he asked me to do was sweep the damn floor and even then I did a bad job. The ex who never listened, only tried to fix my problems. "Try not to be so

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depressed!" He wanted to stay in the house during the divorce that he instigated "because all his tools and stuff were there." (No way, asshole.) I thought it was my fault for being crazy, not trying hard enough, for being a bad spouse.

Ten years later I have a partner who understands emotional labor, and he's very good at it himself. He's there for every vet appointment, brings home my favorite wine when I've had a bad day, does his share of cooking, cleaning and laundry, and thanks me for the things I do. When I have a panic attack and feel like an ass, he hugs me and tells me it's OK. He doesn't try to fix me. I told him about this thread, and now he laughs when I give him an extra hug because he knows what I've been reading.

Recently I heard from mutual friends about an ill-fated camping trip that the ex and his girlfriend went on. There was a bad storm, and in the middle of the night they had to pack everything up in pouring rain because there were tree branches coming down. Meanwhile I was home safely tucked in with my beloved and our cat, watching the lighting. When I heard the story, I immediately thanked my partner. "What for?" he asked. "BECAUSE I FUCKING NEVER HAVE TO GO CAMPING AGAIN."

Thank you all again, and hugs to anyone who wants 'em.

posted by [username] at 1:07 PM on July 24

### 2. The loveliest text

So my (challenging, histrionic, manipulative) mother managed to catch me on the phone, and in the midst of a difficult and draining conversation, while I was staring blankly at kitten videos and wishing I had one of those *Feminine Mystique*-era doctors who passed out tranqs like candy, or barring that, at least some weed, my husband IM'd me with a couple of links, making it obvious he'd gone ahead and made all the arrangements for our accommodations and travel for our anniversary jaunt to London, which we'd been discussing and basically agreed upon last week, but I hadn't got around to doing anything about it. The accompanying text said *I went ahead and booked us into that same hotel in Bloomsbury, but if you'd rather stay somewhere else, let me know, and I will change it. I'll pick up our tickets when I'm passing through Euston the week before. Likewise, if you aren't ok with these dates, let me know and I'll change my holiday booking at work. Also, let me know if you need an excuse to get the fuck out of that conversation. I have no idea what drama bomb she dropped on you, but you were obviously shocked and distressed.* (She led with I NEEEEEEEEED YOU, making me think, oh god, another major medical problem, but no, she's quarreling with her neighbours again, and wanted sympathy. I am an only child, and she's either outlived or alienated the majority of her family and friends.)

So, in the spirit of fairness, I offer this anecdote. This is a pretty big deal; I didn't ask him to do this, and I know he did it because I really, really hate doing this sort of thing, and my mother putting me through the wringer always triggers some kind of compensatory caring response in him. I mean, he's probably going to ask me if we have any toothpaste when he's standing 18 inches away from it tomorrow morning, or expect me to assign him clothing to wear the next time we go out, but he does step up in fairly big ways from time to time, I just wish he was better at the small, boring, day-to-day garbage work, because that's the stuff that just grinds me down.

posted by skybluepink at 4:16 PM on July 23

### 3. A lungful of fresh air

I asked my boyfriend of 2.5 years to read this thread in its entirety and let me know when he was done. His initial comment after reading for 15 minutes was "it sounds like everyone is just complaining" -- after he finished reading, however, it had turned into "let's talk about this, how do you think I'm doing with the emotional labor in our relationship? how did this change what you think about us?" So I'm in debt to all of the women who are older and much wiser in the world, telling their stories here and who were able to gift me with something to take into my relationship so we could hold ourselves accountable for the success and room for improvement between my partner and I.

Being with my current partner has always felt like a lungful of fresh air, like a weightlessness you could only accomplish in space, and I never quite knew why that was until this thread gave me the language to understand and express it. It is profound to me how well everything here spelled out what was going on not just in my never-ending nightmare of a previous relationship, but the toxicity of my ex's parents, how they taught him to view women, and also how my own parents were shaped and harmed by what their parents taught them about gendered expectations of who carries the emotional labor in the family, and how they impressed that onto me unwittingly.

I would also like to express my deep, deep appreciation for having a bevy of well-traveled women as part of this community, who are willing to openly discuss the complexities of their own paths in life: families, relationships, work, their relationship with themselves. I am a modest 28 years old, I've fought and hustled for what little I've got so far, my extended family is almost non-existent and so I look up to so many of you as the honorary aunts and grandmothers I have never had. Metafilter's women are a rock for me rely on, even if I don't reach out and participate as often as many of you do. Your strength is inspiring.

Eyebrows McGee and Mrs. Pterodactyl in particular -- you two are the names I am always catching in any thread concerning others' well-being -- but so many others as well, and everyone in this thread. If I could, I would send you all thank you cards and some of those little airline liquor bottles.

posted by Snacks at 11:43 PM on July 25

#### 4. **A perfect mini Crone Island**

I've been having an epically hard week for all kinds of unrelated reasons that just lumped together and plopped in my lap. And today I know, for sure, that I married someone capable of emotional labor. Because he got me a hotel, stocked it with tea and honey, and four meals worth of food, and bubbles for a bubble bath, left me a nice card and left me here for 24 hours. It's glorious. Mini Crone Island. It's so exactly all the things that let me recharge. Which he already knew and did without being asked. And yes, probably some of that is because we've been talking about this thread for days. And OMG he did such a lovely thing for me, and feeling like someone paid attention to me is the best most wonderful thing in the world.

posted by stoneweaver at 10:58 PM on July 20

#### 5. **I am important to him and he likes to please me**

I do have a fantastic husband and his mother was not a feminist at all. Two important markers:

He had a good relationship with his family. After I moved in I continued to let him handle all that by himself. For many years his family didn't even have my phone number or email.

He lived on his own for 10 years so he knows how to do domestic chores. If he has a pile of sportswear that he wants washed he does it himself and *asks me if there is any laundry I need to add*.

I don't really understand why after 15 years together he continues to shower me with wonderful presents and plan adventures for us, but I am important to him and he likes to please me. He knows when I am happy and if there are problems we discuss them in-depth until we are both satisfied.

In short, don't settle. Don't let the guys in your life get off with doing a half-assed job. Speak up and let them know what you are feeling. If they drop you for being too difficult then you will know they were not The One.

posted by Secret Life of Gravy at 12:36 PM on July 21

[Response to an Ask; see also, **V. D. 2. Finding a partner who will be good at EL**, on page 33]

## 6. This makes me feel like queen of the world!

I first learned the term [emotional labor] around five years ago, when we had a baby at home, and I was frequently frustrated and resentful, but wasn't sure quite how to express why, and I ran across an article talking about it. I explained it to my husband and he was like, "Okay, that makes sense, I don't viscerally 'get it,' but I hear what you're saying." And since then he's tried to pick up a lot more of the emotional labor, and I can tell him, "You know, I feel like I'm doing all the emotional labor on this [dealing with family holidays, let us say] and I'm getting frustrated," and he will say, "What can I pick up for you? Or do you just want to vent for a while?" And I can say, "I'm worn out, I just can't deal" (which always means emotionally worn out for me), and he will go grocery shopping on Friday and take the kids out of the house all day Saturday and cook all weekend so that I don't have to run those errands or plan meals or make shopping lists or think of all-day entertainment or supervise children. By midafternoon Saturday I'm always like, "Where'd you all gooooooo I'm ready to be human again!"

Just having a term to apply to that kind of work helped a LOT in making our home more equitable and giving us language to talk about that emotional work. And the other part of it is, since emotional work isn't recognized as work, people are rarely thanked for it. My husband now frequently thanks me, like, "Hey, thanks for getting everything together so the kids could have a great Christmas" or "Thanks for putting together this trip" or "Thanks for sorting all the boys' clothes and figuring out what they need new for school" or "Thanks for dealing with the plumber." THIS MAKES ME FEEL LIKE QUEEN OF THE WORLD! Just having all my "background work" recognized helps a lot!

I don't mind doing emotional labor for my family and friends. It does make me feel good to take care of them. But it feels even better to have that work acknowledge, respected, appreciated, and reciprocated. Being able to talk about "emotional labor" with my husband, just having that language, really helped both of us recognize it and do better at recognizing and balancing that work.

posted by Eyebrows McGee at 6:43 AM on July 16

## D. Making it work

### 1. The relief it's not my brokenness

Yeah, this thread has changed my life. So many things I've been carrying around with me, thinking I was broken and didn't know how to be a woman properly, didn't know how to have relationships (which is why I had the fuckload of therapy). And actually, seeing all these stories makes me realize it's not me. I'm not \*that\* broken. This is systemic. The boyfriend who wouldn't move into the city with me after telling me he would, because it was too easy to stay where he was living round the corner from his mum? Not because I specifically am too demanding and unreasonable after all. The boyfriend who made me stay up til 2am listening to his problems and woes but fell asleep when I told him mine? Not because I'm overly needy and whiny. I've been single for about 18 months because my last relationship was so terrible and heartbreaking, and I think I'm definitely heading for Crone Island but that's fine by me because it has been so hard to go through these supposed partnerships that haven't been partnerships at all.

And also now I know that maybe my friendships aren't as great as they could be because I'm probably not putting in enough of the emotional work (for lots of reasons that aren't necessarily as simple as 'I can't be bothered' although I'm sure that's in there). So I'm going to do more of that, and maybe I would have figured out I needed to do that eventually but this thread has got me there so much more quickly. This is so brilliant. I'm so glad to have been able to follow this (and all its associated threads).

posted by theseldomseenkid at 12:53 PM on July 21

### 2. Finding a partner who will be good at EL

*"Are there tips and tricks for finding a male partner who is willing to do emotional labor?"*

I think there's a few things you are asking:

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1. *Are these guys out there?* (And the answer seems to be yes, as EmpressCallipygos attests. (Perhaps you should just follow her around and test drive her exes!) And I could give other examples of guys I have known who really do their share of emotional labour (including my own husband, who is pretty good at that stuff in most contexts).
2. *What do you do if a guy you are dating turns out to be crap at emotional labour and so on?* (And I think you have figured this out already. Good job on kicking that dude to the curb).
3. *How do you detect whether a guy is going to do his fair share while it is still early on in the dating relationship?*

This one got touched on a little in the thread on the blue. Someone suggested asking about his relationship with his family (how often does he call his parents, does he send birthday presents/cards, etc). I'm not sure, myself, that this is going to work 100% of the time, although it's definitely an indication. Families have different expectations, and how we interact with them is a product of our upbringing. A guy who was brought up not to do emotional labour might have seen the light later, and be pretty good about reciprocity of that stuff among his friends, but still crappy about remembering his mother's birthday, because we tend to get fossilized in our behaviours towards our families of origin. Or because birthdays just aren't a thing in that family.

But I bet there are other shibboleths that taken together would give you a pretty good indication of whether the guy is worth investing more time in. Some might be:

Awareness of his body in space and how it impacts on other people: does he ever step aside when walking in a way that will have his path intersect with others? Does he check behind him before stepping backwards in a crowded space? Does he wait his turn or push ahead? If you are walking together, does he show awareness of whether the pace is good for you, whether the space he is about to squeeze through will still be there when you go to squeeze through it, whether you BOTH have enough time to cross at the light, etc?

Awareness of your moods and a variety of strategies for handling them: what happens if you are grumpy or sad? (What about other people's moods? i.e. some guys seem capable of this awareness and appropriate responses for the person they are in love with, but not anyone else.)

Planning and logistics: go on a complex date, e.g. hiking with a meal afterwards, or to some event that involves some travel. Does he expect that someone else will figure out all the details (when to leave, how to get there, what to bring, bookings, weather eventualities, etc), or does he take joint responsibility? (Or it might be equally bad if he makes all the plans without considering that you might have other ideas.)

Thoughtful presents. If he ever gives you a gift, is it something that you have expressed interest in, or does it connect to some interest or desire of yours, or is it something that he likes, or that (in his mind) generic girlfriends should like?

You can also get a few clues by discussing *other people's* relationships, especially when it comes to childcare. If you are out with him and you see couples that seem like posterchildren for feminist distribution of work, or alternatively, where the woman seems to be doing everything and the man is oblivious, bring it up to him, and see what he says.

posted by lolusc at 10:08 PM on July 20

[From an Ask: see another response, **V. C. 5. I am important to him and he likes to please me**, on page 32]

### 3. **We don't want to drop it all on you; we want to work together**

One of the really weird things that cropped up with my ex that I'd never run into before was this strange belief that emotional work was something to be done on one's own... This lead, at the end, to accusations that he had "already changed a lot for me" and "you're never happy and if you're not happy I'll just hear about it again later" and "I'm never comfortable around you." The worst was when he said, "Everything I

say upsets you and I've tried everything!" and I pointed out that he had tried everything to stop upsetting me *except asking what upset me* he told me, "That's because it's totally random! It's not coherent and it doesn't make any sense!" Which, like, *dude*, I get that it feels that way at this point, but holy shit that didn't ring any 'oh, perhaps i am approaching this the wrong way' bells? He would also say that "You bring up problems and it's always about "us" but then I have to fix it!" after discussions where I appealed to him repeatedly to help me figure out how to make things better or presented possible solutions (which he never had any ideas or suggestions or feedback or anything else about except a vague, "We can try it.")

At the time it was hugely painful (all right, I'll be honest, it still is), but now I'm a couple of weeks out it's also just fucking *bizarre*. Like, you're willing to do emotional work to try and make me happy, but not to bring me in on it? You'll do stuff for me, but only if it doesn't involve collaboration?

So, dudes who are interested and reading this thread: don't be emotional work martyrs because you think that's the only way. Just as the women in your life shouldn't have to carry alone, neither do you. Women-- or at least this woman-- want to be and have partners on difficult and heavy emotional work. Something like setting up a wonderful date for your SO, well, that's a great thing to do in a quiet way so that it just happens for her. But the big stuff... the big stuff has to be tackled together.

posted by WidgetAlley at 11:15 AM on July 20

#### 4. Acknowledging change is hard

- a. A lot of emotional labour isn't all that fulfilling but just scut work, necessary scut work of course, but work that has to be repeated day in day out, with no real satisfaction in getting in done, like Hoovering or doing the dishes or all those other things you need to do to not be an entirely gross adult. And if you're already privileged in this context that less is expected of you, but you can get a lot of kudos with the special, extravagant gestures while all the scut work is done "automatically" for you, it takes effort to see it and more effort to break your laziness.

...with my late wife, we sort of fell into the same sort of relationship, for \$reasons, me working outside the house and she supporting me and if we were not careful doing most of the scut work. I've had the same conversation, more than once, that some of y'all have had with your partners and had my eyes opened.

This thread is doing the same thing again. Just like the lavaballing threads made me aware of my own wide stance, reading all those stories made it possible to see all the same sort of emotional work being done by women in real life around me, at work and elsewhere. It's like the opposite of red pilling.

Thank you.

posted by MartinWisse at 6:05 AM on July 22

#### 5. The slow, non-linear path to change

*... I've been privy to this exact conversation, back in the early 70s; we used to call it a "consciousness-raising session". I didn't realize that the concepts of emotional labour and female responsibility weren't generally and widely understood-- it seemed that the whole world then (I was about 13, so my focus was narrow) was working this stuff out, that women were angry about housework (wages for housework!) and inviting men to care for their children. I thought it had sunk into the culture a bit more and it's a bit dismaying to discover that this is new territory-- or newly articulated-- for many younger women here. But that's social change, I suppose-- it's not a straight line towards utopia.*

Having watched people transform their lives, I've come to accept that true, sustained growth is not a line but a spiral. You identify a problem and circle around it for a while; come up with a technique to help and circle a while with the technique - slowly moving out from where you started. That movement makes another technique easier to find, and another, and another, and one day you look around and realize your life has transformed.

The spiral is infinitely larger when it's a culture.

posted by Deoridhe at 6:00 PM on July 22

## 6. Finding solutions for us both (also "Beyond 'Haha they're so flighty and capricious'")

Four years ago my wife and I were living in our house while it was being renovated by a contractor who I guess wanted to tick every box on the awful contractor checklist. It was a pain in the ass in a million ways and if there was a way to fuck something up such that would require prodding, they'd do it. We were chasing my wife's Dream Design so she was more worked up about a lot of this stuff than I was and she's way more type-A than I am by a mile. So while we're both bothered by this, it's upsetting her more.

Some months in I had to say to her, look - this bugs me too. I am unhappy about this as well and it's taking a toll on me. We've both been at work all day, we're both tired. And when I walk in the door and the first minutes we spend together involve you venting about all the ways you're upset about this project it just makes me not want to come home at all. It just cannot be the first thing we talk about when we see each other at the end of the day. Can we make a rule here that for the first fifteen minutes we're together we don't talk about any unhappy renovation anything? Preferably we find some things we've liked about the day to talk about, but if it's all fucked at least we don't talk about This Groddamned House?

And that was all it took. Being able to walk in the door and enjoy each other for a few minutes before we plotted how to deal with it. For fuck's sake, of course I didn't want to hear it. This wasn't my - in my opinion - overly complicated scheme or pernickity colors. I thought getting bugged by some random marks on a wall from one day to the next was pointless so long as they got fixed eventually. But it bugged my partner so how could it not bug me that she was bothered?

I don't tell this story because I want a fucking cookie; I don't need one. The maddening thing to me, as a person who doesn't have to deal with these absolutely batshit insane stories so many of you have shared above, is that the cookie is that *everything is easier this way*. Boiled-over explosive bullshit is way harder to deal with and more unpleasant than just taking a second and asking a question and not kicking the problem down the road till later.

Maybe it's male answer syndrome that contributes to this crap, this idea that we have to understand and/or be able to reason out everything. A tremendous amount of my thinking about some of this stuff comes from a single minor incident with my dearest friend, who once complained about a phrase I used to describe her that was meant in praise. She'd previously told me she didn't like it and it didn't really register - primarily, I think, because I could not understand why it would bug her, given that it was so close to something she'd say in another context. So when I used it again she corrected me and said she'd told me it bugged her before, why would I say it again? I said I didn't understand blah blah this and that reasons.

She said "Why do you need to understand anything other than that it bugs me?"

Scales, Damascus, etc. Understanding is great, and being an analytical type I value it. But not understanding doesn't invalidate things. Acceptance doesn't need to be predicated on understanding. Maybe we men have a problem with this because of various societal conditioning? Maybe rejecting female priorities - which we grew up hearing haha they're so flighty and capricious and who knows why those silly geese do anything!?! - is okayed for men because they can't reason out the Why when they should just shut up and accept the Is.

posted by phearlez at 9:05 AM on July 22

## 7. Newfound power: Making a conscious choice to take on (or not) EL

One of the (oh god so many) positive outcomes of this thread for me is that by having a label for these tasks actually makes them easier to do (and feel good about) in some cases. Don't get me wrong — like many others here, I have my own share of the justified rage that comes along with the new dawning. But

I also can, say, look at my lovely coworkers and offer them something small to help them out, and reflect on that in ways that I couldn't before. Some now tangible piece of emotional labour that is A) easy for me to do (because it's natural and I've been doing it forever), B) identifiable and therefore less abstract, distinct from other small parts of the daily work I do, and C) is appreciated, implicitly or otherwise (note: this is part of why they're my lovely coworkers, and not ... the other ones).

I feel like I wield newfound power in better knowing what it is I do in my day to day, and with that knowledge I can more appropriately choose when to lend my energies toward those tasks. Or not. Turns out, having that decision point really, really matters to me. Without everybody's contributions to this excellent thread, I wouldn't have even known it existed.

posted by iamkimiam at 4:44 AM on July 24

## 8. Talking EL before you hit overload

Hell, in some cases (since being the SOs of MeFites provides some level of filter), they're above average guys. Which in its own way, is even more infuriating. My beloved husband (aka SoapDude forever now I guess? [from a post about his asking for help finding soap in the bathroom]) is fan-fucking-tastic in some areas. Like, I feel really terrible for everyone talking about emotional labor vis a vis sex, but I also cannot relate to that at all. Which is good, because I think that or Google Glass or holograph technology would render our marriage completely unsalvageable as opposed to just occasionally fucking stupid.

And it's not like I don't sometimes have my soap, or my cockroaches - sometimes I think I'll lob something his way as a kneejerk reaction, like I'm trying to stick it to him by evening the emotional labor scales with whatever item on my plate has become the current last straw that I Just Cannot Deal With. One of the things I truly love about this thread is it's giving me some framework for being more systematic about how I talk about and distribute my efforts and energies, as opposed to just waiting until I've had it up to here and dumping random tasks on my partner to make myself feel better about the inequity. Which rarely solves anything.

posted by deludingmyself at 5:33 PM on July 22

## 9. Counting management in division of labor

This has been on my mind because my boyfriend used to do a lot of the quotidian, repetitive chores around the house, and this was so because I told him that if I was going to be the manager, I wasn't going to be out there on the floor with all the other workers (him). Either he could do the executive functions or he could do the labor functions, or we could split them evenly, but I wasn't going to split the labor evenly and quietly take on all the executive functions too.

Division of labor, bitch! Anyway, we've moved past that now and he's super engaged and remembers when we're out of hand soap and reminds me we need a birthday present for my nephew and cooks dinner with recipes he finds himself on the internet, and I'm super proud of him and I think he's actually the most feminist guy I know now. Yes, it did take a lot of emotional labor on my part to get us here-- it was struggle. And I think being loud about this shit and speaking up is part of the struggle, and it sucks that our "partners" are opposed to us in this struggle, but such is hetero womanhood. I am grateful that he cared enough in this world that strongly encourages him to reap the benefits of not caring.

I have said though that if we break up, I'm going to be single for a long-ass time, because I had energy for that shit when I was 20, but when I'm 30, I really don't know. When I'm 40? 50? Yea freakin' right. Meanwhile, he'll be a prize!

posted by easter queen at 1:40 PM on July 21

## 10. Foregoing the "real" work

Around this time last year I basically said "ok, I am noping out of a lot of things unless and until there's a more equitable division of labor in our household". I proposed we each write down what we felt our personal domains of responsibility were, and then make a joint document about an idealized situation

that was balanced and fair. Then we'd work toward that. My document had nine sections, including pet care, house/lawn care, finances, blah blah. And the largest section was "social/logistical stuff". I was organizing everything about every social outing for all members of the household. I maintained the social calendar and made sure everyone made it to appointments on time. I was cooking all the meals and planning any gathering for friends at the house. I was buying all the presents for holidays and birthdays - I even had reminders in my calendar to send my male primary partner a list of things I might like for my birthday, because he kept saying "it sneaks up on me" and then feeling lousy for not getting me anything (dude. It's the same day every year. It isn't a ninja). I was buying presents for his sweetie (who was also living with us) and making sure to get enough that some goodies could be from me, and some from him. I took care of everyone when they got sick. I worked out the logistics of who had the vehicle when, in ways to least inconvenience anyone. It went on and on.

When we showed each other the 'idealized' domains of responsibility documents, the "social / logistical stuff" category was completely gone from Mr. Mirror's list. Just not there at all. When I pointed it out he said he was only focused on "real" things that needed to get done.

And so the next time he asked me "why didn't you remind me?!" about something, I pointed out that it wasn't "real" work that needed to be done, and I had just gone with the assumption that he could remember to look at the calendar himself to see when his dentist appointment was, or whatever. And he had a level-up moment and said "oh. Shit. I'm sorry" and now we handle things more equitably.

It was damned hard to just let those things go, though, even for a little while - I felt a sense of almost panic not doing that work, actively sitting back and saying "ok, you're a grown-ass man, you say this isn't a thing anyone needs to concern themselves with, so fine, let's see how that works out." In the end, it was work that needed to be done (hey, it sure is nice to see our friends ever), it did and does require effort, and he's a lot more appreciative of just how much I was doing then, and aware of what he's asking when he asks me to do these things now.

I wish I'd had this language ten years ago, this concept of "emotional work" and the idea that it was valuable, that making things run smoothly and making our lives just be *nice* was a skill I was being undervalued for. I could have maybe not run myself into the ground actually *trying* to do it invisibly, striving for an ideal of never being noticed, but everything somehow being wonderful. That's the poisonous femininity I was raised into and I'm thrilled to be rejecting it today. I'm just glad I noticed it, eventually. It took a while. Hell, and I don't even have kids. Putting actual small human beings who are dependent into the mix just serves to make it harder, I'm certain.

It's hard to see, and it's easy to fall into these patterns - society pushes it onto us, we take it onto ourselves, and sometimes don't even notice. I didn't get to the state where I was being the Invisible Logistical Wonder Woman overnight. I've been calling myself a feminist since I was eleven years old, but I didn't notice that my own desire to "just help out" was toxic. Nobody ever stopped me back then and said "hey, are you doing all right? You don't have to do this much, you know." I just thought it was what I was supposed to do. No, instead, the refrain I heard from others was always "wouldn't it be nice if..." alongside some version of "please do more." Reading this thread made my heart lighter, even while I'm frustrated at just how pervasive this shit is. It's not easy to get to a place where emotional labor is even *noticed*, much less valued. I know we're not fully there yet in my household, though it's worlds better now than it was last year, and progress has been faster after that first "oh shit" moment.

posted by lriG rorriM at 11:21 AM on July 16

## 11. Alternatives to living together..

- a. i've often wished we had a model for relationships where cohabiting wasn't some sort of assumed step, and that going from cohabiting to living alone wasn't seen as some sort of death knell for the relationship. i feel super lucky that i actually like living with my partner, but that feels like a one in a million chance. i guess it gets more complicated with kids but for all the childfree couples, i'm surprised more don't live separately.

posted by nadawi at 5:26 PM on July 23

- b. The [relationship escalator](#)! Introduced to me by my last therapist and exactly encapsulates the thing that grates on me. I love living alone, I've tried co-habiting, it would take a miracle to make me do it again. I've no interest whatsoever in ever being married and never have done. But have people I've dated understood that those things aren't anything about them or the relationship or my level of commitment? Nope, must be half-arsed, couldn't possibly be the result of actually thinking about this stuff.

(This feels like a slight derail, sorry if it is, but the model is so great and I wish more people knew about it.)

posted by theseeldomseenkid at 4:12 AM on July 24

## E. Asking your beloved to read the thread

### 1. There is one part of my heart that is always broken

*"The worst was that one liner about being afraid to ask the beloved person to read the thread. How many cringed like me? Because like me you'd had the same thought?"*

There was actually an AskMe I read awhile ago, and I wanted my partner to read it as well because I thought it might be useful to us, but I thought it also might be really upsetting and hurtful to him to hear how some of the users were characterizing behaviors like his (DTMFA stuff). He read the thread and had no feelings about it at all, because he didn't recognize himself in it. This problem in our relationship that has existed for years, and which I have told him about repeatedly, apparently didn't ring any bells to him in terms of his own behavior. Which was painful in its own way.

My partner and I have been together a long time and have kids together. In terms of a lot of the things that fall into the category of emotional labor, he is absolutely terrific: he's a full partner in housework and child-rearing... BUT! But but but but but. He is one of those people (one of those men, I guess) who will do anything I ask him to do, but will never think of things on his own. If I don't feel well and say, "I'm going to go lie down, can you get the kids fed and to bed?" he'll say, "Sure." But he will never say, "Why don't you go lie down and rest? I'll handle things out here." And something I want very very much is, sometimes, not to have to ask. I want to be *noticed* and thought of *before* I bring myself to his attention. I want him to say, once in awhile, "You've been working hard. Why don't you take an afternoon to yourself this week?" or, "Sit down, I'll bring you a cup of tea."

He also, I have now been able to articulate because of this thread, responds to me bringing things up by reacting to the factual rather than the emotional content of what I say. For instance, awhile ago he brought something into our house which he knew could trigger one of the symptoms of my illness. When I told him later that this bothered me, he said, "Oh, I thought it had all cleared out by the time you got home." Whether the house had been sufficiently aired out wasn't the point, to me: to me, the point was that he decided, without consulting me, to do something that might have made me ill, and that felt disrespectful and thoughtless. To him, the important question (until I said, "that's not the point of what I'm saying") was: Did it make me sick? To me, it was: Was he thinking about me and my well-being?

And, finally, he totally does that thing where if I try to talk to him about any of this, he gets upset and I can easily end up taking care of his feelings while still never getting a chance to know for sure I've been heard.

We have a terrific partnership in so many ways. Our relationship is really strong. We are great at solving problems together, we're supportive of each other's interests, we enjoy spending time together, our sex life is very good, we are definitely on Team Us. But at the same time, there is this one little part of my heart that is always broken, and always being broken over and over again, because this doesn't seem to be a thing he can understand well enough to change. And I want it so fucking bad. And every day there are opportunities, big and small, for him to care for me in this way, and he lets them all fly right by him.

I can't decide if it's great that I read this thread, or if I should never have read this thread because talk about your re-opening of wounds. Thanks.

posted by Incoherent Cockroach at 4:17 PM on July 19

## 2. **"It was too much to read" (Also, keeping a stash of TP in the car)**

It's only taken me two weeks to catch up to the end of the thread. I've been furiously nodding and crying and nodding again and seeing the world through a totally different lens and wishing we were all in some comfy room with pillows scattered all over the floor and endless bottles of wine so I could see and hug and converse in real time with each and every one of you since this was first put on the front page. Thank you to every one of you who shared, supported, advised, and helped make sense of these things I couldn't even explain to myself properly until now.

I shared this with my mother, my realization that my frustration with my SO of 3 years isn't just me being a crazy nag, but just me needing a little equal support as a partner in this life we're making for ourselves. My mother's response: that's just the way it is, it's always been that way, because men. I wanted to shake her and tell her it doesn't have to be, but for her it always has been. Which makes me sad.

I shared this with my SO, who first asked me to give him the "readers digest version" of this thread. It took a lot not to laugh or start throwing things because he hadn't yet read it so obviously he didn't understand the irony of asking me to do the emotional labor of distilling 1000+ comments of incredible content into some Cliffs Notes version that he could easily digest so he didn't have to wade through it all. I left him with it, and he told me he eventually abandoned it because "it was hard to read, a lot of 'you're a bad person' stuff." I can understand that being an initial visceral reaction, feeling attacked. But I hope he comes back to it and sees it from the perspective of other people, like the emotional laborers (his mother, sister, aunts, exes, and now me) who have been carrying him for most of his life. And maybe takes it as constructive criticism instead of interpreting it as an attack.

I will say that that same evening he made the unprompted effort to reheat leftovers for me for dinner when I got home late so I wasn't solely responsible for feeding the two of us as per usual. And he cleaned the litter box. And poured me bourbon. (I'll overlook for now the fact that he gave me cute puppy eyes when he said "I cleaned the cat poop" like he wanted a pat on the head. The point is it got done, and I got bourbon). Today he swept AND mopped the kitchen floor because it needed to be done - on his own, with no prompting from me. And agreed he's got dinner duty Thursday night (which he keeps threatening will be cheddar dogs but I really don't care what it is as long as I don't have to think about it or make it). Baby steps.

He's wonderful, truly, in so many ways. But also exhausting in ways he has no idea about. He also knows we're almost out of toilet paper and I'm holding out to see if he'll actually go out and buy it before we actually run out or if that's going to fall to me again. And it pisses me off that I have a secret stash in my car because I know what's going to happen...

Another person saying thank you to each and every one of you here for changing my life. In baby steps so far, but they're still steps.

posted by danapiper at 8:31 PM on July 28

### 3. Men who won't read it are telling you where they stand

i mentioned it over in the [meta thread](#) but i think it applies to where this conversation is now too - men who won't read the thread when their partners specifically ask them to are showing you where their stand. they're saying that skimming a thread is too much effort. i'm most glad that women are here and reading and hearing that they aren't crazy or overreacting. this is a real thing. the communal efforts we're putting into this thread are for each other. if men want to learn from that, they're welcome to - but mostly i'm glad so many women are seeing that they can demand more.

posted by nadawi at 12:01 PM on July 24

### 4. I heard a door swinging shut...

- a. I tried to show my one-year-in BF this thread, saying how powerful it is to read. How it describes the way my marriage went/felt/became. He read for a few minutes and sighed "you know, I think misandry is growing" and went back to his breakfast. I started collapsing internally, like somewhere inside there was a metaphorical door swinging shut.

I persevered over breakfast (high fives, EL providers of the world!) to untangle this but he just said that Other Guys just don't get it. I still waited and listened, and then read out a few comments to him. No links with his own behaviours, even when gently directed to consider some of our own issues. There was instead cool withdrawal, nothing aggressive, but enough to make clear that the conversation was closed.

Then we drove three or four hours up to a city where his friends live, with whom we would be staying, with whom we would be dining, not having seen them for a year. He barely spoke to them and I felt myself deposited as an artefact at the table and pressed to On whilst he took out his phone and started texting his out-of-state friend. I was humorous and asked him to do that later and tried to engage him with his friends. He continued writing texts inviting responses, not 'I'm at dinner! Later dude!' whilst I'm trying to be nice, asking how they are, making connections things I've bothered to find out from FB. On the fifteenth minute I elbowed him under the table. He shrugged me away. Twenty minutes of this and I finally say 'are we eating dinner with these guys, or are we leaving so you can do this other thing?' No apology, just an elaborate pout. This guy is 55 years old. Later, his pout continues. He withholds sex, he does the silent treatment. Next day, all day.

We sit at another restaurant last night and he gets out his phone. I stare into space and think about why I left my marriage, and where I am now. Is it better? Is it the same? Is it worse? He finally admits that he's mad because I called him out in front of his friends. I point out the gentle way I tried to get him to attend to his friends, and he says nothing except I 'should have sucked it up' (like I usually do). He apologizes like a brat, 'I'm SORRY, all right' and I'm feeling all the possible doors to the Relationship building are fully automated and slamming together with loud clicks.

So what, a guy glued to his phone in a restaurant with his friends is a dumping offense? The sum total of a year of relationship? It's not the phone, it feels like I'm an annoying fly, a nag, if I don't pilot into his friendships and do his kin-keeping work, over and over. It feels like emotional labour, even though it also feels ridiculous to mumsily care, and argue, about 'phones at the table'.

The most resonant thing in this highly resonating thread is the stuff about guys doing a lot of pseudo emotional labour when they want to get a girlfriend, or get laid. Once there, fuck that shit. My last angry thought before sleep last night was a grimace over the idea that our conversation about emotional labour has given him a Good Thing ('I'm an emotional labourer ladeez!') to put on his next dating profile page.

posted by honey-barbara at 11:36 AM on July 24

- b. I'm sorry honey-barbara, that is gutwrenching. I am certainly not telling you what to do, but for me, my threshold for a "dumping offense" is very, very low now that I realize I am perfectly happy being single. It's astonishing what I put up with because I felt it "wasn't bad enough to break up over."

## V. (RE) EVALUATING RELATIONSHIPS

I am simultaneously relieved that I am not trying to have a conversation about this thread with my ex, and sad that this thread didn't exist 10 years ago, when we'd only been together about 8 months.

posted by desjardins at 11:47 AM on July 24

### 5. Having to make the ridiculous requests

*It feels like emotional labour, even though it also feels ridiculous to mumsily care, and argue, about 'phones at the table'*

Yes... this is one of the worst things, the pseudo-gaslighting thing where you're simultaneously aware the 1) It is ridiculous to argue about, say, texting during dinner with friends but also that 2) it is ridiculous because no adult should be doing this dumb, dumb thing! Do I *want* to argue about leaving shoes where people can trip on them? No I do not, I want people to *not leave shoes where people can trip on them* because it is *rude* and *thoughtless* and a *child can figure out not to do this*. And when I say, could you please not leave your shoes where people will trip on them?, I don't expect an argument because-- well, duh! Don't do that!

I mean what defense can you possibly have? "No, I NEED to leave them there." "No, that's too much thinking." "No, other people can step around them!" All possible arguments are infinitely dumb, so instead it becomes pouting and comforting them and telling them it's OK, because they can't just say "oh yes, sure, sorry about that" and they can't admit that they just want to say "NO. I'M LAZY. ME TARZAN."

posted by easter queen at 11:46 AM on July 24

### 6. "That sounds like work..."

I just got dumped from a relationship wherein, in the process of breaking up with me, my ex-partner, whom I had previously quite loved and respected, told me in response to me trying to talk maturely about our communication problems and his mental health, "All your solutions sound like more work. I'm not going to do any more emotional work."

The fact that this male person thought that simply **not doing emotional work** was an option for a functioning adult human being that in *any* capacity that ever interacts with other people, or even with *himself* in a healthy way, fucking staggered me. With one statement, he destroyed all the goodwill, trust, and respect he'd built up with me in a year and a half.

I would like to print this out and nail it on his fucking door like Martin Luther.

posted by WidgetAlley at 9:04 PM on July 15

## VI. OTHER

### 1. What it can mean to demand mutual respect

on that note, here are some [words of wisdom](#) that i recently came across: 'A great explanation of why 'be respectful' especially across unstated power dynamics fails.'

Sometimes people use 'respect' to mean 'treating someone like a person' and sometimes they use 'respect' to mean 'treating someone like an authority'

and sometimes people who are used to being treated like an authority say 'if you won't respect me I won't respect you' and they mean "if you won't treat me like an authority I won't treat you like a person'

and they think they're being fair but they aren't, and it's not okay.

posted by kliuless at 2:11 PM on August 12

## 2. Most excellent strategies for wriggling out of housework (aka, Performative Helplessness)

- a. Sure, but whining, doing a crappy job, making life miserable for everyone while doing a crappy job, skipping enough steps that someone will have to redo it later, and a petulant litany of “why do we do it this way/why do I have to do this/why can’t we just invent a better washing machine/why do we have to eat off dishes instead of edible plates/why can’t someone less special than me take over” is the de facto GET OUT OF DOING CHORES magic spell.

“I could ask him to do this simple chore, but he’ll\* do it wrong (so I’ll have to end up doing it again anyway) and he’ll be in a snit all week and brag/complain in public about being henpecked” is the kind of mental calculus that often precedes women doing things themselves.

\*or she, as billiebee points out, although the performative helplessness that hinders actual productivity is decidedly masculine in most contexts I know.

posted by a fiendish thingy at 8:28 AM on July 31

- b. He does know how, and it isn’t hard at all, but playing make believe like he’s a floppy helpless infomercial denizen (how does anyone cut vegetables? how does anyone boil pasta???? I TRIED TO COOK AN EGG ONCE AND MY HOUSE BURNED DOWN) probably works a lot of the time. It works for a lot of people a lot of the time. And a lot of those people are dudes who have learned that “”but I caaaaaaan’t” results in other people doing all the work for them.

These same dudes are also somehow shocked, SHOCKED, when their wives divorce them “out of nowhere” a few decades later.

posted by a fiendish thingy at 8:50 AM on July 31

## 3. When “I love you” is empty

*And there’s this weird expectation, that I should only pay attention to his verbal declarations that he cares (dragged with effort like it’s torture) and completely disregard what he does the other 99% of the time.*

My partner thinks that saying “I love you” is an automatic fix and makes everything okay, and that the saying of it, or the fact of it, also obviates the need for any additional effort. It so does not magically make everything okay, and that misplaced belief that it does somehow magically just makes everything worse.

posted by [username] at 12:02 PM on July 21

## 4. How reasonable EL differs from the fallacy of mindreading

- a. While I’m sensitive to arguments that no one should be expected to read another’s mind, that’s not the same as expecting someone to make the effort to generally anticipate the needs of those other than themselves (and then to do something about those needs!)

posted by sazerac at 12:08 PM on August 12

- b. This reminds me of an argument I had with an ex that went like this:

Me: I have to ask you to do everything.

Him: Yes, but I do everything you ask!

Me : Yes, but I have to ask you to do everything!

He was never able to understand why I was bothered.

posted by dotgirl at 10:22 AM on July 16

## 5. Listening to men... \*the effort to be human

- a. *"You show me a woman who can actually sit with a man in real vulnerability and fear, I'll show you a woman who's done incredible work."* [[Transcript: Brené Brown on Vulnerability \(Nov 22, 2012\) | On Being](#)]

Nah. That just sounds like an average Tuesday to me. Maybe you should talk to more women about the emotional labor they do, so you can grasp how utterly constant it is. We don't need to be lauded or called incredible, we need a damn break from having to do this every single day.

posted by palomar at 5:41 AM on July 20

- b. As a man I've found the article and this thread very eye opening.

My closest friends are all female. Which is probably a gender performance thing but anyway. It's taken a lot of effort for me to open and talk about my emotions with them. I was actually proud of myself for doing this. But I now realise I've probably fallen into the trap of dumping all my shit on them line they're my therapists. In fairness I do think I listen in return. But I realise I need to be much more proactive in listening to and responding to their needs.

Secondly (I can't remember who said it up thread) I'm one of those guys who "hates their family." Last Christmas together felt like a bad party rather than a fun gathering I'd like to be at. Partly this is due to stuff that was going on but I definitely don't keep up contact or engage emotionally. I now realise it's really up to me to get over myself and call my relatives regularly.

(I also recognise at least somewhat that saying these things is easier than doing)

You know all these weird social systems we set up on societies damage people because they don't allow the full range of human behaviour.

It's kind of weird to think that it actually takes a boatload of effort to be fully human.

posted by Erberus at 7:50 AM on July 22

## 6. "I just realized that my wife needing more time off than me isn't because I'm stronger"

This entire thread has been revelatory (in a painful way) for me as the slack-assed half of a marriage that involves a lot of emotional labor. So it is with some small relief that I can say that the thing described above has always been an essential part of our marriage. Every so often, as needed (determined by either her or me), Mrs. Scump takes off for a week or so to do her own thing. Most often she picks the time, but sometimes I step in as an outside observer and suggest that it's time for a break, especially when she's not doing such a great job of looking out for her own best interests.

I do it too, but it's a sign of how unbalanced things have been in our marriage that I don't need to do it as often. Pro tip for other people who are in a relationship with unbalanced emotional labor: if you run into this (one person needing more self-care or more "time off" than another), and you're interpreting it as you just not needing as much self-care or time off, you may want to reexamine your assumptions.

It's possible, maybe even probable, that you don't need it as much because you're not paying as much, and that the reason your partner needs more is because they're doing more.

At any rate, the taking-time-off thing is, I think, a minimum standard. I don't deserve some sort of special recognition for it. It's just something that seems naturally sane and obvious in a marriage, especially involving kids. You have to have time off from your "regular life", because you were a person in full before you were married, and that didn't stop just because you got married. There needs to be room for that person too.

## VI. OTHER

Anyway. I'm noting this more out of a sense of relief, like "oh, thank God, there's something that I've actually maybe done right" than a sense of WITNESS MY AWESOMENESS, because this entire thread has, like I said, been revelatory. Painfully so. It doesn't speak particularly well of me that it took this thread for me to wake up, but thank God for this thread. And here's hoping I have enough rope left to positively change my behavior.

Thank you to everyone who's shared their experiences in here. Thank you so very much.

posted by scrump at 1:07 PM on July 27

### 7. Why are you women so indecisive?

- a. Ohhh, that reminds me of another common complaint about women that is secretly about this subject-- "Women are so indecisive! Why can't they just say where they want to eat!"

My indecision is based on the certainty that my choice will upset someone, that we will arrive to that place only to experience one of these incredibly common mood-poisoning incidents that dudes like to do:

- making fun of the menu (and if you say "we can just go somewhere else," responding with "it's FINE! No, it's completely fine. I'm sure I can find SOMETHING.")
- saying "why would anyone want to eat here"
- saying "why would anyone want to eat [dish]" that I have just ordered
- making weird "she's still deciiiding, WOMEN" jokes to the server
- saying "get whatever you want" only to passive-aggressively pepper you with tiny verbal barbs when you get whatever you want
- saying "oh man, if we were at [other restaurant] I could have [dish at other restaurant]"
- complaining about the beer selection
- complaining about the appetizer list lacking mozzarella sticks
- complaining about size/shape/bun-type of burgers
- complaining about one variety of sandwich with an ingredient they consider "weird"
- making comments about the female server's figure
- telling everyone they know about "the time [female person] made me go to [restaurant]" for the next fifteen years (I knew a guy who made jokes CONSTANTLY about the time his wife "dragged" him to this weird restaurant where the only thing they served was bread. That restaurant? Panera.)

Ultimately, in my experience, any woman's refusal to choose a restaurant is based on the often-correct suspicion that whatever choice you make will be wrong anyway, so let's just go where he wants to go, it makes things so much easier.

posted by a fiendish thingy at 9:58 AM on July 17

- b. I am a super indecisive person, and I feel like a fiendish thingy just poked right at the heart of the reason why. When you're making decisions where you're prioritizing *other people's preferences* - often unstated or even unconscious preferences - it's damned hard to choose anything.

posted by lriG rorriM at 10:03 AM on July 17

## 8. Investing in each other (women) instead

This article was just what I needed today as I've been pondering over the last week about how *sick and tired* I am lately at having to tiptoe around men lately at risk of hurting their feelings/egos. At work and in my personal life. I would just like to be straightforward and say things I need to say, things which have literally nothing to do with the men and are in no way a reflection of anything about them, but I *can't*. Because they'll get defensive and pissy and suddenly I'm the bad person. So I have to expend about 3x more energy and time trying to sugarcoat things and present them in a non-threatening way and I just get so tired of it sometimes.

*Sorry if I sound bitter. I'm just awfully tired. I've been taking care of a lot of other people lately, and haven't had much time to take care of myself. It's wearing me thin. I wish I could pay someone to do some emotional labor for me! And by that, I mean, I could use a nice hot meal and a big bouquet of flowers, just because. Better get my butt to the store. Ain't no one else gonna do it for me.*

Idea: Women (if they want to) doing emotional labor **for other women**. Most of us have been taught this shit from birth and are good at it. And (speaking for myself only), I don't mind doing it when it's worth it to me, i.e. when I'm doing it for someone who recognizes it and who I know could and would reciprocate for me if I needed it. That is almost always other women. So, good reminder to me to use my powers in this area in a productive way. I make an effort every day to support, appreciate and recognize other women for all the good work they do and never get recognized for, but I'm going to double down on that. I feel this is actually a pretty productive use of my ongoing frustration with patriarchy in general.

posted by triggerfinger at 9:51 PM on July 15

## 9. Religious orders make sense now

Another puzzle piece: was thinking about religious life. Convents, monasteries. We think of these things as big sacrifices, but in fact, they are places designed to dial the emotional labor burden way, way down. You are removed from regular family and social life. You don't have to stress about the cleanliness and condition and chores around the places, because all of these things are taken care of in a fair and equitable rotation of tasks - when it's your turn to do the dishes, you do the dishes, but on the other days, you blissfully ignore the dishes. Life is so regulated and organized that you really can be mentally and emotionally free to concentrate on the tasks you are there to do - whether it's contemplation, human services, or whatever. This wasn't a stupid organization of life. Religious orders recognized that emotional labor had to be wrestled to the ground before anyone stood 5 minutes' chance of being able to devote attention to anything else.

I also think this is what drew me to life in summer camps and residential education settings for many years: a similar level of organization of chores, and an equitable sharing. Men and women alike did their duties when it was their turn, and were penalized for shirking. Both the emotional and the menial labor were sorted - labor was never a negotiation; you never had a long-running standoff as to who was going to take out trash or scrub the pots: it was all written there right on a rotation chart. This did more to create gender equality than any number of manifestos or heartfelt discussions. A basic rota. A recognition that everyone needed to contribute equally to the boring work of daily life. The beauty of it: when you're on, you're on: you do the work outlined in the rota. When you're off, you devote not a second's thought to the condition of the kitchen or the bathrooms or the trash. It's a big old SEP until it's your turn in the rota again.

posted by Miko at 9:19 PM on July 26

## 10. The President, Warren Buffet or the Pope

*"I personally would be totally okay if you [a man] asked me and phrased it along the lines of 'I'm really working on doing better to shoulder the burden of emotional labor in relationships. I've been reading a lot about it and I've learned a lot, but I need clarification on something and I just haven't been able to*

## VI. OTHER

*find a good answer through my usual channels. I'm wondering if I could run it past you and get your thoughts on it. I will listen to and absorb your reply and not get defensive or argumentative. I genuinely want to know how to do better and will keep a completely open mind.' "*

I was only half way through this paragraph and already thinking that it contained more apologetic words and disclaimers than a man would be likely to use even talking to a very high status man, like the President, Warren Buffet or the Pope.

It's really hard for me to imagine a man being that apologetic, even when trying to negotiate a plea bargain. I'd like to understand better how different genders are socialized about their speech patterns. (And I have read a couple of Deborah Tannen's book.)

posted by puddledork at 8:31 AM on July 20

### **11. Stunt cooking**

oh god I'm suddenly flooded with memories of every wretched holiday meal at my great-uncle's place, when his mean scary wife and all but the very oldest and youngest female dinner attendees would swoop up at some unseen signal and practically wrestle your plate away from you, kicking off the aggressive dinner shutdown process, and all the men would meander into the living room to watch a sport and talk about what kind of horsepower their mutual fund has, and I would get confused by the sudden strict gender bifurcation of the group\* and frankly terrified by the Stepfordian kitchen tornado betwixt meal-end and pie-begin, so I would always end up hiding in the den reading old copies of Reader's Digest and feeling an incredibly deep sense of shame for not understanding the dynamic well enough to grok my role in it as a girl-child.

\*my adult male cousins often cooked but never cleaned up, which always struck me as weird, but I later put two and two together and realized they only do stunt-cooking -- grilling, deep-frying, poorly planned turduckens, anything involving an open flame, etc.

posted by palomar at 6:35 PM on July 20

### **12. Thank you (from a man)**

It's really, really valuable to hear women's stories on this and every other feminist issue because they're so often stories from a world totally foreign to most men. You can see in some of the responses how easy it is for men to not even see what goes on in the world around them, because they've never had to pay attention. They've never been held responsible for sustaining relationships in the same way that women have. It's exactly why some men don't get the problem with street harassment (they've never paid attention to the relentless demands on a woman's time and appearance), the problem with workplace sexism (they've never noticed that their male boss treats them differently), online harassment (they've never been abused for speaking an opinion), etc.

I only realised there was more to the world when I started listening to women explaining again and again how their reality is fundamentally different, and that the fact that I hadn't noticed was a blissful ignorance bestowed on me by the same system that screws us up in so many ways. Until that realisation, it's so easy to think women are exaggerating, or simply failing to see some obvious solution ('Just stop sending Christmas cards!'). I wish it wasn't this way, but it took a huge volume of women's stories before the penny dropped that they weren't just discussing isolated things.

So thank you. It must be hugely frustrating to get the same clueless responses, time and time again, from guys who just don't see that these things are more than individual flaws in need of correction. I promise that I find it immensely useful, and that I use these stories and experiences to help myself be a better man and a better feminist, and I'm sure many other men do too.

posted by twirlypen at 2:42 AM on July 16

## VII. CREDITS

### **A. "Where's My Cut": On Unpaid Emotional Labor, 7/13/2015, by Jess Zimmerman**

The article that started it all: "Where's My Cut": On Unpaid Emotional Labor, 7/13/2015, by Jess Zimmerman: <http://the-toast.net/2015/07/13/emotional-labor/view-all/>

### **B. MetaFilter Thread, 7/15/2015 to 8/15/2015**

The original thread was active on MetaFilter from 7/15/2015 to 8/15/2015, and garnered 2115 comments in that time, which filled 700 pages. This compilation is not an attempt to summarize every topic raised in the thread; rather, it is a compilation of "greatest hits" according to my own personal judgment. See the original thread to explore further stories and topics.

### **C. Condensed Version 1, 8/29/2015, prepared by Olivia K. Lima**

Some excerpts above (as noted in the posts themselves) are from companions threads and groups that MeFi readers started to keep the conversation going.

This compilation was prepared by Olivia K. Lima (oklima297@gmail.com), 8/29/2015.

Deep thanks to the many women (and men) who added their voices and shared their stories.

### **D. Condensed Version 2, 10/2/2015, prepared by Timid Robot Zehta**

- Wow. Wow wow wow wow. This is amazing. Thank you everyone!
- Converted document to [LibreOffice](#) so that anyone can edit regardless of whether or not they have access to Microsoft Word
- Updated formatting to take advantage of styles for dynamic formatting, cross references, etc.
- Corrected a few spelling errors (sorry if I clobbered anything, I tried to leave anything that looked intentional or British)
- Timid Robot Zehta <[tim@zehta.me](mailto:tim@zehta.me)>

### **E. Condensed Version 3-9, Jan 2016, prepared by Timid Robot Zehta**

- 1/8/2016: Condensed version 4: Made minor edits and redactions as requested by the original authors.
- 1/9/2016: Condensed version 5: Made minor edits and redactions as requested by the original authors.
- 1/10/2016: Condensed version 6: Redacted entries of authors who have not yet responded to Olivia's request for positive confirmation of inclusion.
- 1/11/2016: Condensed version 7: Made minor edits, redactions, and added posts back as requested by original authors.
- 1/13/2016: Condensed version 8: Made minor edits, redactions, and added posts back as requested by original authors. Replaced Flower poem with link to page where it is published with permission. Added permission and copyright to footer.
- 1/14/2016: Condensed version 9: Made minor edits, redactions, and added posts back as requested by original authors.

**F. Condensed Version 10, Jan 15 2016, prepared by cortex**

- A few further edits and additions by request of original comment authors, and minor edits to endnotes. For any questions about the document, please contact cortex at [josh@joshmillard.com](mailto:josh@joshmillard.com) or via the MetaFilter contact form: <http://www.metafilter.com/contact/>