

The love project

No games, no gimmicks, no pressure – Amanda Holland took a 30-day 'love course' and discovered that finding it starts where she hadn't expected...

Here's the thing: I'm 31 and I've never had a proper boyfriend. That's not easy to put down on paper for the world to see. The loving and accepting part of me says there's nothing wrong with that, but I also feel a sense of shame. There must be something wrong with me, whispers the negative voice inside my head. It's not that I've never dated the same person for long periods of time; I've just never been with someone who wanted to commit to 'boyfriend' status.

In the past, I've gone to great lengths

to adapt when dating. I've lost weight, changed my hair or the way I dress, hidden parts of my personality and even taken up hobbies I had no interest in. However, as nothing seemed to make a difference, I slowly gave up. I felt alone, but pretended that didn't bother me. When I turned 31, it hit me: if I carried on this way, making no effort and pretending that I was happy, then 'it' might never happen for me. So, rather nervously, (because frankly, why do I have to work at finding love? Isn't it just meant to happen like in a Disney movie?), I enrolled on a >>>

>>> 'Get Ready for Love' 30-day online course run by Project Love. The company was set up by two female life coaches, Vicki Burt and Selina Barker, who saw that there wasn't any love and relationship advice out there that spoke to smart, self-aware women. Women like me, who don't want to learn 'how to catch a guy and keep him' or to follow The Rules (been there, done that). Their aim was to be the antithesis of all the dating advice that plays to people's fears and insecurities.

And so it began. From the ping of the first email (you get one a day, with workbook activities, and food-for-thought in the form of blog posts, podcasts and videos), it was a real struggle. For someone who thought they were ready to find love, I was surprised by how much I resisted the process – I felt like a sealed vault that couldn't be prised open. But eventually, my 'aha' moments came, while working on these three lessons...

1 How to handle your 'shitty committee'

You know that inner voice that loves nothing more than to point out all your faults? I found that on starting this journey, my 'shitty committee' had been given free rein. I used my negative beliefs to stop me from even trying to find love. I had to dig deep and work out why. As a child I was taught that I could always do better, that a B+ was good, but an A would be preferable. It left me feeling that what I achieved was never good enough.

I started to see how this had affected me; how I'd settled for situations that weren't what I wanted and men that weren't right for me, because I had started to believe that I didn't deserve more. Burt and Barker challenged me to prove that the negative opinions about myself

weren't true. 'You're not lovable' was met with – 'I have lots of friends so that can't be true'. 'You aren't attractive enough' was one I found hard to convince myself was untrue, but I started to notice couples when I was out and about, and seeing that not every pair resembles Adonis and Aphrodite helped convince me otherwise. Some days are better than others, but when I do find myself listening to my shitty committee, I shut it down quicker than I used to.

2 Self-love for beginners

As Oscar Wilde wrote, 'to love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance'. This belief is at the very heart of the course, as Project Love believes cultivating a loving, healthy relationship with yourself and

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discovering that the love you've been longing for was within you all along, will change your fate. This left me rolling my eyes and wanting to skip the challenge. I say 'challenge', because loving myself felt alien to me. The more I thought about it, the more I realised I'd been waiting for someone to come along and love me so that I could love myself. Although I had heard it countless times before, I finally realised that if I didn't believe I was enough and worth loving, I might not find the right person for me. So I started to perform daily acts of love – buying flowers for the house,

going to the cinema, having picnics in the park, cooking myself dinner. Small gestures which, as it turned out, were things I rarely bothered to do because I was waiting to do them with someone else – a partner.

3 Opening up to love

Although I had been working through the issues holding me back, dating still scared me. 'Opening up to receive love requires us to be vulnerable, and being vulnerable means taking down the walls that we have put up around us to keep ourselves protected from getting hurt, being disappointed or being rejected in love,' explain Burt and Barker. So, if I had any chance of putting myself out there and actually going on a date for the first time in eight months, I had to get vulnerable.

I was set some tasks: ask friends for help, accept compliments, express how I feel during tricky conversations and smile at a stranger. Asking for help was excruciating. I could say I like to do things myself, but that's not true; I've been let down in the past, so rather than risk being disappointed by people again, I just don't ask. But it turns out I'm letting myself down here, because I'm missing out on experiencing the kindness of others. As I began to ask for help and be more honest about my feelings, I felt for the first time that there was a possibility I wouldn't have to walk my path alone.

By the end of the 30 days, I began to value myself more and tolerate a lot less from men who weren't genuine. I also tuned into how I felt about someone, rather than worrying whether they liked me. Case in point, a recent date I went on. He was good-looking, well-dressed and a bit of a charmer. Usually on such occasions, I would spend most of the date saying what I thought he'd like to hear, being



careful not to express too much of an opinion until I'd gauged what his was (very unlike me outside of dating), and I'd let him do a lot of the talking (again, so not me!). On this date, I was totally myself; we covered topics of conversation that are never usually discussed on a first date, or a third for that matter, and our opinions clashed, but I didn't censor myself. I found when you aren't overanalysing a situation or trying to figure out your next move in the 'game', you can listen to the other person. Is he

interesting? Am I attracted to him? I wouldn't usually ask myself these questions because I'd be worried about what his answer would be in relation to me.

He wasn't the man for me, but I still had one of the best dates I've ever had. I felt at ease with myself, confident and happy – and if your vibe attracts your tribe, then I see great things to come in the future.

Project Love 'Get Ready for Love' 30-day course costs £69. See loveprojectlove.com. Readers can get £20 off; quote code 'psychologieslove'

PROJECT LOVE TOP 3 DATING TIPS

1 BE REAL
Waiting to respond to a text or modifying your behaviour so that he asks you out again is just an attempt to control and manipulate your love life. There is nothing real about being calculating and nothing loving about this way of doing things. Be yourself – the results can't be any worse than how you've fared already.

2 BE OPEN
Often couples in happy relationships have ended up with people they'd never have imagined would be their type. So ditch your long shopping list of what you're looking for in a partner – what he looks like, what his interests are, his job. Instead, focus on how you want to feel in a relationship and let that be your guide.

3 TAKE A BREAK
If you're feeling a little uninspired and lethargic about dating, then take time out to dose up on some inspiration and come back to it later with a fresh perspective and renewed energy. Spend time with people who are in happy and healthy relationships, read or listen to real love stories online and think about how you want to feel when you're in a relationship – then do things that help you to connect with those feelings. Sometimes you'll need a weekend off, sometimes a couple of weeks. Do whatever it takes to get you feeling fully refreshed.