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Bill Schlotter

Scholar of Single Lifestyles Has Little Love for Valentine's Day

An empty mailbox on Valentine's Day---could anything be sadder?

Actually, yes---many things---according to Bella DePaulo, a visiting professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who says Americans have the erroneous idea that everybody wants to be somebody's Valentine.

DePaulo, who studies how society perceives and discriminates against single people, said Valentine's Day is an affront to happy singles---and there are a lot of them.

At the heart of the problem, she said, is that we all live by a misconceived ideology that everyone ultimately wants and needs to be married.

"The ideology just assumes that everyone wants to marry," DePaulo said. "It assumes that married people are happier people---even better people---than singles, and that they are better because they have that one peer relationship that the culture most values."

The ideology further supposes that single people are lonely and depressed on Valentine's Day, DePaulo said.

"People believe that just about everyone wants to marry, and, without a sweetie, they are not making much progress toward that goal," DePaulo said.

Such thinking flies in the face of DePaulo's research.

"I've looked very closely at the basis of claims made that single people are less happy and more lonely than married people," DePaulo said. "A very interesting study of more than 100 people 65 and older compared men and women who were divorced, widowed or had always been single. The people who were least likely to be lonely were the women who had always been single."

Nonetheless, come Valentine's Day, one can expect to see singles barraged with misplaced sympathy over their loveless circumstances.

DePaulo has seen articles with titles "How to Survive Valentine's Day without a Sweetie" and "How to be Happily Single While Looking for Love."

"These titles suggest singlehood is something to be survived or cured," DePaulo said.

"They suggest that people who are single have no love, and are just marking time while they look for some.

Singles need instructions on how to be happy."

DePaulo said she supposes there could be alternative ideology-free Valentine's Days. Perhaps we could celebrate all the people we care about, not just the ones with whom we share a romance.

Perhaps there could be a complementary day for celebrating solitude.

"Perhaps the most empowering response to Valentine's Day would be indifference," DePaulo said. "If Valentine's Day were of no more emotional import to people who are single than Secretaries Day is to goldfish, then I think we would be free."

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