

# love + life



## Boys on the Side

You love your guy, but you can't seem to stop Gchatting Adam. Or liking Doug's Instagrams. Allow us to explain the #BackupBF phenomenon.

By Faye Brennan



**WHEN AN EX CUTS YOU OUT**

He has a new woman, so it might mean *auf wiedersehen* to your friendship! You may want to lash out at him (or his new girlfriend) for the snub, but it's better to accept his decision and wish him well, says Katherine Woodward Thomas, author of *Conscious Uncoupling: 5 Steps to Living Happily Ever After*.

**The Former Flame**

You two hooked up or maybe even seriously dated, but because of some hiccup, your bond fizzled. Your Facebook friendship, however, hasn't, and seeing him pop up in your feed reminds you of the good times you shared.

You can't help but like his shirtless Labor Day pics and message him "So, how was it?" when he gets back from a work trip to Amsterdam. (Red flag: You're well aware he was even on a work trip.)

**Here's the deal:** You may not be confident in your current relationship, so you're living with one foot in the past where it feels more cush, says Laura Doyle, an intimacy expert and author of *First, Kill All the Marriage Counselors*. Talking to your ex is your strategy to ease that niggling feeling. Possibility number two: You're a smidge bored by how content and drama-free your love life is now. (Oh, he went hang-gliding yesterday? We made spaghetti.) "It's like you're sitting in a lifeboat while on a luxury cruise," Doyle says.

**Will it burn you?** Chatting with a blast from the past may feel comforting, but it's not worth the fight it will cause if—make that when—your boo finds out. "There's mounting evidence that contact through social media can lead to jealousy, emotional cheating, and relationship dissatisfaction," says Drouin.

You've always been told to have a backup plan. That's why you applied to a second choice college, copied all of your important docs onto a flash drive, saved some coin in case of an emergency, and have kept a few guys on retainer in case your current relationship crashes and burns. Wait, wha??

Romantic "Plan B" options are actually shockingly common. A recent study published in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior* found that the average woman has about four "back burners"—men she regularly communicates with in case she finds herself back on the market. As for the average taken guy? He has eight (not a typo) potential women-in-waiting. That's a small army of number two bitches!

Crazy as it seems, this practice is deeply rooted in our mating habits, says Helen Fisher, Ph.D., a biological anthropologist and chief scientific advisor for Match. "Reproduction and parenting are the most important things we do as humans, so many women (and men) are inclined to design alternatives in case their partner fails them." And now, it's never been easier to tap those backups, thanks to—you guessed it!—social media, say study authors Jayson L. Dibble, Ph.D., and Michelle Drouin, Ph.D. Their research found that having other people on reserve doesn't necessarily mean that you're not deeply committed to your current man (most digital exchanges in their study were found to be

**Snuff it out:** “Unfriend the ex and block his number,” says Doyle. It’s harsh, but what you had together is o-v-e-r! Once he’s a digital ghost, turn your attention to your main man. If you’re in a newish relationship, commit to being more vulnerable with him in order to strengthen your trust. “Let him see you cry if you’re upset about work or your mom; tell him when you’re scared about a presentation or job interview,” says Doyle. And if things are feeling a bit yawn-y with your long-term man? Sign up for acting lessons or a team sport together so you can experience some nail biting without effing up your bond.

**The Longtime Guy Friend**

He’s your BFF with a penis. No one knows more about you than this kid! You practically grew up together (or felt like you did). He has an adorable family and a solid career and would make an excellent hubby—which his current girlfriend is well aware of. You, on the other hand, have never felt that sexual “zing” with him, but you keep in touch by leaving friendly comments on each other’s Instagram posts and texting on the reg.

**Here’s the deal:** It sounds like you have a male in your wolf pack who knows you and cares about you, which may be a smart and healthy strategy—especially if you’re planning to (or already have) kids. “Many women today live far from their relatives, so they collect a host of people who they hope will help them in difficult times,” explains Fisher. A backup male nanny, perhaps? **Will it burn you?** If your guy bestie also happens to be perfect in your eyes (minus that one little factor known as “the spark”), you may find that you’re starting to compare your significant other with him. As Drouin says, “even those in committed relationships are continually assessing the suitability of potential romantic partners.”

But doing so can create an unfair uphill battle for your man—suddenly, he doesn’t dress well enough or his buddies aren’t refined enough. And then, even though you love him, you can’t seem to overlook his faults.

**Snuff it out:** There’s no need to stop talking to your male pal. Just keep the line between who’s a friend and who’s a lover very concrete and clear—both in your mind and online. In fact, invite your male pal over for dinner with you and your S.O. to eliminate any gray areas, and he’ll become well established in the friend zone, says Doyle.

**The Shameless Flirt**

You met him while attending a friend’s party solo. As soon as you locked eyes, wowza... downtown fireworks! The chemistry was crazy, but you made it clear that you’re off-limits. Still, his flirty Snapchats and Twitter DMs (“Nice new profile pic. I can’t stop staring at it.”) prove that he doesn’t care. You’ve only responded once or twice, but secretly, the attention gives you the blush-worthy tingles.

**Here’s the deal:** Oh, you like to be reminded that you’re still attractive to the opposite sex? Get back to us when you have something original. “As women, we need to feel desired, cherished, and adored—that’s how we’re built,” says Doyle. “So even in instances of low-level loneliness, like when your partner is staring at his phone or playing video games instead of paying attention to you, you may feel tempted to find another admirer.” Enter this handsome specimen who has a way with one-liners that makes you feel *mmm* good. **Will it burn you?** You’re entertaining this dude solely because he’s making you feel wanted. But if your goal is a long-term, monogamous relationship, you should reserve romance and sexual attention for your guy only,

says Michael Gurian, a relationship expert and author of *Lessons of Lifelong Intimacy*. Fail to do so and you’re egging on an affair.

**Snuff it out:** Doyle likens the pull of this ego booster to cocaine: “It’s highly addictive.” But getting your fix from your honey will feel much more rewarding. “Partners are not mind readers, especially when specific language and timing are the issue,” says Gurian, who suggests speaking up and telling your guy exactly what you need and how often (such as requesting an “I love you” once a day, or a sexy date night twice a week). Then, even when he’s entranced in a Grand Theft Auto marathon, you won’t need that validation that you—and your union—are still smokin’.

**The Work Husband**

You spend every weekday Gchatting each other from across the office, so it’s only natural that he knows the ins and outs of your daily life. He’s your coffee run standby, and when the boss reams you out, he’ll text with you during your commute home until you cool down. He’s your ride-or-die man from 9 to 5, and you can’t imagine a workday that doesn’t include him.

**Here’s the deal:** There’s a reason so many women have work hubbies: The relationships can provide major benefits, says Gurian. “The limbic system is set up to form multiple attachments so that we can get many of our needs—like psychological, spiritual, and emotional support—met by different people,” says Gurian (but remember, intimate needs are different and reserved for numero uno). In fact, Gurian says that in his clinical work with married couples, he found that those who don’t have any outside connections tend to suffocate their partner with the pressure to be their all. **Will it burn you?** It can if you’re complaining ad nauseam to your office bro about your partner, since you’re inviting him into your intimate world. (If you need to vent, talk to your girls!) In that case, you may lean so hard on your cubicle pal’s shoulder that you drift apart from your guy, and he’ll be left wondering what happened. **Snuff it out:** You don’t need to ditch your colleague, but keep the subject of your talks centered on light subjects (like last night’s episode of *Broad City*). And if he asks how you and your man are doing, be transparent but subtle, says Fisher. “Mention some fun activities that you and your partner recently did together, and he’ll know that you are happy.” And if you’re not? Briefly say you are working on figuring some stuff out together—and then do so. ■

ARE YOU SOME GUY’S SIDE PIECE?

The telltale signs below, as our experts informed us, look awfully similar to the red flags of an emotionally unavailable dude. Because, well, he kinda is! (And you don’t have time for that.)

- ➔ He’s dating you, and other women, but says he “can’t commit right now.”
- ➔ He’s single, but he texts you to “hang out” on Friday and Saturday nights. And only after 9 p.m.
- ➔ He’s a longtime bud who vanished after he got a GF. Now that they’ve broken up, he’s resurfaced with a drink invite.
- ➔ He’s in a serious relationship but sends you flirty Snapchats and dick pics. Uncool, bro.