

Spiderman Doctrine

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*“Whatever life holds in store for me, I will never forget these words:
With great power comes great responsibility.”*

—Peter Parker, aka Spiderman

Today’s sexually active young women are learning the truth of the Spiderman doctrine and that the truth can hurt.

Hooking up — the casual sexual behavior that has replaced dating for many of their generation — gives women more power than their mothers had to pursue and drop partners freely. But it also requires a high degree of vigilance because if they become pregnant, infected with disease, or simply abandoned by their partner they, often more than their partners, will feel accountable and lousy.

My email box is full of examples. One college sophomore wrote about being raped by a man she hooked up with. “I always felt empowered during sex because I could get anyone I wanted to have sex with me,” she said. “What I didn’t realize was how powerless I was.” A 27-year-old wrote about hooking up with one man and getting pregnant, then giving birth, being abandoned, finding and marrying another man and a year after the marriage still trying to figure out how to love. Another college student described meeting a man at a party and making out with him on three different occasions.

They weren't in what she would call a relationship, she said. She wasn't sure, in fact, what she would call it. The fourth time they got together they had sex. She didn't hear from him after that. "Who was responsible in that situation?" she asked. "I've always heard that women had the power...I guess I was responsible for saying 'Yes,' but he should be responsible enough to call me."

"Years ago," she sighed, "Everything was black and white."

She's not entirely correct, of course. There was plenty of role ambiguity in the dating behavior of earlier generations. If unwanted things happened, such as a pregnancy, the young woman did incur blame, as indicated in the curious phrase "she got herself pregnant." Once the birth control pill became widely available, women shouldered even more responsibility.

But it was also the case, even in the 1960s, that if the young woman wanted to keep her baby, she and others anticipated that the baby's father would marry her. Also, sex was something a couple was expected to have only after they were married or at least in a committed relationship. Men — and couples — may or may not have acted more responsibly back then, but the cultural expectation that they should was a restraining force.

Absent that expectation, many young women today feel more responsible for the outcome of casual sex and many men feel less. "Every day I am hit on by guys who don't want to date me, but want to f— me....," a college freshman wrote.

A group of college students, sitting with their coffee in a campus dining room, had this to say:

"Say you're making out," one young woman started. "A guy will ask, 'Are you on birth control?'"

If you answer yes, a young man continued, the guy assumes he won't have to work hard to get her into bed. "Birth control's a green light," he added.

Another young man said he doesn't even talk about birth control with a partner. "Girls should be responsible for that," he said.

These young people had no doubt who is better off.

"Because girls are more assertive," said one young man, "it's easy for us to be assholes."

Young people today are active in service- and civic-oriented activities and careers in proportions exceeding earlier generations. They're good, bright women and men. They know that something is askew in their sexual culture.

But they have no idea how to change it and that is a terrible place to be.

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