

On Disability, Not-Dating and Obsession

written by Guest Contributor | September 15, 2016



Image via [tumblr](#)



The one in the bathroom of my friend's loft party my freshman year of college.

The one who spoke broken English and three years prior had gastric bypass surgery.

The one I met under the arch in Washington Square Park whose online dating profile had described him as a "nice Jewish boy."

The one who I fucked on the floor of my friend's room as my friend slept next to us.

The one I never met in real life but talked to daily for two years.

The one who made me tea the day after I was hospitalized for a psychotic episode.

The one who texted me: "you seem to think that at some point I electively made myself responsible for your feelings, which is so not true it's nauseating. so maybe it's best that we don't be friends, since you never wanted to be friends in the first place."

The one who still owes me \$80.



I am an obsessed person. That is, I become obsessed with people and things quickly. This, I suppose, is separate from the obsessive-compulsive disorder from which I suffer that began to surface in fifth grade. The head shaking.

The snorting. The spit on the tongue. My OCD is relatively under control due to help from one of three psychiatric medications I take daily but my personality still has extreme obsessive tendencies.

I become obsessed with bleaching my teeth nightly. I become obsessed with flossing my teeth so hard until my gums bleed. I become obsessed with smoking cigarettes as I walk somewhere. I become obsessed with learning sign language because a guy I talked to for a month was deaf.

I've also denied an obsession only to cave into it. I turn my phone off for days at a time when I realize that my dependence on someone's attention is getting out of hand. I obsess over men's attention. I obsess over positive recognition from professors and coworkers. I obsess over validation from my parents.

My friends know that I obsess over them. I remember a dream in elementary school about a friend of mine who played field soccer with me in my dream and within the following days I had become obsessed and began to follow him around. He lived a few houses down from me and I remember staring at his backyard from my window to see if he was outside. At this age, I knew something felt weird inside of me but I did not deny this obsession. Now, I am more easily able to identify and control these tendencies, but still struggle with it daily.



I have been writing this piece on "not-dating" for a long time. Or, how Maggie Nelson puts it so brilliantly in her color-scapic memoir hybrid entitled *Bluets*:

At a job interview at a university, three men sitting across from me at a table. On my cv it says that I am currently working on a book about the color blue. I have been saying this for years without writing a word. It is, perhaps, my way of making my life feel "in progress" rather than a sleeve of ash falling off a lit cigarette.

The literature about "nonaction" that I have come across offers me some sort of realization that I have always been unable to achieve on my own. Not doing something is a refusal of an action, and in some cases, an act of agency by means of refusal. Not listening is ignoring. Not working is anti-capitalist. Not having Facebook is refusing social media societal norms. Not having a gender is a transgressive move against a hegemonic binary. Not taking medication is not caring to live.

Within this context I view "not-dating" as an action. The action of not being in a relationship. The action of relationship refusal. Not-dating is not passive.



Not-dating does not satisfy the craving for attachment that I have. One night I get home and open Snapchat to sext someone I've been seeing for a few months who at the time was out of state. His name didn't appear on my list. I check Facebook. He is not on my friends list. I check Twitter. His name does not appear. He removed himself from my life.

I went to my bookshelf, found the book he gave me a few months prior, and put it on the floor. I ripped the front cover off. I tore the spine out. I ripped pages. I drew on them with black Sharpie—the word "DIE." I burned the corners of pages and the front cover. I put it in the sink and ran water on it. I placed it on my living room table next to a dead succulent I'd been hoarding for a few weeks. The book and plant are still there.



I struggle with finding permission for this essay and for writing about the people I want to write about. I've never struggled with this problem of permission before. My sister tells me, "If people wanted you to write kindly or fondly about them, they should have acted better."



Johanna Hedva recounts her coming-to-terms with

depersonalization/derealization disorder in a brilliant [article in GUTS Magazine](#). She describes a panic attack in which “language breaks down (I cannot speak, or understand what is being spoken to me, during these states) but not because it never existed, or because it is nothing, or because it seems inadequate in a postmodern way, but because it uncreates.” An uncreation. An unrelationship.

In 2016 I am diagnosed with derealization/depersonalization disorder. I am very easily able to control my experiences with the disorder with medication and therapy. I avoid smoking marijuana because cannabis excites DP/DR symptoms. During dissociative episodes, especially in high school and early in college when I hadn't been diagnosed, I have attempted to hurt people. I strangled a roommate. I bit a friend. All of these experiences resulted from an obsession with the physical. Words and worlds do become unreal and uncreate people and even myself.

Again, Hedva so brilliantly writes:

Depersonalization and derealization are not the same thing, but more like two sides of the same experience: one describes a state of interiority (depersonalization), in terms of how one feels about oneself; and the other describes an exterior state (derealization), or how one feels about one's environment. DP/DR could be said to describe the skin between the outside and the inside, and in both places, there is the feeling that neither is “real.”



During an appointment with my psychiatrist, I see the book *The Happiness Project* on her bookshelf. After a quick Google search, I find out that the book is about a woman who is unhappy who decides to make some changes in her life to make herself more “happy.” I think the book is going to be about woman-empowerment, so I order it on Amazon. It comes. I read the first chapter. I get rid of it.

I am not interested in reading a book about a middle-aged white Upper East Side woman who lives with her husband of twenty years and two small children and how she is unhappy and decides to journal about her experiences in attempt to analyze them and come up with a plan on how to “become happy.” It is a *New York Times* best-selling book, so I guess that says there is an audience for this type of book, but I am not part of its demographic.

It's almost as if I pride myself on this unhappy identity. I've [written before](#) about how the label “*I am unhappy*” gives me a sort of comfort in claiming it, but I have anxieties on how my unhappiness, like anything subjective, is politicized. How unhappy am I allowed to be? What am I allowed to do with my unhappiness? Who wins and who loses when happiness is on the line?



Mental illness runs in my family and I often feel epigenetically affected by my ancestors' suffering. My grandmother was a victim of abuse from my grandfather for over sixty-five years until she finally left him when she was in her 80's. My grandfather had extreme addiction problems (perhaps an obsessive personality trait) and suffered from delusions and dementia toward the end of his life.

When my grandparents split a few years before my grandfather's death, a family secret was revealed in which my grandparents were never married because my grandmother became pregnant before marriage and she was too embarrassed to have a wedding after having a child. They lied for over sixty years.

As I view it, my grandparents had a not-relationship as long as they could—i.e. until they had a child—at which point they had to declare a relationship of some sort to survive in the rural South where they lived. This antiquated Southern logic, while obviously oppressive, manifests itself in my current life. What has been done to change these despotic ideas of living? I worry that I have not done anything to alleviate myself from their suffering that currently affects me in similar ways. At the same time, I sometimes feel that it is not my responsibility to change. The tension between these two feelings is a reminder that, for me, happiness is an unrealistic goal but I am trying my best every day to be content with myself.



I do not believe in "identifying" with others' experiences because this causes crises of identity. After having "identified" with something, I find myself looking for more. This takes my life out of a mode of creating experiences and into a path of identity-seeking and often soul-searching. But, there is some solace in understanding why my ancestors have chosen similar paths, most of which come out of safety concerns or conformity. It's more accepted to have multiple sex partners today than it was for my grandparents. It's more accepted to not be dating someone now than it was for my grandparents. I am being told that it is acceptable to have a not-boyfriend, but what am I supposed to do if this is not what I want? How can I claim an identity that is not made available to me? And, like the author of *The Happiness Project*, should I just learn to be content with my life as it is, or am I responsible for the implications put on other people by my desire to change my lifestyle?



Realistically, most of the men I meet are from online dating websites which almost always utilize location services and present me with how far away the person is from me. The infamous "grid" shows me lists—menus, even—of men

around me. I become obsessed with following the location of people I meet. People I am not-dating. This is an obsession that I refuse for long periods of time and then fall to the compulsions and locate them. The thrill of immediately locating someone is immense but I always feel remorse afterward. For me, this process is a neurotransmitter-increasing process. It's like a high from a drug-to which, ironically, I have never become addicted. Do people take the place of drugs in my nervous system? Does my addiction to people satisfy my addictive tendency so that an addictive drug problem is not a necessity for my obsessive personality? What happens when a person eliminates himself from my life?



I've been seeing G. for six months. Naturally and historically me, we met online and meet for the first time at a bar next to my apartment that I frequently have first dates because it's low-key and the people are usually friendly. I have too many drinks and get drunk. We walk to my apartment and up the four flights of stairs to my door. We fuck, as I normally do on first dates, and play the album *Miley Cyrus & Her Dead Petz* in the background. The song "Slab of Butter (Scorpion)" comes on, and Cyrus croons the lyric "Self-control is not/ something I'm working on."

He later tells me that he is, like me, not sexually motivated either but would rather have a deeper connection with someone. This is lethargically a positive declaration for me. I want to continue not-dating him. I think it may lead to something more. In my head, I think it may lead to a relationship.



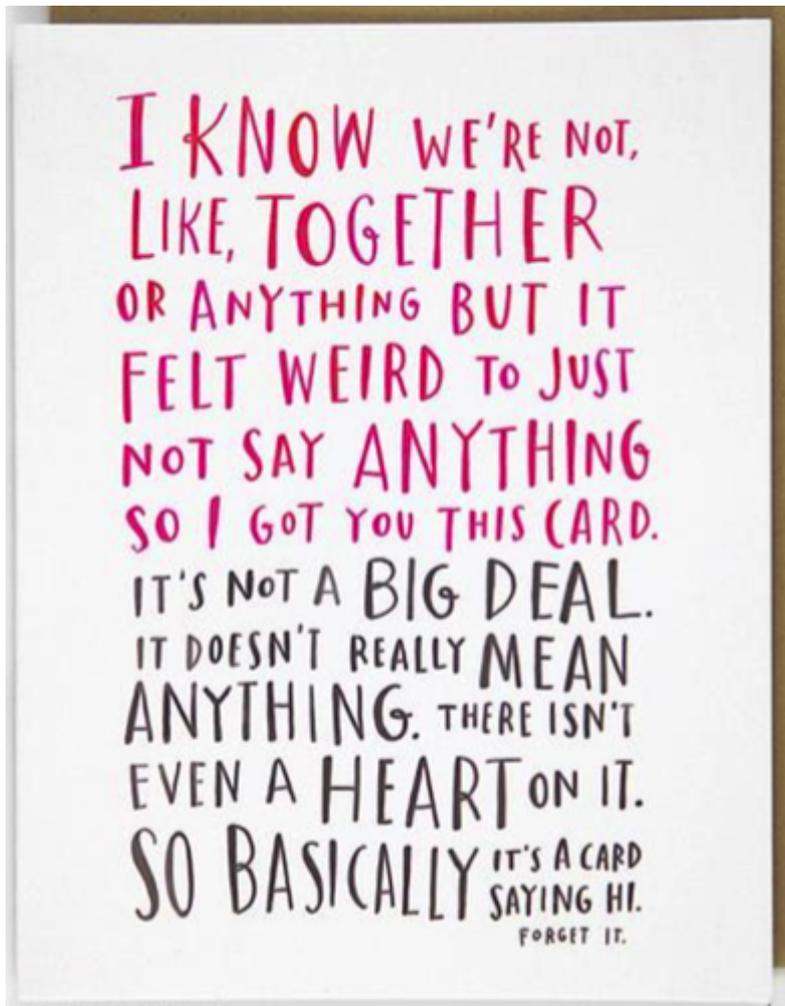


Image via [Emily McDowell](#)

What is one to do in a not-relationship and how does one make a move from not-dating to being in a relationship, especially when her own body is against her? Similar to how it is difficult for me to describe my disability in words, it is equally as difficult for me to describe my wants and desires regarding a relationship. My friend Carley Moore, a brilliant poet and essayist, writes in an essay about hunger and nourishment entitled "On Eating:"

The truth is, I have actually realized that I have a hard time saying what I want because most of the time I don't believe it is possible... But I am challenging myself to say these desires out loud, to protest for them, and to ask for them. ([GUTS Magazine](#))

In other words, Moore is commenting on the realistic wants and desires that she possesses but finds too overwhelmingly fantastical to say out loud. It is easier to repress wants and expectations in fear that they will not be acknowledged, aligned with, or have them met with positive reaffirmation. I tell myself that I will explicitly voice what I want, like how Moore challenges herself, but I find myself feeling too vulnerable and too overwhelmed. The speech act of the Other saying *I do not want you* is too real and ruinous regarding what I have, or could have, with G. Not-dating is

fantastical because it strips exclusivity away from a non-relationship context in a way that has nothing to offer the future and simultaneously allows me to create my own future in my head. In this regard, my wants and desires do not matter, not only to the Other, but also to me.



On dates, I often bring up discussion about the medications we take and for what reasons. My daily experience with medication consists of the following:

1. Advair, once daily for asthma
2. Nasonex, twice daily for general allergies
3. Sudafed, once daily for general allergies
4. Zolof, once daily for OCD & DP/DR disorder
5. Buspar, twice daily for anxiety
6. Ativan, as needed for panic
7. Truvada, once daily for HIV prevention

People always ask about DP/DR and I never have the words to explain it. Perhaps that is the disorder itself—an indescribable, almost unrealized disorder. The refusal of describing. The refusal of a relationship with the disorder. I almost always tell them to read Hedva's writings because she comes in where I must leave off.

Are people actually interested in my disability, or do people just want to understand how it is going to affect them? And is it my responsibility to educate people on an otherwise-unheard-of mental disorder?



I feel that open-relationships are more popular today than they have been before, and I talk about this concept with my friend. She tells me that she's staying with her friend who has a husband and a live-in partner. I joke: "why can she have two when I can't even get a boyfriend?"



While working on this essay, I'm also doing research for my honor's thesis which consists of documenting and representing obscure LGBT periodicals from the 70s, 80s and 90s as part of the New York Public Library's phenomenal rare archival collection.

I come across a collection entitled *Ecce Homo*, a 1970 magazine that describes itself as "The Magazine of Sexual Awareness for the Gay Male." A small black-and-white photograph of two males appears on the bottom of a page. In the photo, a younger, hairless guy wearing a necklace with a key on it looks up at a hairy-chested muscular man, probably discussing the blowjob that is about to happen. The caption reads "The majority of homosexuals prefer

encounters which let them feel, at least briefly, they are with someone real." As I read this magazine, the magazine is simultaneously reading me—an idea taught to me in a lecture once by Avital Ronell.

The idea of describing a person as "someone real" fails to keep in mind that people present themselves in ways that are not always authentic—that is, people transform and present themselves in social situations similar to the argument of "front stage, back stage" theory. I would argue that a more accurate caption for this photograph would hint that people search for *something real* rather than *someone real*.

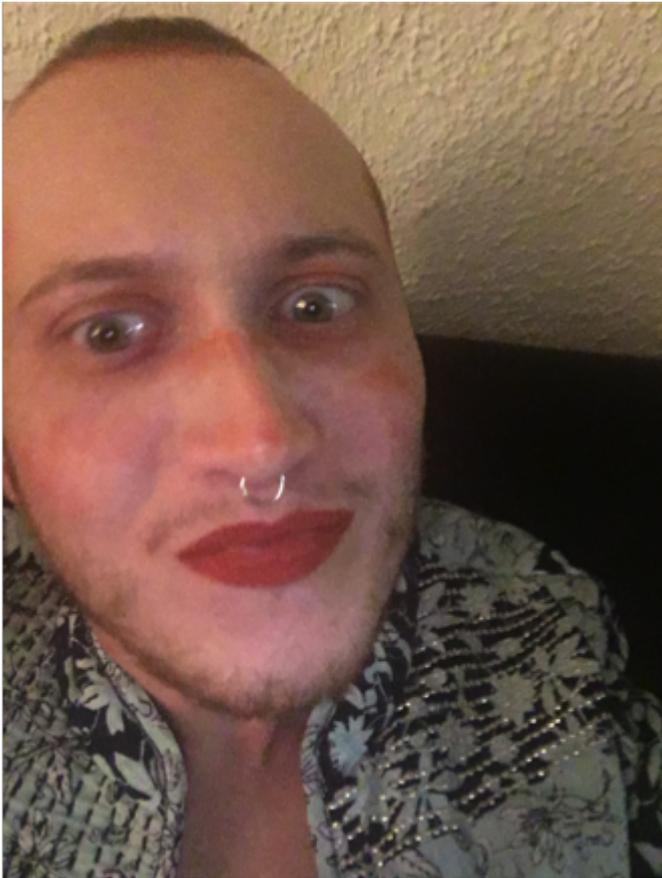
What do I have to gain from not-dating someone, especially when my romantic interests are not grounded in sexual gratification by means of actively cruising for a sex partner? Would relationships be easier for me if I were to seek a sexual connection that starts and ends with explicit penetration?



During this summer I become ill. I have no hearing in my left ear and I have a stomach condition that my doctors cannot figure out. For long periods of time, I cannot eat without feeling nauseous. My stress level is at an all-time high due in part to my job, and I go out with my best friend a few times and immediately have to leave because I become overwhelmed in large groups of people. I begin to smoke more cigarettes. I begin to drink heavier.

I am anxious, overwhelmed, and depressed. I write in a poem, "i am depressed and tired // i am detroit."

In these moments of not feeling well, I buy expensive lipstick and apply it to my lips and entire face. I shave my head into a patchy pattern. I listen to music loudly. I laugh.



Within these times of not-dating, I find meeting new people exhausting. It's very rare that I feel unsafe, but during an encounter with someone I meet off a dating app, I shake in fear. My poor judgment and reactionary impulse gets me kicked out and banned from the very bar in which I met G. for the first time.

I meet this man outside the bar and he invites me to come meet his friends. I compliment them upon meeting and a slightly overweight girl stares me down.

She declares, "I'm a very good reader of people, and I don't like you."
I reply, "I'm sorry you feel that way."

The guy I met excuses himself to use the bathroom.

"I know you're here to fuck my friend."

"Not exactly. I just came over to meet him."

"What do you do? Where do you live?"

"I'm a student at NYU and I live in the East Village."

"How do you pay your rent?"

"I work two jobs. What do you do?"

"I have my degree in physics but I work at an oyster bar in Midtown."

"What brings you to the East Village?"

"I'm cat sitting for someone down the block."

She looks at me with eyes of threatening insinuation. I should have left,

apologized for wasting their time, and wished them well. I was angry. I am not-dating someone who I am not sure is into me anymore. I was rejected by someone in the same bar an hour ago. I am looking for it. I am looking for something.

"I don't like you, I think you're pathetic, and I think you should leave."
"I'm actually fine sitting right here and don't think I will be leaving any time soon."

I hate that she feels entitled to this queer bar. I should not have to leave. She should.

Her friends—including the guy I was there to meet—try to get her to leave but she refuses. I add, "Yeah, you might want to get going. I wouldn't want that cat you're watching to get hungry or something." She continues staring.

I ask her, "So, how is your physics degree helping you in your career as a cat sitter? How old are you?"

"I don't feel the need to answer your question."

"That's fine. Are you a freelance cat sitter, or are you a part of one of those cat sitter unions?"

"You're a whore and I don't need to answer your questions. You should leave."

"I'm okay here. I'm actually going to get another drink. I'd offer you one but I wouldn't want you to get messy and ruin your makeup. Oh wait, too late."

I come back to the table and her friends coerce her into going to the photo booth next to us. While she gets up, she pushes all of the drinks on the table onto my lap, spilling Blue Moon and vodka sodas on my lap. Without any sort of thought, I push them back at her and pick up a glass and throw it in her direction. It misses her but causes commotion.

This was a violent and reactionary response that I immediately regret. She made me mad and encroached on a space that I wanted to call mine. She embarrassed me by spilling the table's drinks on me. I wanted to affect her like she affected me. Revenge. Retribution.

The bar staff come over and immediately force me to leave. I'm not sure what happened with the girl and her friends. I run home in fear that they are behind me. She is tough and angry and I know that she could very easily hurt me. This situation, in its vocal stages, was enjoyable—fun, even—for me. But when things became physical I acted with no thought.

I feel so bad about this that I go home and cry.



Six months after meeting and I am still not-dating G. He directs a play part of a famous New York City festival and I show up to the show with a bouquet of flowers—orchids and sunflowers—which before he tells me are his favorite.

After the show, I get drinks with him and his cast. One of them asks, "So how

long have you been dating?" He replies, "We're not dating."



Seth Loftis is a poet and essayist from Ohio who lives in New York City. You can find him writing on his blog at <http://unhappyblog.com>.