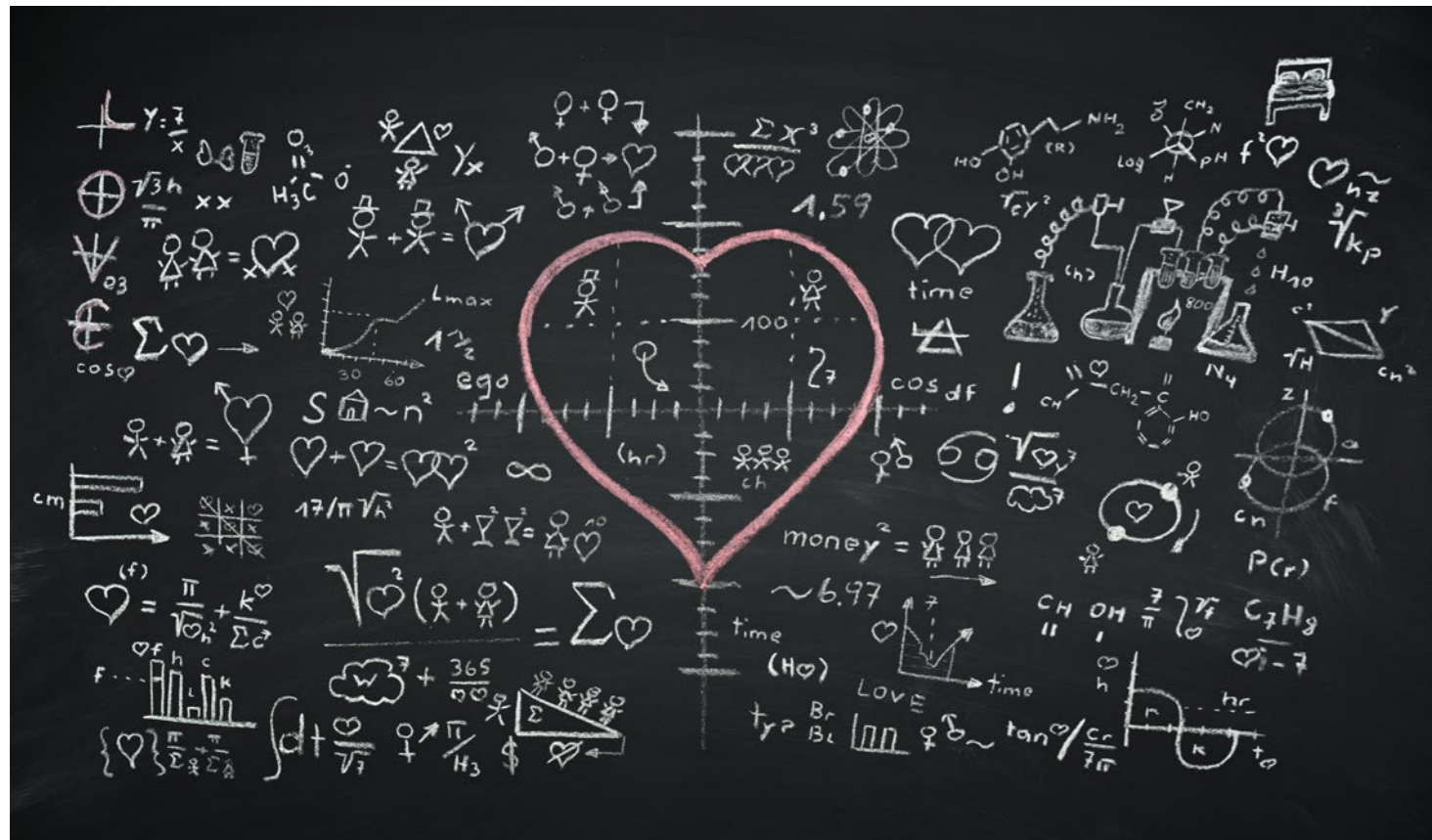


Lessons from LOVE SCHOOL

Can you overhaul your entire approach to love and relationships in just 30 days? Marianne Power signs up to Project Love to find out...



If there's one thing that drives me mad it's this persistent narrative that says you can only be complete by being attached to another human. It's not enough to be happy, healthy and free – true happiness can only come from walking off into the sunset with another person and, ideally, giving birth to their children. Then, and only then, when you look into a child's eyes do you know what real love is. All of life before that moment was just a dress rehearsal.

This is a problem for me because as much as I love children, I've never felt a need to have my own, and I'm deeply conflicted about finding The One. My life is already full of love in the form of friends and family, who I adore and endure in equal measure, just as they do me, and I get huge fulfilment from my work, travels and freedom. Why do I need a man on top of all that?

And yet I worry that I'm protesting too much and that I only feel this way because I've never experienced love, and therefore don't know what I'm missing. I also worry that living on my own and thinking mostly about myself is going to make me selfish and self-involved.

And so it is with mixed feelings that I start a 30-day online course called Get Ready For Love, which promises to 'revolutionise' my love life. The very idea makes me cringe, but I've heard nothing but good things about the women behind it, life coach Selina Barker and dating coach Vicki Pavitt, who run Project Love, an organisation that helps women create lives, careers and relationships they love through one-to-one coaching and online courses.

Project Love was created after Selina overcame her own relationship problems. For years she was meeting men but not the right ones. The course is a reflection of what she did, with Vicki's help, to change that situation. They promise there is no talk of rules to follow to Get The Guy. Instead there are exercises that help you understand what's holding you back from having more love in your life, then tips on what to do about that. What could I lose?

I log on to the site to find that each day will bring a different lesson – comprising audio from Vicki and Selina along with a workbook to fill out. There is also a private Facebook group where you can share your thoughts with other women doing the course.

Lesson One starts by asking how you would like to feel about 'love, life and YOU'. I write a shopping list: alive, vibrant, sexy, energetic, powerful, open, strong, honest, inspired and confident. The next question asks when you last felt that way – for me, it was during a trip to the west coast of America a few years ago. I always feel more alive when I'm travelling. They suggest finding a photo

that encapsulates this feeling, but I'm terrible at storing pictures and can't find one.

Lesson Two asks me to write the history of my love life, which is a bit depressing. I sit in a coffee shop and write about my 20s when I thought I was too fat, ugly and ginger for men to like me, but then ran a mile from the few who did show interest. The truth was that relationships terrified me and, deep down, I did not think I was good enough to be loved.

In recent years, with the help of therapy, these feelings of being unlovable have lessened and I've since met some lovely men and had great sex. However, now I'm 40, the men I meet want to settle down but I never do. I've always kept one foot out, ready for my escape. I don't know if that's because I haven't met the right man yet, or whether I have but I've been too quick to dismiss him.

The next tasks are a mixture of affirmations to repeat – 'I am ready to do whatever it takes to clear the blocks that have been keeping me from finding love' – and exercises aimed at getting me inspired about my love life, including creating a vision board where you cut out pictures to represent what your life will look like when it's full of love. I get a pile of magazines and cut out pictures of flowers, art, green silk underwear and sunny skies. It makes me feel uplifted and inspired... it was only after I'd spent two hours sticking pictures on to my A2 sheet of paper that I realise something is missing – there is no man on it.

I am also asked to think of couples I know and admire. My mind is completely blank. Even though I like the partners my friends have chosen, I wouldn't want to be in any of their relationships. In fact, the very thought of it makes me feel trapped. I realise that this is how I feel about all relationships when we're invited, on day five, to list the beliefs we have about love. I write: 'I think that relationships are a prison and the end of "me". Love is not real; it is a fantasy; it won't last.' I keep going: 'Men don't like women like me. Men cannot be trusted. It will all end in tears.'

I am shocked by how negative my views are – of course I was never going to find love with those beliefs.

For Lesson Six, my task was to refute each of these crazy statements, so I write about the fact that many men have liked me and loved my hair and my body. I write about the male

friends in my life who have been nothing but kind and trustworthy. Then I write: 'I can be in a relationship and keep my freedom and still be "me".'

The next question is: 'How would it feel to be in that relationship?' And then, sitting at my kitchen table, I am overcome with fear and sadness. I don't want to even allow myself to think about what a good, loving relationship would be like because I don't believe it can happen for me.

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In a one-to-one session, near the end of my 30-day course, Vicki explains this is a common feeling. 'People come with different situations and complaints but, usually, underneath it all is a feeling that they are not good enough to deserve love.'

Lessons 12-14 are all about self-love for this reason. One suggests 'wooing yourself' by going out for nice meals and buying flowers, but I explain to Vicki that I do all that already. Plus, for the first time ever, I do quite like my body. So what's going on? What's holding me back?

'How scared are you of a relationship out of 10?' asks Vicki. 'Ten,' I find myself answering. Oh. I say that I have not been hurt for years and keep all men at a distance so I'm never in a situation where that can happen again. Vicki tells me that it's okay to be scared, but that you can still be open to love anyway.

'Does everyone have to end up with someone? Could it just be that I'm not meant for that?' I ask Vicki.

'Maybe you are happier on your own, but you need to make sure that you make that choice out of full-heartedness, not out of fear and defensiveness. So why not prioritise your love life now, go all in and see what happens?' she says.

I ask her if she believes you 'just know' when you find the right person. 'I worked with one woman who realised that a man she'd known for seven years was the one for her – but she'd never seen it,' Vicki explains. 'We are often the worst judge of who is right for us.'

Lesson 15 involves pinpointing the qualities we want in a man, only to be told to cross out anything to do with looks, work, style and location. The qualities we should look for are the deeper ones, such as kindness, intelligence and loyalty.

This makes so much sense – as does everything on this course, which addresses deeper fears of vulnerability, intimacy and rejection, along with giving more practical advice on how to meet the right men.

Lessons 20-30 are about getting out there, dealing with first-date nerves and dating online in a loving way. The advice is down to earth, empathetic but never patronising, and the encouragement of other smart, funny women posting in the Facebook group helped to make me feel less like a weirdo for being stuck when it comes to love. It seems a lot of us struggle with this stuff, and I would recommend this course to anyone who can't understand why they are always single or trapped in bad relationship patterns.

On the Tube home from our appointment, I think about a man already in my life who has the qualities I'm looking for – namely kindness, intelligence and humour. Is he the one and I just haven't allowed him in?

But as the Sufi poet Rumi wrote: 'Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.'

In my case, that takes longer than 30 days.

5 ways to get ready for love

By Project Love founders Vicki Pavitt and Selina Barker

1 Clear the blocks to love

To do this you have to turn inwards and take a look at what limiting and negative beliefs you have about yourself and what it takes to love and be loved. And, one by one, challenge them. Find examples where the opposite is true. For example, if you've decided that people find women like you too intimidating, then find examples of women who are like you and in happy, loving relationships. Use them as a reminder that there are great people out there that love women like you. And then move on to dissolve your next negative belief. With each block you challenge and remove, you'll feel a sense of liberation and empowerment.

2 Date yourself

The most important foundation to finding love and making it last is self-love, so taking the time to cultivate a close and loving relationship with yourself is essential. One of our favourite self-love exercises is to take yourself on a date. By doing something special for yourself – something you'd only normally do with someone else – you're giving yourself the love and attention you'd normally only give to others. It can be an absolute game-changer when it comes to your love life. We've had clients do everything from taking themselves out to brunch at their favourite cafe with

a good book to getting dressed up and going on a solo date to the theatre.

3 Turn on your 'green light'

When you're ready to meet someone new, you need to let the world know that you're available. The way we communicate with those around us is primarily through our body language, so make sure it's welcoming the world in, rather than telling it to keep away. Slow down as you walk, relax your body, take your headphones off, hold your head up and smile at the world. Then see who smiles back.

4 Explore different ways to meet people

You might meet them online, by swiping right, through friends that set you up on a date or maybe out doing something fun where you get to meet people. So try it all: sign up to a dating site or app, tell your friends that you want to be set up on dates, and get out and do fun things that involve meeting new people at the same time.

5 Channel positive vibes

Be the energy you want to attract. If you want someone fun and outgoing, then start channelling this energy, from the minute you start writing your profile through to firing off messages to potential dates. Play around with your own dating ritual and, most importantly, enjoy yourself.

Want to get more love in your life? Project Love is offering a £20 discount for Red readers. Visit loveprojectlove.com/get-ready-for-love and use the code REDLOVE