He loves you not: Valentine's hype can force tough decisions

By Elizabeth Lund, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor / February 14, 2005

They're the Valentine's Day gifts no one asks for: a note slipped under the door that reads "I'm taking my freedom back." Or 25 votive candles with the comment, "The flame has died." Sometimes it's just the ring of a phone and the terse message, "We're through."

Those on the receiving end of such presents might want to break Cupid's arrows, since Valentine's Day breakups are becoming more common. As many as half of dating couples split up on Cupid's big day, estimates Jodi Smith, etiquette expert and president of Mannersmith Consulting.

The main reason Valentine's Day breakups are so frequent, culture watchers agree, is that the much-hyped holiday creates so much pressure and so many expectations. The ubiquitous ads for long-stemmed roses, heart-shaped boxes of chocolates, and flowery cards prompt many to think of all the reasons they don't want to remain half of a couple.

But there's disagreement on whether breaking up on Feb. 14 is acceptable behavior or unforgivably cruel.

Ms. Smith doesn't see anything wrong with Valentine's goodbyes, but does think that how they're handled is important.

"There is no need to keep hanging on to something that is not working," she says. "It is perfectly acceptable to break up on Valentine's, [but] dumping champagne on your date, creating a scene, and storming out of the restaurant is poor form. The polite person thinks before speaking and considers the venue before offering a carefully worded exit speech. No need to demean the person while dumping them. Leave the dumpee with a shred of self-respect and a box of chocolates."

Ria Romano of Boca Raton, Fla., didn't follow that advice and still feels bad about how she handled her Valentine's Day split a few years ago. She and her boyfriend had been dating about three months when he planned a romantic, expensive evening.

He buzzed her apartment intercom and asked her to come downstairs, adding, "I have two dozen red roses for you."

Ms. Romano, although dressed for the date, surprised herself by saying, "I know it's Valentine's Day, but I'm not going." She ended the relationship while he stood in the lobby. To make matters worse, Feb. 14 was also his birthday.

"I know that's really, really bad," she says, "but I suddenly heard this little voice in my head saying, 'He's not the one.' I felt so guilty, but I also felt relieved that I didn't have to

go to dinner.

"Valentine's Day puts so much pressure on people," she adds. "There's a lot of anxiety that you don't get with Christmas or New Year's."

Ms. Smith has heard such comments many times before. Her advice to Romano and others is: "Don't be too hard on yourself." Yes, it's better to break things off several weeks beforehand, but the culture encourages just the opposite. Dumping is the symptom, she says, not the underlying problem.

"We live in a society where people routinely spill their guts on the Internet or on national television shows, but there's very little self-awareness," she says. "We feel as if we need to act on an emotion as soon as we acknowledge that emotion."

Social scientists agree. "People are notorious for not being strong enough to sit a partner down and say, 'I'm sorry, it's over,' " says Barry Kuhle, assistant professor of psychology at Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Pa. Rather than dealing with a situation directly, they procrastinate until something forces the issue, and Valentine's Day does just that.

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