



## How to Handle a Crush (Honestly)

Sure, it feels good when that cute dad at drop-off smiles at you. But if you're putting on lip gloss before you get out of the car, it's time to come clean.

by **DAPHNE DE MARNEFFE, Ph.D.**

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**A SPARK** of attraction between two people is one of the great pleasures of life. But when you have a long-term partner and that spark is between you and someone else, things can get tricky.

Being able to deal in a healthy way with the attractive people who cross your path is an important skill for couples. People usually manage through a mental balancing act—letting themselves feel a little, yet not too much. But the years of early parenthood can be challenging. Postbaby, many of us don't feel at our most attractive. Marriages can feel more functional than romantic, and we don't always have time to nourish our own friendships or hobbies. Even when we try to open up with our partner, missed cues or rejected advances can shut us down.

When you least expect it, someone else might catch your eye, and suddenly you wake up and remember how you used to feel. Before you know it, daydreams start wafting through your mind, and you wonder whether you're in the grips of a crush. Perhaps you're spending time imagining the witty conversation that you might strike up with your son's soccer coach, or you're giving a lot more thought to what you'll wear on a day when you know you'll be meeting up with a certain colleague.

Most crushes are harmless and relatively fleeting. And there can even be some benefits. Here are three:

● **A CRUSH LETS YOU SEE YOURSELF IN A NEW WAY.** Life can sometimes feel like endless logistics and just putting one foot in front of the other. We're focused on our kids' moods, sleep schedules, screen time, schoolwork, and the rest. Having a crush helps us see ourselves in a new, more attractive, and more interesting light. That added sense of vitality can pervade every part of life, even trips to the grocery store.

● **A CRUSH CAN ADD SPICE TO YOUR PRIMARY RELATIONSHIP.** One woman said to me in her therapy session, "You'd think that having a crush would make me feel guilty. But I actually think it makes me like all men better, including my husband!" Her openness to the charms of men was expanded, as was her own feeling of desirability. Both helped her become more amorous at home.

● **FEELING ENERGIZED CAN JUMP-START NEW POSSIBILITIES.** Okay, so maybe you began going to yoga because of the cute teacher or got involved with a political cause because your charismatic neighbor was organizing it. But being open to people and new experiences is what ultimately brings us a sense of purpose and joy. Romantic feelings can expand your vision of what's possible and can get you out of a rut you didn't even know you were in.

### Consider if it's gone too far

Of course, a crush isn't always harmless, and you may be playing with fire. Here are some ways to check yourself:

● **KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A HARMLESS AND A HARMFUL CRUSH.**

The crucial distinction is whether your thoughts and feelings are getting more intense. Are you taking a momentary feeling and weaving a story about it? Are you starting to compare your real relationship with an idealized romance? One problem for people is that they think they're in control and then discover too late that their alternative fantasy relationship is sucking up vast amounts of attention and energy. Sometimes people realize they're feeling needy or empty, and don't want to give up their crush. The desire to



feel appreciated is too strong, the impulse to resist the daydreams too weak. They begin to hide from themselves that they are making subtle choices that intensify their feelings, and they may even begin telling white lies or shading the truth.

● **TRY TO BE BRUTALLY HONEST WITH YOURSELF.** Is asking that handsome stay-at-home dad out for a coffee really necessary to help make him feel a part of the community?

Is complimenting your fitness instructor's appearance a bit over the line? Is a thank-you dinner for the consultant who helped advocate for you at work truly called for? Sometimes it's best to err on the side of caution and to find a friendly but less "out there" way to compliment or thank someone.

● **TALK TO YOUR PARTNER ABOUT IT.** This may sound awkward, but it's one of the most effective ways to regain your balance. Of course, no one wants to hear that his partner has a crush on someone else. Telling your partner may seem like overkill ("If it means nothing, why bother him about it?"), and secretly, you may be reluctant to pour cold water on your infatuation. That's all the more reason to talk honestly. It prioritizes protecting your relationship, and it can even be bonding. The sooner the conversation happens, the easier it is.

"I'm really embarrassed to admit this," said Tina in a therapy session with her husband, James, "and I wouldn't

want to hear something like this from you. But I realize I've developed a crush on Dan." Dan was their contractor, and he was in the middle of a small building project at their house. James felt hurt, angry, and threatened, and asked some pointed questions: "Have you told him? Have you touched him at all?" Tina said no, but she felt intensely ashamed and worried about her husband's reaction.

In the course of the difficult conversations that followed, I said to both of them, "I know this is really hard, but I'm proud of you for talking about it. Tina, confiding in James is a sign of your trust in him and respect for the relationship. James, it's very loving of you to listen without blowing up or shutting down." Tina's most important message was that she was sorry she hadn't protected their relationship better. It reassured James about how much she valued him.

If you are the one being told about your partner's crush, you should feel free to voice your hurt, fear, or anger. But try to steer clear of shaming your partner with blanket criticism or judgments about his character. Long-term relationships have many challenges, and it's how you face them together that determines how well you survive. After the painful initial conversations, Tina and James turned their attention to their mutual longing for more romance between them, and they committed to spending more quality time together.

For couples busy with kids, staying romantically and sexually engaged with each other can be a challenge. And it doesn't have to preclude the occasional crush. What's key is that when you feel the pull of someone other than your partner, you notice and appreciate, rather than intensify and pursue. If you can mentally enjoy the electricity of everyday encounters while still maintaining firm boundaries, it can help keep excitement alive at home. ✖



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