

Men's Health

HOW TO ASK HER OUT

4 Mistakes Guaranteed to Get You Friend-Zoned

Follow our expert tips to avoid being banished to relationship purgatory.

BY SARAH JACOBSSON PUREWAL, IMAGE FROM THINKSTOCK

I'm chatting with my friend Patrick, and he's telling me about a girl he recently went to dinner with. He says she's hot, and that she's been texting him a lot—but what should he text back?

I ask him about the content of her texts: Are they flirty? Does she want to see him again? Do they involve sexy selfies?

“Not really,” he replies. “She says she's bored.”

My alarm bells start going off. “Don't engage!” I practically yell. “She's trying to friend-zone you!”

He's confused, so I explain: “Girls text their friends and boyfriends when they're bored. You're not really her friend, and you're not her boyfriend ... yet. But if you do boyfriend things, like cure her boredom or listen to all her problems, she'll realize that she can have a sweet, boyfriend-y relationship without actually having a boyfriend, and that's just bad news for you.”

My explanation isn't very eloquent, but my point is clear—and Patrick, like most guys, wants to avoid the friend zone at all costs. But the beginning of a relationship can be tricky, according to psychotherapist Vinita Mehta, Ph.D.. “It's easy to cross signals, including whether someone is just a friend or wants to pursue something more,” Mehta says.

Still, there are steps you can take to make sure your signals are

clear—and that you don't fall into her friend zone trap. Here are four mistakes guys make that land them in the friend zone almost instantly, and how to avoid them.

You don't make your intentions clear

This might sound obvious, but you might be in her friend zone because you've never indicated that you would like to be otherwise, says relationship expert Tracy Thomas, Ph.D. In fact, it's possible that she doesn't even know you want to be more than friends. According to Thomas, the key to staying out of the friend zone is to make your intentions clear, and to make sure all of your communication—verbal, non-verbal, written, etc.—is about what you want.

“Being direct doesn't mean you have to say, ‘I want you to be my girlfriend,’ all at once, or all the time,” Thomas says. “But instead of saying ‘You're welcome to come over,’ say, ‘I'd love it if you came over.’” You don't want to pursue her so aggressively that she feels overwhelmed by your attention, but it should always be obvious that you are, in fact, pursuing her as more than just a friend. “Don't say ‘Do you want to go to dinner,’” Thomas says. “Friends go to dinner. Say, ‘I'd like to take you out to dinner at this great Italian place I think you'll like. Are you free Friday?’”

You let her vent about other guys

Life is not *When Harry Met Sally*. Unless you get really lucky—or you take action—she's not going to wake up one day and realize that all the guys she's been dating are assholes, and that her true love (you) has been hanging out in her living room all along. You might think you're just biding your time, but the longer you wait, and the more you get to know her in a friend-type way, the more you risk ending up in her friend zone for life, says Thomas.

It's not your job to listen to her guy problems—she has girlfriends and guys who actually are just friends for that. “If you find yourself in the role of therapist thinking you're going

to get in her pants, you're not only in the friend zone, you're in the free therapy zone—and no woman wants to have sex with her therapist who knows all of her neuroses,” Thomas says. “Do not be the recipient of all her neuroses and mistake that for intimacy.”

You try too hard

You probably don't think you're trying too hard, especially if you've never even asked her out. But if you're doing things for her that only a boyfriend would do—such as buying her things “just because,” or allowing her to engage you in mindless texting banter—guess what? You've been friend-zoned.

Here's the tricky part: If she's a serial friend-zoner, she's already picked up on your extra effort, and she'll give you just enough attention to make you feel like you're actually getting somewhere with her. A serial friend-zoner is someone who likes the attention of a suitor without the responsibility of an actual relationship, says psychologist Alicia Clark, PsyD. “She'll give you just enough reinforcement so you'll continue to be available and supportive of her, but at the same time she'll masterfully avoid sending you any indications that she's romantically interested in you,” Clark says. “She is interested in you, and she wants you to stick around, she's just not interested in dating you. A real friend would not do this.”

Both friendships and romantic relationships are reciprocal—a girl who likes you as a friend or as a potential romantic partner will do the same things for you that you do for her. “Don't settle for less than you want or deserve in a relationship,” Thomas says. “Because if it's one-sided, and you're the only one participating, she won't respect you and you're dead in the water.”

You're afraid of rejection

Once you're fully entrenched in the friend zone, you probably won't be able to leverage a friendship into a romantic relationship, according to relationship expert April Masini. “A

lot of men are afraid of rejection, so to stave off that sting they simply don't ask her out and instead become a buddy—a miserable, anxious buddy,” Masini says.

Being rejected from the friend zone can actually be harder than getting shut down straight away, Clark says. Because you already have a relationship with her (a sham friendship is still a relationship, sort of), you have more to lose than if you were asking out a stranger. “Men who allow themselves to fantasize about a future relationship with a girl make it harder for themselves to declare their intentions and risk losing her,” Clark says. “By avoiding making their intentions clear, they can keep the hope alive that someday all of their attention will be reciprocated.” In other words, you're in relationship purgatory, and that's never a good look.

Here's what you do: Ask her out. “If you ask her out, she will say yes or no,” Masini says. “If she says yes, you win. If she says no, you still win, because you've been given the opportunity to stop wasting your time on someone who's not interested. Clarity is a gift. Fear is not.”

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