



In Defense of Emotional Cheating

It's totally normal for you and your S.O. to have crushes on other people, argues Anna Breslaw. So can we not freak out about it?

Eric* and I first became friends in college. He was cute, but he never occurred to me as a viable romantic option. First, he'd been with his girlfriend for years. Second, I knew his type (shiny-haired, preppy, rosy-cheeked) enough to know that I was the polar opposite (anxious, Jewish, anemic).

Five years later I was settled in a monogamous relationship with my boyfriend, Mike, when Eric popped back into my life. Over drinks he told me he and his girlfriend had broken up. Now I was "taken" and he was single, and I saw him in a way I hadn't before.

As I walked to the bar to get us our zillionth round, I could swear he was checking me out. It had been ages since I'd felt that kind of electricity with any guy—including my boyfriend.

I was supposed to feel guilty. I once believed what Disney had fed me, that if you find your prince, all the other attractive men around you disappear. Right? When friends in serious relationships would confess to having a work crush, I'd pretend to understand but judgmentally think: If you're still noticing other dudes, you're not with the right one. Turns out, it's not binary like that. Mike and I have a great relationship, but I've learned that even when you find The One, you do *not* receive a pair of special soulmate goggles that turn every other sexy man in your proximity into a stalk of cauliflower with eyes.

In other words, I realized, I *like*-liked Eric—and if I hadn't been dating Mike, I'd have tried to hook up with him in a hot minute. We started doing things every week or so. Hanging out with him was like being on a really great third date without the jittery getting-to-know-you convo or the high stakes of "Will we sleep together?" We'd part ways, and I'd get to go home and watch Netflix with Mike.

I told my friend Julie about this, and she was skeptical.

"OK, *what* is going on with that?"

"Nothing. We're friends."

"He's so cute. You're really not interested?"

I had to think about that one: "Define *interested*."

Eric is interesting. Yes, he's cute. And I discovered we did have some similarities: He's a writer, like me, and sensitive, and tends to overthink things like I do. We have good chemistry and understand each other, but I don't actually *want* a boyfriend like Eric. I want a boyfriend like my boyfriend: stable, calm, supportive, and good in a crisis. And I would never cheat on Mike. Because here's

the important part: Crushes and love, I've come to see, have nothing to do with each other.

One's about a deep connection with someone you know inside and out.

The other is about having fun fantasizing about someone you don't really know who's probably more interesting in your head than in real life.

I get it—for some people who are tempted to cheat, having someone like Eric could be like an addictive drug that slowly pulls you in and tears you down. For me, it's more like baby aspirin, or the thing your grandpa takes for his blood pressure: vital, healthy, and safe. But only you and your partner can decide where your boundaries are and when you've crossed them.

That, of course, is rule number one of safe emotional cheating. Rule two: Make sure the third

party doesn't have deeper feelings about you than you have about them; otherwise they may make a move. Rule three: You have to be honest with your long-term partner about your crush, and accepting about theirs! (Fair is fair; Mike has his crush too.) And finally, because you and your partner know your relationship better than I do, remember rule four: Make your own damn rules. **G**

Anna Breslaw is a writer living in New York City.



Always a Flirt

Why, asks Breslaw, give up harmless fun?