When a guy comes along who seems to think about you every minute, who tells you he’d do anything for you, who’s there for you 24-7—why wouldn’t you get totally swept up? This is what love feels like, you think, and let your heart take the lead. If those warm, fuzzy feelings continue, it can develop into something bigger and better than you ever imagined! But other times, it can turn into something that really isn’t love at all. It starts small: constant phone calls or texts checking up on you. Dirty looks when you’re talking to a guy friend. Offhand remarks that put you down—like, “For a smart girl, you sure act like a dumb-ass.” It feels weird, but he tells you he’s just overprotective or joking around. Or it’s not you he doesn’t trust but other people, so you start to distance yourself from your friends, even your family, to make him happy.

You might see other people in your life dealing with the same thing and think that’s just how love is. Your guy might not even realize how toxic this kind of behavior is. Problem is, the more it continues, the more hurtful it can become. Little by little, you lose yourself as you question how the love that was so great in the beginning could turn into something so ugly. The good news: There is someone out there ready to give you real love, the kind built on trust, kindness, and respect. Read on to find out what a solid relationship does (and doesn’t) look like and how to find one that doesn’t just make you feel good—it actually is good for you.

“...I thought love meant making your relationship work, no matter what.”
—Emily, 22

Love is the most amazing, delicious, warm . . . confusing, overwhelming, complicated feeling. But if you’re not sure what real love is supposed to be, you might be getting a dangerous substitute.

BY HOLLY EAGLESON

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When Stephen* and I met at homecoming, we exchanged numbers and started dating a week later—I fell for him instantly! He’d sweetly send me good morning texts and call me to wish me good night, and he had such a great sense of humor. A week later, though, he began pushing me in the halls. At first, it was playful, kind of like a nudge, but slowly he became more forceful, and one time he even pushed me into the locker—hard! I knew it wasn’t normal, but I didn’t know how to react. I told myself he must know more about another relationships, because he’d gone out with more people. And the way he’d come up and put his arms around me in the hall made me feel so good, I just brushed off the bad stuff. But by October, things got worse. He was doing stuff like kicking me in the shins under the table in study hall. When my mom asked about my bruises, I told her it happened during cheerleading. I was afraid to speak up, because I knew she’d make me break up with him. He also started pressuring me to sext him. I knew it was wrong, but that we could get away with it, but it was so easy for him to persuade me to do things. He’d say, “Do it, or I’ll break up with you.” He even threatened to tell people about sexual things I’d done with him, so I didn’t answer right away, he assumed I was doing something I shouldn’t be doing. He got angry and demanded that I had to do it to him. We both had BlackBerrys, so he could see when I received each BBM. If I didn’t answer right away, he assumed I was doing something I “shouldn’t be.” He interrogated me about Facebook, too. Who was that guy you added? Why did he post on your wall? And he’d threaten that if I didn’t delete whoever it was, we’d be done. Sometimes our fights got really heated and he would shove me. I made excuses, telling myself it was the first and last time he’d do anything like that to me. I thought I could somehow get things back to how great they were before, and he’d stop making me feel like I was being replaced so easily, yet I was relieved too. I was a person who makes me happy first, I don’t want to ever feel like I’m losing myself in someone else’s issues.

The final straw came when I wanted to hang out with my BFF for her birthday, but he didn’t want to spend any time apart from him. When I told him I needed to do my own thing, he totally lost it, calling me a whore. Then he threatened to kill himself. I tried to talk him down, but he said, “Don’t underestimate me. If I do it, I’ll find a way to take you with me.” Then it hit me: This guy really might kill me. I was crying so hard when my mom walked in and saw me. She grabbed the phone, and said, “What are you doing to my daughter?” He started screaming at her. That was it for me! I told him I was going to break up with him because, that’s what I thought you should do if you’re in love. But when he saw I’d hit him, I realized how twisted things had become. I broke it off that day—it felt like the weight of the world was lifted off my shoulders. After a week, I saw that Taylor* was telling another girl he loved her on her Facebook wall, just like he had with me. It hurt to know I could be replaced so easily, yet I was relieved too. Not that I would choose someone who makes me happy first, but I don’t want to ever feel like I’m losing myself in someone else’s issues.

When I first met Luke* I was a freshman in college and wasn’t looking for a boyfriend, but when my friends introduced us, it felt almost too good to be true. He’d talk to us at the beach, and shopping, and was so affectionate in public. We even met one another’s families and soon he told me he loved me. But after a few weeks, his attention went from sweet and romantic to suffocating. We were in constant texting, texting at least 100 times a day. We both had BlackBerrys, so he could see when I received each BBM. If I didn’t answer right away, he assumed I was doing something I “shouldn’t be.” He interrogated me about Facebook, too. Who was that guy you added? Why did he post on your wall? And he’d threaten that if I didn’t delete whoever it was, we’d be done. Sometimes our fights got really heated and he would shove me. I made excuses, telling myself it was the first and last time he’d do anything like that to me. I thought I could somehow get things back to how great they were before, and he’d stop making me feel like I was being replaced so easily, yet I was relieved too. I was a person who makes me happy first, I don’t want to ever feel like I’m losing myself in someone else’s issues.

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