

## What's really wrong with 'nice guys'

One thing you learn quickly in the dating advice business is that some topics are more or less evergreen. And with the recent explosion on [social media](#), it's a good time to talk about one of my favorite topics: [Nice Guys](#). After all, what better way to ring in a new year than by looking at some old issues?

But first, some context:

Over the last week or so, I had several people forward me links to [this comment from MIT Professor Scott Aaronson's blog](#) about growing up as a nerd terrified of women and trying to be a Nice Guy and how this meant that nerds couldn't be keeping women out of [STEM](#) fields. As is the nature of the [Internet](#), this immediately was an opportunity to comment on the topic. Many people had some interesting and thought-provoking comments to share; Laurie Penny focused on the [tricky topics of intersectionality and privilege](#), while Amanda Marcotte discussed [the problematic subtext of his complaints](#). Of course, this too becomes its own invitation to comment as [Scott Alexander rode to Professor Aaronson's defense](#), criticizing Penny and Marcotte.

I want to talk about some of the underlying attitudes at play here regarding nerds, entitlement and dating. Aaronson's complaints are excellent examples of what I hear from [nerds](#) and self-described Nice Guys all the time. Critically, they're held forth as reasons why Nice Guys deserve a break instead of the opprobrium they receive and why it's unfair for women to treat them with disdain, with a dash of nerd victim culture and privilege for flavor.

The long and short of Aaronson's comment is fairly simple: Nerds are Nice Guys (as opposed to guys who are nice) and they're unfairly maligned by society because the world is cruel and mean and unfair. Aaronson, for example, explains that because he's a nerd, he was at a disadvantage when it came to talking to women. Why? Because he was terrified.

*Here's the thing: I spent my formative years—basically, from the age of 12 until my mid-20s—feeling not 'entitled,' not 'privileged,' but terrified. I was terrified that one of my female classmates would somehow find out that I sexually desired her, and that the instant she did, I would be scorned, laughed at, called a creep and a weirdo, maybe even expelled from school or sent to prison. And furthermore, that the people who did these things to me would somehow be morally right to do them—even if I couldn't understand how.*

This is an incredibly common complaint that I hear from men, especially Nice Guys: [They're scared](#). I've lost track of how many men have told me that they're terrified of making a mistake, of [being called a creeper](#), or—as in Aaronson's example—somehow ending up being thrown in jail because that's how law works.

In fact, they're so terrified that many decide to quit talking to women entirely. Aaronson, however, took his fear to the next level.

*My recurring fantasy, through this period, was to have been born a woman, or a gay man, or best of all, completely asexual, so that I could simply devote my life to math, like my hero Paul Erdős did. Anything, really, other than the curse of having been born a heterosexual male, which for me, meant being consumed by desires that one couldn't act on or even admit without running the risk of becoming an objectifier or a stalker or a harasser or some other creature of the darkness... At one point, I actually*

*begged a psychiatrist to prescribe drugs that would chemically castrate me (I had researched which ones), because a life of mathematical asceticism was the only future that I could imagine for myself.*

## Anxiety is your own worst enemy

While I can sympathize with the emotion—I've had all the same worst-case scenario nightmares when I've approached [women](#) I like—the cold truth is that this anxiety is self-inflicted. The problem isn't in the desire, it's in the belief. At their core, these imagined nightmares are about ego protection. All these over-the-top consequences—the mockery, the social expulsion, even being jailed—are ways our brain protects us from the [fear of rejection](#).

Don't get me wrong. The discomfort and anxiety that Aaronson and so many others feel is very real—our bodies respond to imagined fears the same way they respond to real ones. The heart palpitations, the way your hands start to shake and your vision starts to narrow, these are all the physical symptoms of fear. However, the reason we have these anxieties is because they keep us from attempting what we really fear: getting rejected by someone we're attracted to. These unpleasant fantasies provide convenient and plausible excuses for why the person suffering from them can't and shouldn't approach someone. We dislike the sensation of being afraid and so we come to avoid the situations that might trigger them, literally becoming afraid of being afraid.

Part of what makes it so stressful and torturous to Aaronson and the many others who suffer from this anxiety is that they live in a world of impossibilities. They've bought into the dating binary: You're either good with women or you're not, and there's nothing you can do about this. All of those little fears and anxieties get reinforced by confirmation bias—looking for proof that they're correct for feeling this way. Case in point:

*Of course, I was smart enough to realize that maybe this was silly, maybe I was overanalyzing things. So I scoured the feminist literature for any statement to the effect that my fears were as silly as I hoped they were. But I didn't find any. On the contrary: I found reams of text about how even the most ordinary male/female interactions are filled with 'microaggressions,' and how even the most 'enlightened' males—especially the most 'enlightened' males, in fact—are filled with hidden entitlement and privilege and a propensity to sexual violence that could burst forth at any moment.*

This is similar to what I call the Dr. Google effect—if you're sick and enter your symptoms online, Dr. Google will inevitably tell you that you have cancer. By looking for information without context to interpret that information or being unaware of where to look, you get results that are unhelpful at best and terrifying at worst. Aaronson found information without context—in this case, the writings of Andrea Dworkin and other radical [feminists](#)—and took it as further confirmation that he was a horrible person.

The problem is that he—like many other nerds and Nice Guys—took all the wrong lessons from what he read.

Scott Aaronson is quick to remind us that he's a feminist. He loves him some feminist literature. He reads lots of feminist books and radfem sites! Andrea Dworkin is his favorite author! But at the same time, he states that it's those pesky feminists who made it impossible for him to not fear the womens. Scott Alexander, in his defense of Aaronson, agrees (in between taking swipes at Marcotte's appearance):

*I live in a world where feminists throwing weaponized shame at nerds is an obvious and inescapable part of daily life. Whether we're 'mouth-breathers,' 'pimpled,' 'scrawny,' 'blubbery,' 'sperglord,' 'neckbeard,' 'virgins,' 'living in our parents' basements,' 'man-children,' or whatever the insult du jour is, it's always, always, always a self-identified feminist saying it. Sometimes they say it obliquely, referring to a subgroup like 'bronies' or 'atheists' or 'fedoras' while making sure everyone else in nerddom*

| knows it's about them too.

Those poor nerds, put upon by the vicious feminists! Tricky, tricky feminists, making sex so damn scary and unattainable by nerds! Why, you might think they were jocks or something! Why can't the feminists give nerds a break and recognize that nerds are [innocent](#) and [harmless](#)?

The problem is that Aaronson made the same mistake that many other nerds and Nice Guys have made by misunderstanding the point of what he was reading. Specifically, he wasn't willing or able to step outside of himself and realize that not everything was about him. It's [#notallmen](#) all over again—seeing everything as being about him instead of about what women go through.

You see this repeatedly whenever someone brings up, say, [The Gift of Fear](#) or the essay [Schrödinger's Rapist](#)—there will inevitably be someone complaining that it's unfair to them, that they're not a rapist or murderer and how are they supposed to meet women? Aaronson complains about how seminars about [sexual harassment](#) made things worse:

*You can call that my personal psychological problem if you want, but it was strongly reinforced by everything I picked up from my environment: to take one example, the sexual assault prevention workshops we had to attend regularly as undergrads, with their endless lists of all the forms of human interaction that 'might be' sexual harassment or assault, and their refusal, ever, to specify anything that definitely wouldn't be sexual harassment or assault. I left each of those workshops with enough fresh paranoia and self-hatred to last me through another year.*

In short: “Why do you have to make me feel bad about myself, I'm not a bad guy!”

## It doesn't have to be this way

It's [#notallmen](#) once more, the constant insistence that an exception should be made because reasons. It becomes about making their hurt feelings the center of the debate instead of hey, maybe people shouldn't act this way. But the point of Schrödinger's Rapist and other feminist writings isn't that men are evil [rapists](#) and everything they do is unwelcome, it's that women live in a world where [sex](#) is used against them. It's a [basic benefit of being a man](#)—men don't experience sexual harassment or risk sexual assault the way women do. Despite his protests that being a nerd makes him one of the least [privileged](#) people in society (apparently in all of his feminist reading he never encountered the concept of [intersectionality](#)), being bullied in high-school or reading mean quotes about social misfits on [Tumblr](#) and [Jezebel](#) doesn't equate with hundreds of years of systematic oppression. Being told that, hey, society teaches men to act in a certain way that's incredibly shitty to women (and frankly [to men as well](#)) isn't a referendum about his worth as a man but a call to be better.

So what should he have done instead? Well to start with, he should've read some [Bell Hooks](#) instead of Andrea Dworkin. But more importantly, Nice Guys like Aaronson need to take a step outside themselves and examine their behavior. Take that sexual harassment seminar. Now you've seen behavior that is considered harassing. Are you behaving in that way? No? Cool, then it's not about you, now is it? But hey, let's say you did do something uncomfortable or creepy, now what?

[Well, you could always apologize](#). Recognize that you did something wrong, apologize for it and don't do it again.

But that doesn't work with the Nice Guy outlook.

The problem with Nice Guys—and something that's embedded deep into Aaronson's comment—is the deep-seated belief that they're being “cheated” somehow. In Aaronson's experiences, he'd been doing everything “right,” so why is it that other people are getting rewarded and he isn't?

*All this time, I faced constant reminders that the males who didn't spend months reading and reflecting about feminism and their own shortcomings—even the ones who went to the opposite extreme, who engaged in what you called 'good old-fashioned ass-grabbery'—actually had success that way. The same girls who I was terrified would pepper-spray me and call the police if I looked in their direction often responded to the crudest advances of the most Neanderthal of men by accepting those advances. Yet it was I, the nerd, and not the Neanderthals, who needed to check his privilege and examine his hidden entitlement!*

This is the fallback of many a Nice Guy—the lament [that women love assholes](#), instead of Nice Guys like him. He's been following the rules! He's not playing grab-ass! He's being nice! Shouldn't that count for something?

Well, no. As I've said many times before, [you don't get a cookie for meeting minimum requirements for decent behavior](#). But he's unwilling to consider that maybe the problem is what he is or isn't doing. Aaronson has defined himself as a nerd and therefore the “good guy” by definition. There can't be anything wrong with his behavior. Those other guys—the ones that women are going home with—are “Neanderthals.” The bad boys. And believe me, Aaronson chose that word deliberately; he's saying they're brutish and crude, even bestial. They're cavemen while Aaronson is an astronaut. He's enlightened while they're ignorant. They're bad. He's Nice.

Even when he protests that he doesn't mean to blame women or the Neanderthals for getting the sex that he doesn't, he still can't avoid the dichotomy of “us vs. them” with its implied morality. Sure, it's society's fault—we'll get to that in a second—but he's still equating the men who are getting laid with being beasts and unthinking brutes.

And that's where things fall apart. He doesn't consider that the so-called Neanderthals weren't “breaking the rules” or “playing grab-ass” but flirting with the women they liked. While Aaronson and others were paralyzed by fear, those supposed assholes were actually making approaches. They were out there taking chances and risking getting rejected. That doesn't make them Neanderthals; they're just guys who're choosing to go for what they want instead of letting fear hold them back.

But that doesn't compute to Aaronson or other Nice Guys. They don't dare. Better to find other ways, more enlightened ways, and to constantly complain about the unfairness of it all when it doesn't work.

Part of what makes this so frustrating is that Aaronson gets so close to a moment of understanding and misses it by this much:

*I got older, and after years of hard work, I achieved some success in science, and that success boosted my self-confidence (at least now I had something worth living for), and the newfound confidence, besides making me more attractive, also made me able to (for example) ask a woman out, despite not being totally certain that my doing so would pass muster with a committee of radfems chaired by Andrea Dworkin—a prospect that was previously unthinkable to me.*

I want to drive this home: The thing that changed for him was that he asked a woman out. He matured enough to stop looking at women as The Enemy who were looking for reasons to fuck him over and call him a rapist and just [interact with them as though they were people](#). And yet even looking back on things, knowing he was wrong this entire time—he still can't stop blaming others for the unfairness of his situation. He still blames “society” for teaching a subset of “unprivileged” men not to approach instead of taking responsibility for his own attitudes and beliefs—ones he still holds on to.

In the world of the Nice Guy, it's the [world that's evil and selfish](#) and needs to change.

## And thus we come to the core of the problem with Nice Guys

Nice Guys, for all that they insist that they aren't, are dealing with an over-inflated [sense of entitlement](#). The Nice Guy outlook is about what he's "owed" and how the world needs to change and conform to make his lives better without requiring that he change. Even in his complaints about how feminists made him feel bad for wanting to have sex, he's focused on himself—he wants someone to make him feel better and validate his feelings rather than acknowledging that some behaviors are problematic and people need to try to address them.

Let's go back to Aaronson's complaint that sexual harassment seminars didn't provide him with clear-cut rules on when approaching someone isn't sexual harassment. Of course they couldn't, because the difference between welcome, consensual flirting and harassment is contextual, not binary. What works in some circumstances for some people isn't going to work for everyone or in every circumstance. It's on the individual to learn to adapt and change as needed. But by complaining that he wasn't handed a consistent, universal set of rules is asking people to stop being people and start being social robots and the world doesn't work that way.

I'm going to say this with all sincerity to Aaronson and other nerds and Nice Guys: I'm sorry you were bullied. I'm sorry you may find relationships scary and confusing. I'm sorry you may not have the instinctual social ease that others may have. I've been there, I have done that, and I've got the emotional scars to prove it. I understand that trying to figure out how to get better at dating can be confounding, frustrating and intimidating—that's the whole reason why I created [Dr. Nerdlove](#).

So with that being said: Build a bridge and get the fuck over it.

Being bullied doesn't make you right, better, or morally superior. Being a nerd doesn't mean that you're holy. Just because you're a [geek](#) doesn't mean that you aren't also an asshole. Being [socially awkward isn't an excuse](#) and trying to play the Oppression Olympics doesn't make it any better. No, life isn't fair, but it never has been fair, and the sooner you stop expecting that fairness to apply to you, the sooner you'll be able to improve.

Yes, we live in a society that tells [men and women conflicting rules about sex and sexuality](#) and that can be confusing. Yes, the rules about boundaries and consent are changing and we're all trying to shake off generations of toxic lessons about gender and sexuality and it can be weird, confusing, and intimidating. But blaming feminists for scaring you, bullies for bullying you, or neanderthals for taking what you "deserve" isn't progress, it's whining. Stop blaming others for what, at the end of the day, are your choices. You and you alone are [responsible for your life and to make it better](#).

It's time to stop talking about fairness and niceness. It's time to be good. It's time to be strong.

It's time to build your new life.

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