

“I’m 34, and I’ve Never Been in Love”

Meet Jeff Wilser, writer, former Marine and all-around normal guy. Except for this: In 10 years, he hasn’t had a relationship that’s lasted longer than three months. No butterflies, no real emotion, nothing. On behalf of every woman who’s ever dated a can’t-commit guy, we sent Jeff on a mission to man up and figure himself out.



Wilser, at home in his Brooklyn apartment, reading one of his many how-to books about love

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I’VE DATED A LOT; slept around plenty. But I’ve never been in love. That’s pretty weird for any 34-year-old and very weird for a 34-year-old relationship expert. On my website, thelunge.com, I give dating tips to single guys. I even do marriage advice. (Mostly, I tell men to—duh—listen to their partner. Amazingly, it works!) But you know that *thump-thump-thump* in your chest when you really like someone? I don’t. I’ve never thought, *Maybe she’s The One*, never had my heart broken, never—in the last decade, anyway—had a relationship that lasted more than three months. I can write about love, but I just can’t seem to feel it.

First, a little background: When I was 13, right after my parents’ divorce, I swore I’d never get married. As the years passed, I conflated “love” with “marriage,” thinking, *If I’m never going to get married, then there’s no reason to fall in love*. I’ve actually said “I love you” to three women, but I did it because it was expected. Once they figured that out, breakups ensued. I’m always hurting women, and I’m always a jerk.

The thing is, I really hate being a jerk. And as I’ve run the Groomsman Gauntlet and watched my friends get married, I can’t help but think: *That could be awesome. That could be for me. I want to laugh in a*

STYLIST: RACHAEL WANG; PROP STYLIST: MELISSA FELDMAN; GROOMER: KERRIE URBAN; JOHN VARVATOS JEANS

playful snowball fight. I want to think of a girl and dance a goofy jig. I want to be that guy I hate in every romantic comedy.

I've dated amazing women, like Karen, a razor-smart blond; and Alice, with the bubbly laugh; and Cat, the fashion maven. After every breakup, my baffled friends ask, "What was wrong with her?" My answer: "Nothing." So I have to wonder, Am I physically incapable of love? Cavemen loved. Romans loved. Even *Stalin* loved. I call Diana Kirschner, Ph.D., author of *Sealing the Deal: The Love Mentor's Guide to Lasting Love*. "Between 2 and 3 percent of adults have never experienced love," she says. "But all those people can get over the problem if they are willing to work on it."

I think about this logically. If you can't play the guitar, you get better by practicing. If you want to lose weight, you get thinner by dieting. Maybe I just need a little love practice. So I consulted the experts and coaches. I gave them a mission: Help me find love. Here's what they prescribed. *Cupid, I'm calling you out. Bring it.*

I Play a Little Mood Music

My journey started—as all journeys should—with music. Andrea Syrtash, author of *He's Just Not Your Type (And That's a Good Thing)*, advises me, "When I coach women who want to enter a new phase of dating, I tell them to make a soundtrack of their life. If you have a theme song, you might feel more positive." The soundtrack to *my* life is usually melancholy fare like Nick Drake and Elliott Smith. For inspiration from a band that embodies capital-L Love, I round up 27 Beatles albums. I listen to "All You Need Is Love," "And I Love Her," "Love Me Do," "Why Don't We Do It in the Road?" (OK, not every song fits.)

My lesson learned? It comes so easy to these bastards! They're always falling in love. "Lovely Rita," "Lucy in the Sky," "Maggie Mae." On *Sgt. Pepper* the Beatles ask, "Would you believe in a love at first sight? Yes, I'm certain that it happens all the time!" Oh, it does, eh? Fine. I decide to try to fall in love with a woman I see on the street.

A few days later, I'm at a downtown subway station, standing next to a stunningly sexy woman. A train slowly arrives. I look at her awkwardly, look away, look back.

C'mon, Jeff, love is at stake! Love! "So..." I stammer, "we could probably walk faster than that train, huh?" My body floods with shame. She puts in her iPod headphones.



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Two takeaways: (1) This doesn't work. (2) This is creepy. But I keep the Beatles on my playlist and soak in their optimism.

I Do a Puppy Love Workshop

I'm not a dog person. But in my love research, I came across some studies that say dogs increase owners' empathy and lower stress. Surely a more empathetic, happier me is more likely to fall in love. So, fine, I'll learn to like dogs. Time to find some puppies.

I bring a date, a woman I'll call Sarah, whom I met through a friend. She's game to hit a pet shelter with me—just to look. I stare at the puppies and don't know what to do. Sarah laughs. "Look into their eyes," she says, then baby-talks to a terrier. They're instant best friends, and I'm impressed.

I cuddle up with Gracie, a sand-colored mutt with a cataract in her left eye. I, too, once had a cataract! "Gracie, I've been there," I say to her. I tell her that my cataract surgery worked, and now I'm 20/20, but then I realize that Gracie doesn't have my health insurance. Gracie will never get cataract surgery. I feel something odd, a pinprick in my belly. Could this be...empathy? I try to memorize this strange new sensa-

tion. Unlike my usual dating activities (bars and drinks), this is out of my comfort zone, which, oddly, feels good. And maybe it's a coincidence, but I start to really like Sarah.

I Try a More Scientific Approach

How can we feel what we don't understand? I decide to research the science of love. Helen Fisher, Ph.D., author of *Why We Love*, links romantic love to a specific region of the brain, the ventral tegmental area. (So the next time you tell someone you love them, just say, "You stimulate my ventral tegmental area.")

Fisher explains that romantic love developed as humans evolved. As a species, we lust so we can procreate, but we form attachments so we can nurture babies, create families and avoid a literal orgy of chaos. I'm comforted by this. If love is stamped into our DNA, then it's something I can do too. When love is poetry, it scares me; when love is science, I get it.

Fisher is encouraging. "You'll do it," she says. "There's a bell-shaped curve—some people fall in love quite often; some fall in love quite rarely. But you'll do it." A few days later, when I attend my friend's baby shower, I take in the room full of couples, toddlers and sippy cups, and instead of my usual estrangement, I feel like one day I'll most likely be part of the crowd.

I Cast a Wider Net

It's time to harness the power of technology, databases, algorithms. Cupid hadn't gotten it done. Maybe OKCupid can.

With breathtaking efficiency, I filter 100,000 women to a few dozen who had a match score of 90 percent with my personality test. I go out with a museum worker, a trainer, an indie-theater actor and a VP of a social-media company. I try to incorporate my blossoming vulnerability into the dates. At a West Village lounge, the fitness trainer swirls her gin and tonic and asks, "So what are you writing?" Vulnerability. Honesty. I should say, "I'm writing an article about falling in love. And on this date, I'm trying to fall in love." I sip my whiskey. "Nothing interesting." Vulnerability might have its place. That place is not on a first date.

I'm eager to meet the indie-theater actor. Her profile is well-written and funny, and she's as big a *Lost* fan as I am. We immediately get each other's references, finish each other's *Continued on next page* ➤

sentences, stay out until 2:00 A.M., fool around. There's potential here.

Meanwhile...the site gets addictive. Every morning, I check my OKCupid app for messages or "winks." I constantly tweak my profile, and I juggle three dates on back-to-back-to-back nights.

But the goal isn't to meet a bunch of women; the goal is to fall in love when I meet the *right* one. I'm interested in the indie-theater actor, but things are progressing with Sarah. I call the indie-theater actor to tell her that I had a great time, but I'm kind of seeing someone else. I decide to disable my profile. I think this is progress.

I Cleanse My "Love Chakras"

A friend suggests that my love chakras need to be cleansed and balanced. I have no idea what this means. But in the spirit of leaving no stone unturned, I visit a Reiki energy healer in his Brooklyn office. I start to tell him about myself, but he cuts me off.

"Jeff," he says, looking at me intensely, "we need to get you out of your head and into your heart. For the next three minutes, we're going to look in each other's eyes without speaking." So we do. It's uncomfortable and far too intimate.

Then he rebalances my chakras. I lie on a massage table faceup (fully clothed!), and his thumbs drill into my chest. At his direction, I visualize his fingers reaching my heart. Then we're done. I have no idea if my chakras are balanced, but when I go out next with Sarah, I'm careful to make deep eye contact (without being weird, I think).

I Remember the Last Time I Felt Joy

Luke has Obi-Wan. The Karate Kid has Mr. Miyagi. I need a sensei. Kirschner volunteers to give me a Love Mentor session. (Note to men: Never start a conversation with your buddies by saying, "So I'm on the phone with my Love Mentor....")

"Think back. And remember a time when you were in love," she says one day over the phone.

Me: "I can't. That's the point."

Kirschner: "Remember a time when you felt joy. Pure, unbridled euphoria."

I flash back to when I was a teenager. It's 1994, and my beloved Houston Rockets have just won the NBA Championship. The electricity of the playoffs, the crowd chanting, "MVP! MVP!"

"What do you feel?" Kirschner asks.

I can't speak. Hakeem Olajuwon's thick accent. A young Sam Cassell. The songs they played in the old arena: "Whoomp! (There It Is)." I can't help it: I start to feel choked up. *Jesus, Jeff: No. You're not going to cry with a Love Mentor.*

But I do. I start to cry. Not because I'm happy, but because for the first time in many years, I remember what that joy feels like. And it sinks in: For my entire adult life, I've been numb. "Jeff, what you're feeling now? This is what love feels like," Kirschner pronounces happily. "You've just proved that you can do it."

And you know what? I believe her.

And Finally...The End?

Two months have passed. Did my experiment work?

I've fallen in love, and we're getting married in August....

Well, it'd be nice if I could tell you that. Alas, real life is not a Kate Hudson flick. But something has changed. Individually, none of these experiments was a silver bullet. Still, the very process has made me more comfortable with love, more hopeful. So here's a bit of advice for you: If you're dating a guy like former me, who says he'll never commit, run far, far away. So many women tried to "fix" me, to be the one who'd *finally* win me over.

But now I recognize that no matter how hard they tried, I was the one who had to do the fixing. So I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but it's time for you to move on. He's not worth your time—not until he shapes himself up.

And now it's been three months with Sarah, my date from the puppy shelter. And at the risk of jinxing things and embarrassing her or me or both of us, I will say this: I'm excited when I get a text from her, I blow off plans with my buddies to hang out with her (sorry, guys), and I've caught myself daydreaming about traveling with her to Maui. This is uncharted territory. And that's probably how this "love" stuff actually works—not as an experiment but organically, because you really like someone and you want to see her more.

Will it last? I have no idea. But I kind of hope so. Unlike the old days, the idea of love doesn't freak me out. As an old band once said: Let it be. ■

Jeff Wilser is the author of The Maxims of Manhood and The Man Cave Book.