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Don't blush; it's just a crush

Sweet on someone who's not your sweetie? Do tell.

By Katy Barron

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Bask in the romance! Scorn the commercialism! Or, wallow in the solitude. Whatever your reaction, today is Valentine's Day, and it's not going away.

There was a time, in most of our lives, when this frivolous holiday could be the day we learned we had a secret admirer. But sometime between junior high and the real world, Valentine's Day got heavy — representing love, consumerism and loneliness. The crush was forgotten . . . but not gone.

Even as we grow up and settle down, we don't stop having the kinds of crushes normally reserved for the pre-teen set. Crushes are time-honored, even among people who are married or in committed relationships, says psychologist James Houran, a consultant for online dating site True.com. As long as a crush remains safely in the realm of fantasy, there's no danger of divorce papers or restraining orders. It's only when you have a realistic chance of following up on the crush and keeping it from your significant other that you risk straying into the danger zone, Houran says.

The safest route is to confess your crushes to your true love. "When it's out in the open, it helps you. If you joke about it, it lets them know there is no threat," Houran explains.

So in the spirit of this fluffy holiday, consider celebrating the equally fluffy crush. It's the perfect conversation piece for your Valentine's dinner. To get you started, we've outlined some of the most common varieties and asked Houran to help demystify them:

The celebrity crush

As seen in: Your girlfriend, who develops a keen interest in Major League Baseball whenever Johnny Damon is up to bat for the Boston Red Sox.

Doctor says: This type of crush is all about superficial attraction, a basic biological drive. But don't take it too literally. If your husband has a crush on Salma Hayek and you're a fair-skinned blonde, it doesn't mean you're not his type. It's natural to seek variety in life. 'You shouldn't be offended,' psychologist James Houran says.

The talent crush

As seen in: Your boyfriend, who brings up your co-worker's water-skiing skills every time her name is mentioned.

Doctor says: It's common to take notice when faced with someone who has a talent or ability we admire or wish we had. It's best to make light of it. Humor can be an effective way of broaching deeper issues.

The fictional character crush

As seen in: Your wife, who is smitten with 'Spider-Man's' sweet but nerdy Peter Parker.

Doctor says: Women are much more forgiving about looks than men. Crushes like this are telling of other characteristics they look for in a mate. Consider it a learning opportunity. It's a glimpse into what traits our minds use to filter prospects for us.

The foreign accent crush

As seen in: Your best friend, who makes up trivial tax questions just to hear her Spanish accountant speak.

Doctor says: Accents can trigger transference, as they're often associated with fictional characters who are rich, sexy and powerful. This, in turn, could lead to a romantic crush. Gently remind your friend that Antonio Banderas does not prepare her tax returns.

The man crush

As seen in: Your husband, who gushes about his new pickup basketball acquaintance, saying things such as: 'He's such a cool guy. We should invite him to dinner sometime.'

Doctor says: Strong admiration for other men usually leads to jealousy, unless that man could be a mentor. Just be careful when you tease your husband about his new best friend. 'Men are frail creatures. We tend to worry about our feelings. When we feel admiration it makes us challenge our sexual identity,' Houran says.

The couple crush

As seen in: A singleton or another couple's envious crush on a fun-loving pair of friends.

Doctor says: The grass is always greener. Still, these crushes can be educational. Analyze what it is about the couple you admire so you can learn what's missing from your own relationships.

They're celebrities, and they're so 'crushable'

In politics:

1. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger
2. The Bush twins
3. Former U.S. Sen. John Edwards

Musicians:

1. Usher
2. Eminem
3. Nick Lachey

Cartoon

characters:

1. Aladdin
2. SpongeBob Square Pants
3. Bart Simpson

Talk show hosts:

1. Conan O'Brien
2. Oprah Winfrey
3. Ellen DeGeneres

Actors:

1. Orlando Bloom
2. Brad Pitt
3. Jesse McCartney

Actresses:

1. Angelina Jolie
2. Halle Berry
3. Lindsay Lohan