Why do nice guys always finish last? [1]

Hey Alice...

Just a quick question: why is it that nice guys always finish last? I've tried being nice all my life (nineteen years) to women, yet I get nothing. Yet if some guy who treats them really badly comes in, they're the ones who end up with a girlfriend — and me with squat. What's the deal?!

Thanks

Answer

Dear Reader,

The “nice guys finish last” stereotype is one that has some long-standing cultural play, and you’re certainly not the only person who has wondered whether the stereotype plays out in practice; there’s even significant research on the question! These studies have somewhat demonstrated that niceness is valued differently for heterosexual men versus women (Note: because much of the research focuses on heterosexual folks, the following may not be true for homosexual folks). That being said, simply being “nice” to someone does not mean that s/he will respond in the way you hope they will or that they owe you anything in return. As far as initiating and sustaining a relationship — that’s where things get a bit more complex than just possessing one or more attractive traits. And though research may provide some additional insight (more on that in a bit), it also bears mentioning that being true to you — nice-ness and all — will likely still be what pays off in the long-run in the romance department.

Studies looking at heterosexual couples and perceptions of “receptivity and caring” (a psychology code word for “niceness”) and attractiveness have shown that men tended to rate women they perceived as “nice” as more attractive than those they perceived as not “nice”. On the contrary, women studied showed a more mixed, or neutral response to men they perceived as nice. Researchers have theorized that women’s assessment could be due to anything from biological programming, to cultural forces (e.g., responding to societal messages that “bad guys” are attractive), or it could be because women may attribute nice-ness as a cover for an ulterior, hidden motive. Are these valid reasons? Might there be some more complicated forces at play
(both in the general population, and also in your specific case)? It may be worth reviewing the theories of partner selection briefly before addressing your questions:

- **Evolutionary theories** look at what women and men would theoretically do if the main goal of partner selection was to perpetuate the species (in other words, to make babies). These theories claim that for men a central driver is attractiveness: because men produce sperm, they can mate with multiple partners and can also have reduced parental investment. Women, who produce relatively few eggs, are more likely to pick a mate with high social and economic standing, to help provide for her and her offspring. However, there are a ton of reasons why evolutionary theories fall short — both men and women can and do enjoy casual flings; many individuals do not enter into relationships with only the desire to produce babies; and individuals can’t be reduced to organs and urges they may (or may not) have.

- **Social context theories** suggest that the major driver in partner selection is surrounding a cultural value that dictates things like the value and desirability of nice guys versus jerks. Culture probably has some impact on people’s actions and perceptions, but research has pointed to the limited use of this framework, as it is clear that many women and men express different desires for their relationships than those that are portrayed in popular media.

What does all this mean? The reality is that individuals are way more complex than can be accounted for via biological drives or cultural forces theories. Being a “nice guy” or a “bad boy” may be just one piece of the partner-finding puzzle. Consider, for example, the incredible diversity of types of relationships: two people can experience everything from deep friendships (with or without physical intimacy), to flings, and long-term romantic relationships. Along those lines, studies have shown that for short-term, casual relationships, women may rank physical attractiveness as very important, but for long-term relationships, women rank agreeableness as most important. In addition, a committed relationship may change over time: one particular attribute of an ideal partner in your teens may not be the same in your 20s and 30s, or even in your 70s. To complicate things further, just because a trait (such as being “nice”, or “hot”, or wealthy) is valued by a particular person, it doesn’t necessarily mean that an individual with that trait will be selected for partnership. One study showed that, overall, perceived relationship quality and partner compatibility were much more indicative of relationship success — it seems that chemistry between two people is more complicated than just a number of common traits.

What does this mean for you and nice guys everywhere? First of all, try not to sweat what’s happened to you before. Most people seek the partnership of someone who is receptive, caring, thoughtful, and considerate. These are traits that are not just desirable in the abstract: possessing them can help two people forge a special bond between each other and can contribute to growing together. Second, remember that a connection might be sparked by an attraction to one or more traits, but that alone is not likely enough to sustain one. So, rather than focusing on being a nice guy to “get a girl,” think about who you are as a person, and consider whether there’s someone who you’d like to get to know better as a whole person as well. Finally, don’t give up hope. Just because you haven’t yet clicked with someone who appreciates you for who you are doesn’t mean you won’t come across this person in the future. Staying true to yourself makes it that much more likely that you’ll hit it off with someone for the long-term.
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