How Today’s Strong Women Can Find Love and Happiness Without Settling

The Alpha Woman Meets Her Match

Sonya Rhodes, PhD
with Susan Schneider
THE ALPHA WOMAN MEETS HER MATCH
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WILLIAM MORROW
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
To Bob
—S.R.

To my daughter, India
—S.S.
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THE ALPHA WOMAN MEETS HER MATCH
IN THE YEARS I’VE spent building a thriving private practice as an individual and couples therapist, I’ve ridden the waves of the women’s movement and the sexual revolution. But one day, as a client in her early thirties sat back with a sigh and said, “I guess I’m just your typical strong, overachieving woman with boy problems,” I realized that I was seeing something distinctly new. Over the last decade or so, my practice has been crowded with women just like her: self-confident, accomplished, sexual—but unhappy and frustrated by their lack of success in relationships. These are the new Alpha women.

There’s never been a better time to be an Alpha woman. She’s on the rise in her education and in the professions. She’s self-reliant, and she can explore her sexuality and make her own life choices. But many fear that marriage or a long-term relationship will somehow elude them.

In our society loud voices complain about women being too strong and too threatening and too sexual. The takeaway message? That women
The dire predictions for women are way overinflated, and those who sound the alarms have their own agenda. Sometimes women themselves join the chorus of alarmists. A strong undercurrent of worry surfaces when they hear about a friend or colleague’s divorce. One recently divorced woman told me that she could always count on these two questions: Had she worked too much? Was she a higher earner than her husband? These are women’s secret fears. If a marriage breaks up, it has to be the woman’s fault, right? And even our supposed allies may surprise us: that same woman who was interrogated by her friends was asked by a major women’s magazine to write an essay about how her career ruined her marriage!
One woman in a focus group said, “I feel like an evolved person. I have a great career and great friends. I feel really strong in every part of my life except in relationships.” I’ve heard many Alpha women express the fear that they won’t find someone to love and to marry. Maybe they are too threatening to men, they say. Perhaps they should tone themselves down, they fret. I say, absolutely not. That is a big mistake.

Whenever I hear women say these things, I get angry—not at the women, of course, but at a culture that thrives on making dire predictions about the failed loves and lives of assertive, sexual Alpha women. It’s simply ridiculous. For you, finding a mate is challenging, but the pool is large and your energy is strong.

What today’s Alphas can do is be more careful about their choices. As it is, the women I treat are confident and overwhelmed, successful and self-doubting, sassy and diffident. They’ve been bruised by their experiences with men. The woman in the focus group added that she felt emotionally beaten up when a man she was seeing lost interest just as their relationship was on the verge of deepening. “I felt strong and good,” she says. “I was ready to take the plunge. But after that I felt I couldn’t trust my judgment anymore.”

With egos shaken by unsuccessful relationships, women often feel uncharacteristically vulnerable and undone. When they walk into my office, they are seeking a mentor to guide them through the winding maze of dating, so that they can avoid the dead ends and arrive at the goal of finding someone with whom they can share their life. And I never encourage women to settle, tone themselves down, or blame themselves exclusively for problems in a relationship. None of these is an option. Never!

Images of those women paraded across my mind and their stories begged to be written about. Their dilemma is a telling part of today’s zeitgeist. The Alpha Woman Meets Her Match is a boots-on-the-ground book that conveys everything I teach my patients and also includes
THE ALPHA WOMAN MEETS HER MATCH

the thoughts that I normally choose to keep to myself. The book is sourced from my clients’ histories, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and from my deep layers of experience. You, the reader, will view clinical vignettes taken from my practice (composites of clients disguised to protect their identity). Every case study has a conclusion that you can apply to your own life. The stories will resonate with your experiences and offer plenty of insights and solutions for making the right choices in your personal life—without having to settle or compromise the person you are or wish to become.

TAKE BACK YOUR ALPHA

Ballbuster. Bitch. Bossy. Negativity swirls around assertive women. I know that the word Alpha paired with woman comes with a lot of baggage. At first I was advised to find a less controversial term than Alpha woman. But I decided to stick with it precisely because it has negative connotations. I do not think we should dumb down women’s power and status by avoiding the Alpha in her. I think we should call it like it is. We’re not doing a service, either to women or men, if we search for terms that don’t ruffle feathers. The fact is there is a new gender-role reality, and it is retro to parse terms or, God forbid, threaten men’s egos. I will never advise women to bend over backward to boost men’s self-images by playing down their strengths. Those days are over.

Some fascinating research points to an urgent need for social norms to keep up with changing times. One study from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business found that when a woman earns the same or more than her mate, marital troubles often ensue. The wife may decide to work less or even go for a lower-paying job—a prime example of what it means to tone yourself down!—in order to protect the traditional belief that a man must be the family breadwinner. Even more amazing, the wife will often take on more
of the household chores as a way to compensate for her greater earning power, with the aim of being nonthreatening to her husband. The academic term for this is *gender deviation neutralization*. Translation into English: if you dare to deviate from the norm (husband equals breadwinner), then you must somehow, in someway compensate for your abnormal behavior! This is a no-win situation; women should never tailor their behavior to meet social stereotypes. Ultimately, you’ll hurt yourself and your relationship.

Over the last several decades, we’ve seen advances, like better birth-control options, exciting growth in economic opportunities for women, and the evolution of the feminist movement, as well as strong female role models in politics, the media, business, and academia. More women than men graduate from college and graduate school. Increasing numbers of women are enrolled in medical school. In 147 out of 150 of the biggest cities in the United States, unmarried, childless women under thirty earn 8 percent to 15 percent more than their male peers. Women contribute 40 percent of family wages, though they still make eighty cents to the man’s dollar. In 25 percent of couples, women make more money than their husbands. In middle- and working-class families, women have more opportunities for economic and social mobility than men do. As you can see, neither the myth of the male breadwinner nor of the traditional female stands up to reality. We see the proof all around us: if women are successful in the business world and men are successful at home, both of which are clearly true, then the old stereotypes are just empty shells.

As a therapist, I see my clients’ lives as microcosms of changes taking place in the larger society. Social and economic equality allows the expression of a wide range of gender-neutral personality and behavior for both men and women. Being competitive and dominant is not exclusively male any more than being nurturing and caring is...
exclusively female. Michael Kimmel, a sociologist who specializes in gender-role behavior, puts it this way: “Gender difference is the product of gender inequality, not the other way around.”

Most striking to me is that as women have shaken off the constraints of old gender roles and become freer to pursue their sexuality and careers and personal fulfillment, new sets of problems have arisen. Everywhere I go—from the office to dinner parties—women of all ages relate to the Alpha identity and want relationship advice.

ALPHA WOMAN, BETA WOMAN

Today’s Alpha woman is everywhere. In dress and style, the Alpha is the familiar, highly visible prototype; she wouldn’t be caught dead in a 1980s power suit with padded shoulders that imitated male business attire. She is unabashedly sexy as well as career oriented. Her towering four-inch stilettos march off to the office, the store, the judge’s chambers, and her lacquered-red soles send a “follow me” signal, straight to the bedroom.

She’s the MD who manages a clinic like a well-oiled machine, or the self-confident Web editor who envisions herself running the company with her combination of tech skills and business savvy. She’s the chic, assertive saleswoman who convinces you to buy an outfit you aren’t sure you actually need. If she’s young and feeling her way as an Alpha female, she may proudly sign her texts HBIC (head bitch in charge—an acronym I heard recently from a seventeen-year-old client of mine headed to the Ivy League, who could be the poster child for the new generation).

As I’ve studied and worked with women, I’ve discovered that our Beta sisters sometimes feel diminished or threatened by the Alpha prototype—but there is really no cause for this. I am not talking about good, bad, or better people; I am saying that all Alphas and Betas—in
other words, all of us—are on a personality continuum, and most of us are a mix, with greater or lesser degrees of both.

Betas have less of a need for control, and they may have less interest in a leadership position than an Alpha would. In a group of women, the Alpha is the one who exerts power and influence through her ability to take charge of the conversation, while the Beta will tend to listen and support. In the extremes of both, an Alpha may be too confrontational; a Beta may be too passive. Fortunately, people are malleable, and you can modify some of your behavior for a better balance.

Can you be an Alpha if you’re not a big earner or powerful out in the working world? Of course! Lily, a physician and a mother of two, works between fifteen and twenty hours a week to her husband’s seventy hours plus. She puts it this way: “I’m an Alpha in disguise. I don’t wear my Alpha on my sleeve.”

Like Lily, many strong Betas carve out a niche for themselves within a relationship; they may control the finances or decisions about the children, for example. “I’m a little afraid of direct confrontation,” Lily says. “I will tend to avoid it. I look like I’m easygoing and amenable and I don’t always show my forceful side, but I do like to get my way.” Alpha? Beta? It isn’t always either/or, and Alpha is not better than Beta. Far more important is the degree of each that you have in your personality, and I will show you how that works in chapter 2, where you’ll plot your profile on the Alpha/Beta spectrum. You may be a Beta, with anywhere from a handful to a big helping of Alpha, or an Alpha with strong to middling Beta tendencies, or an extreme Alpha, with practically no Beta at all. You may be pretty much a hybrid, with equal amounts of both. I’m betting that you’ve got some Alpha no matter who you are.

Funny, strong, independent, and comfortable in her own skin, the Alpha believes in herself—but has some blind spots. She assumes that as an Alpha female she should be partnered with an Alpha male.
But clinical experience has shown me that this partnership is at the greatest risk for divorce, because two Alphas will tend to compete for power and dominance. I will show Alpha women how they can learn to envision and accept themselves as the Alpha in a relationship with a Beta man, who might just make the best fit.

THE NEW “CATCH”

The Beta man is out there in the culture, in the media, and in the sociologists’ studies and statistics—and he’s a great catch. He might be that dad pushing a stroller down the street, or the dad who is the Pied Piper of the playground set, or the father who knows the politics of the kids’ PTA far better than his working wife does. A *New Yorker* magazine cartoon features two Old West–style gunslinger hombres with their infants in BabyBjörns standing in a bar negotiating for a play date. A new ad campaign for shaving cream suggests men “man up,” a playful poke both at traditional notions of manhood and at today’s softer guy.

Today’s Beta guy is transformed and more complicated than the sensitive guy from the eighties and nineties. *Real Men Don’t Eat Quiche*, a bestselling book in the eighties, satirized the sensitive man who was trying very, very hard to be acceptable to feminists. We’ve come further by now! The Beta man is no longer the guy assumed to be gay if he likes yoga, dresses well, or is a vegan. His ego doesn’t depend on scoring macho points. He is dependable, responsible, and supportive.

Many Alpha women have a sexual Achilles’ heel: openly sexual as they are, they still expect the man to take the lead in bed, which gets in the way of their falling for the tender lover, the Beta male. I call it the *Fifty Shades of Grey* syndrome, based on the series that found such a willing audience among Alpha dynamos who feel some sneaky retro
shame about their sexual appetites. An Alpha who is secretly embarrassed by her intense sexual fantasies may feign passivity in order for the man to take the lead, so she can be taken. Her shame, which is not obvious to her, is paradoxical, contradicting everything about this alluring, sexy, spunky woman.

I will show how Beta males are—or can be—the best lovers because they want you to get off, too. With men, we tend to categorize Alphas as sexy, Betas as weak. Forget that! I will show you how to stop compartmentalizing and find the more complex man you’re really looking for.

But what do women and men really feel about the nonmacho male? After I’d begun thinking about Alpha female–Beta male partnerships, I mentioned to an Alpha friend of mine that her husband was a great Beta guy. Although I meant it as a compliment—her husband is a nurturing family man and a supercreative graphic designer who works on a vintage letterpress machine in his studio—I could tell from her body language that she was a little insulted. It made me realize just how loaded these terms are.

The old hierarchy of Alpha and Beta, in which the highest-ranking Alpha males run the show, isn’t operative anymore. Not every man is an Alpha player nor an Omega loser desultorily plucking his guitar on an old futon in his mom’s basement. Alpha players are alive and well—and enabled by technology (their best friend!)—and so are hopeless wimps and slackers. But most of the men I see—hailing everywhere from Wall Street to the suburbs—do seek equal, balanced relationships: a 2010 Pew poll found that 62 percent of both men and women believe that the best marriage depends on a true partnership—in other words, that ever-desirable, ever-elusive state of nirvana we call equality. Of course, making that a reality is still a huge challenge in spite of all the changes.

Alpha women like to lead, and Beta guys do not mind following.
But am I advocating inequality? A good Alpha woman–Beta man partnership can benefit both partners if they respect each other. If the Beta guy knows how and when to push back, the power balance can skew in the direction of the Alpha woman without harm being done to the relationship. When I see successful marriages like a rabbi wife wedded to a stay-at-home dad who happily watches the couple’s four children, an attorney wife whose bike-mad husband runs a suburban bicycle shop, or the male elementary-school teacher married to the female physician, I’m heartened. These couples have found their bliss.

A MODERN VISION OF LIFE

I do not believe that the start of the era of the Alpha woman means the end of men. The new era isn’t about women being up and men being down. Alpha isn’t better; nor is Beta. The Alphas and the Betas of the world can balance each other out, smooth the rough edges. Alphas need some Beta and Betas need some Alpha to make them well rounded and equipped to succeed in the twenty-first century. You will see how this works in relationships.

I will help you know who you are and find a relationship that’s the best fit. I will explain a great therapist’s tool—the concept of positive complementarity, which is the way couples balance and complement each other’s strengths and weaknesses—in order to build a relationship with a strong, sustainable structure. I will discuss how sharing a vision of life, which involves the concept of partnering, is probably the greatest predictor of a successful marriage. The new gender roles require new paradigms for understanding the politics and dynamics of relationships. As gender roles have become fluid, previously rock-solid characteristics for men and women have liquefied. This is totally for the good of all.

These are confusing times. The Alpha woman–Beta man partner-
ship goes against cultural traditions that we’ve all been taught. And so much else is going against tradition that sociologists’ and psychologists’ heads are spinning: the unique-to-our-times decision of many women to marry later or not to marry at all; prolonged bachelorhood; and single motherhood, either by choice or by divorce. It’s quite a challenge!

GETTING TO “AHA”

Unsurprisingly, when a client comes to my office for the first time, she is distressed over a bad breakup or by a relationship that just won’t take. She is feeling battered and frustrated by her experiences with men, and she is on the cusp of desperation. I spend our initial sessions getting to know her intimately. I encourage her to share the narrative of her life: her successes and disappointments, her longings and desires, her vision of her future, her values, and her choices and behavior in relationships. I get a clear picture of the man or men she dates and how she goes about her dating life. Because I conceive of therapy as an interactive partnership, we work together to identify patterns in her love life. By the third or fourth session, I usually have an idea of what is getting in the way of her being more successful in the dating world.

Since my clients are usually quite empowered in most arenas of their lives, I focus on what prevents them from experiencing the same kind of fulfillment in relationships. I never shy away from being a client’s advocate, guide, and confidante. I am very direct, but always in a caring context.

I have suffered along with many gutsy women clients as they face the deeply personal challenges that go into making an eleventh-hour decision about single motherhood. I will advise younger women on how to avoid getting backed into a corner—that is, how to know when to give up on the good-time guy and start focusing on someone
who wants what you want. Some Alpha women who start seeking a serious relationship in their thirties may find that men their own age resist being pressured into making a commitment and will opt to date younger women. If you’re at that place, I will walk you through your options as well as how to reinvent yourself with an eye toward a great future. (Trust me. You can definitely do it.)

In my comfortable office, men and women have the rare chance to look into their hearts. I will show just how much, for better or for worse, online dating and tech devices have revolutionized every aspect of the age-old search for sex, love, and meaningful relationships. I will come down squarely in the position of yes, it’s convenient and helpful, but no, you are not just an algorithm.

I spend my days happily analyzing relationship patterns and helping people reexamine their expectations and rebalance their most intimate connections. It’s an ongoing drama in which men and women are now trading the leading roles. Every strong, independent woman I work with wants a connection with a flexible, adaptable partner—someone who will love, value, and respect her. I stay with her as she rides the wild dating roller coaster and help her put on the brakes in the right place. I work with men who are struggling with a new economic reality and definitions of manhood. As I share the fascinating and highly relatable stories that I hear from my clients, I am dead certain that you will experience one aha moment after another.

My office provides a wide-open window into the future of relationships in our society. The view from here—complicated, challenging, and exciting—gives me reason to think that men and women, whose ideals include equality based on new definitions of gender roles, can work toward and practice their ideals. It makes me optimistic about the future. I want to share my optimism and expertise with you, Alpha and Beta, single and married or divorced, with children or not.