

Not long ago, the syndicated "Dear Abby" advice column featured a question from "Feeling Miserable," an individual in the throes of second-guessing a decision not to date a plum of a potential partner she had recently met. Describing him as "the most amazing guy," Feeling Miserable noted, "[H]e's in grad school, has a job, his own home, loves music, movies and good food—he can even cook."

So why dump him? The problem arose when the fellow disclosed that he has genital herpes, a condition his reluctant paramour found too daunting to manage. Feeling guilty for rejecting him, the writer asked Abby if she was hasty or just plain wrong for doing so.

The advice maven's response essentially (and reasonably) said there's no reason that "Feeling Miserable" should be guilty about the decision, and there's nothing wrong with recognizing and respecting her comfort level. In sharp disagreement with what the stymied suitor said when discussing his HSV diagnosis, Abby insisted that it's incorrect to characterize herpes as "no big deal" and referred readers to [ASHA](#) for more information.

Other than suggesting that genital herpes is more problematic than it seems to be for the tens of millions of Americans who have it (the majority of whom don't even know!), Abby's response wasn't terrible. On a subtle level, though, she did miss an opportunity to acknowledge that countless discordant couples (where one partner has genital HSV and the other does not) do have long, happy, healthy relationships, and there are effective risk reduction strategies that go a long way to protecting the partner who doesn't have herpes.

Betsy B., a nurse who moderates ASHA's Herpes Message Boards (and who has been disheartened more than once at the HSV information dispensed by advice columnists), offered this response to Abby:

*"Was this gal justified in her ending the relationship with this man with genital herpes? Well of course she is! Everyone has a right to their own opinions and I fully support that even when the decision is that you can't handle the idea of herpes, so you don't want to pursue a relationship with someone who has the virus. Kudos to the man for being up front and honest. Not sure he knows as much about his herpes as he should, but at least he's honest with partners. I just hope that the gal did her homework first and didn't give in to a knee-jerk reaction to hearing that her man had genital herpes. Herpes is incredibly common, but it doesn't shed all the time (which Abby contends). Precautions really do work to help reduce transmission too, and you can get a partner's risk down pretty darn low. If you just run from someone to whom you're attracted simply because you heard 'herpes,' you owe it to yourself to better educate yourself on this incredibly common infection. With 1 out of every 2-3 adults having oral herpes and 1 out of every 4 having genital herpes, it's not something most of us get thru life without. Oh, and, to Feeling Miserable: A man who is in grad school and cooks??? Heck, herpes couldn't keep me away from a guy like that!"*

Betsy is right—Abby missed an opportunity. Perhaps a response similar to what fellow advice columnist, Carolyn Hax, wrote regarding STD testing would have been more appropriate. When a reader wrote about her boyfriend's defensive stance on the subject of STD testing, Hax offered the following:

"I'd like to make a general plea to remove the 'accusation' element from sexual health conversations. Here's what it takes to get infected with something: sex, once, with a non-virgin (or, heck, sex with a boundary-pushing virgin). Protection helps but isn't perfect. So can we please shake hands that this is about positive/negative, not dirty/clean?"

Now there's some good advice.