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ADVICE

How to spot a love-bomber and what to do if you're involved with one

Over-the-top compliments, displays of wealth and excessive affection could be signs of love-bombing.

By **Andrea Yu** Special to the Star

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READ THE CONVERSATION

It didn't take long for suspicions to arise when 22-year-old Gina went on a first date with a new man 10 years her senior.

He flaunted his wealth, describing lavish tropical holidays and multiple vacation properties that he owned. Gina also felt overwhelmed when her date excessively complimented her appearance and insisted on holding hands. It made her feel uneasy and uncomfortable.

Over-the-top compliments, displays of wealth and excessive affection could be signs of love-bombing. "What happens is that people groom you for their own needs," said Theresa McAdam, a therapist from the Toronto mental health service Layla Care. "Typically, it's because they feel insecure."

McAdam said love-bombers use tactics to portray themselves as the perfect partner to gain someone's admiration.

"This feeling becomes like an addiction for them because it fills a void that they have," she said. Love-bombers are controlling and demanding of their love interest's time, texting or calling often. Once the "high" is gone, the love-bomber may end the relationship suddenly.

"The aftermath is the other person feeling hurt or sad," said McAdam. "They may blame themselves, feel conned or shameful. Sometimes they feel desperate to gain back the person's love and attention. They may miss them." Encounters can be short: weeks or months, but some could last years.

For Gina (the Star agreed not to disclose her full name), despite feelings of unease about her date's excessive affection and compliments, she tried to rationalize the situation. "This was the first time I had been involved with someone this much older than me," she explained. "I thought, 'Maybe he's just more experienced and knows what he wants. Maybe as a person, he's just more intense, more extroverted, compared to me.'"

While expressions of attraction and commitment can be signs of genuine romance and interest, Miranda Giacomini, an assistant professor of psychology at MacEwan University in Edmonton, said extreme behaviours are concerning. "Are they suitable for the phase of dating that you're at?" asked Giacomini. "Anything that lies in an extreme form would always be a red flag."

Giacomin's research is focused on understanding narcissism. "I don't think that all people who engage in love-bombing would necessarily be narcissists," she said. "But it could be a strategy that narcissists use to keep their partner close and maintain power."

Another way to differentiate love-bombing from a healthy relationship, according to McAdam, is whether you can maintain boundaries and if they're understanding when you're not available.

"They'll respect that you have friends and other interests," she said. "They'll genuinely care that you're a balanced and healthy person. A love-bomber may become upset and pull away their attention, or use manipulation tactics with you when you have other interests or when you put up a boundary because they want the focus to be all on them. Because the love-bombing is not about you, it's about them."

At a time when singles are more isolated than ever and feeling deprived of romantic attention, the pandemic could be making it easier for love-bombers to get away with their actions. After months or years without romantic encounters, compliments and attention can feel good and be flattering.

"It was nice to have someone seem like they were so interested in me," Gina recalled. But as the red flags piled up, she decided to end things with her romantic interest after their second date.

While Gina was quick to identify the love-bomber's toxic behaviours, McAdam said some relationships go on for months or years. If you suspect you're dating a love-bomber, McAdam doesn't recommend continuing the relationship unless the person has "demonstrated a strong desire to change, not through words, but actions like attending their own therapy or going to couples therapy," she said.

There should be consistent change over time, with demonstrations of respecting boundaries. The love-bomber should show understanding of their own behaviour as being toxic and abusive.

McAdam said it's common to see love-bombing traits among people who have experienced childhood trauma that resulted in unhealthy attachment styles. "Often, the bomber grew up with some form of abuse or many happening all together, such as neglect or physical, sexual or emotional abuse by an adult in their lives," she said. "Unfortunately, the abuse they suffered conditioned them in a way to feel unsafe, shameful or unworthy. And these abuses create an environment where the love-bomber, as a child, was unable to develop true self-confidence and true self-worth, causing distrust toward others."

As a result, love-bombers believe that everyone they encounter will hurt them eventually, yet they're also desperately seeking to be loved. "The only way they can achieve this feeling is by using abusive tactics to get what they desire," said McAdam.

While Giacomin said narcissism is a stable personality trait that is unlikely to change, McAdam believes people can change with enough desire and willingness to work on themselves. "It could take years before they are truly ready or able to contribute to a healthy relationship," she said.

Those who have experienced long-term love-bombing themselves, or have been repeatedly love-bombed, can also look inward to understand their own needs and desires.

"Maybe we have our own traumas or insecurities," said McAdam. "Having a love-bomber come to us ignites the need that we feel for love and maybe we're willing to accept it from an unhealthy place, or we're more likely to accept abuse or ignore signs and tolerate things that we shouldn't." Therapy can also help those impacted by repeat love-bombing identify and seek healthier relationships down the road.

For Gina, her encounter with love-bombing will change the way she dates in the future, but in a good way. "In this situation, I second-guessed and questioned myself so much," she said. "I think that I'll feel more confident in trusting my own thoughts and intuition."



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