

The Discouraged Suitor

Labor economists occasionally have a crisis of faith. After years of scrutinizing the unemployment rate, they suddenly remember... *discouraged workers*. Who are they? They're people who *want* a job, but aren't officially unemployed because they aren't actively *searching* for work.

This is a serious problem – and a serious flaw with official unemployment rates. True, we should not forget the Proudful Worker Effect – the workers who say they want a job, but refuse to do any job for which they're genuinely qualified. But if you take introspection half as seriously as I do, you can hardly deny that lots of people find job search *extremely* demoralizing. When your whole ego and sense of self are on the line, one needs Stoic determination to keep looking in the face of multiple rejections. Every parent has seen even the sweetest of children surrender to despair. Does anyone seriously believe that human beings cease to have these emotions by their eighteenth birthday?

Happily, there's a silver lining: If you ever become a worker, strong social norms rise to your defense. Imagine you fail to find a job. If anyone mocks your failure, virtually everyone will take your side. The same applies if a bystander snarks, "I guess your very best just isn't good enough, haha." Until you finally land a job, parents, friends, and total strangers will share a bounty of comfort, hope, and friendly advice on how to do better.

Yes, you may prefer to brood alone. Social norms, however, insist that discouraged workers *need* to be encouraged even if they don't *want* to be encouraged. If you say, "I can't find a job," you will hear a barrage of questions: "Where have you looked?" "Are you using social media?" "Maybe you're aiming too high?" "Have you asked your friend, Jim?" Or even: "The economy's picking up; have you tried re-applying anywhere?" You'll also enjoy an abundant supply of truisms: "You've got to keep trying," "We all fail, but you can't give up hope," and "There's no harm in asking." A tad annoying, but these questions are the expression of a valuable social norm: Encourage the discouraged.

Once you take the plight of the Discouraged Worker to heart, you might wonder, "Are there any major analogous social ills that I've also overlooked?" The first that comes to my mind is what I call the *Discouraged Suitor*. Lonely people normally search for a mate; they're analogous to the conventional unemployed. Some lonely people, however, are analogous to Discouraged Workers. Such people want to find love, but the dating experience is so depressing they stop trying.

Denying the existence of Discouraged Suitors is as dogmatic as denying the existence of Discouraged Workers. In both cases, people face a challenge of epic proportions: convince an employer to hire you... or convince a stranger to love you. When the stakes are this

high, failure is scary. Unsurprisingly, then, we commonly respond to failure with despair: “I’ll never find a job” or “I’ll never find love.” Discouraged Workers silently endure deep feelings of uselessness. Discouraged Workers silently endure deep feelings of loneliness.

There is however one major difference: Social norms on the treatment of Discouraged Suitors are none-too-supportive. Parents and friends naturally urge the lonely to persist in the pursuit of true love: “There’s someone out there for everyone!” Yet social norms have also long allowed public mockery of the socially awkward and unattractive: “You’re 25 and never had a girlfriend, heh!” In recent years, moreover, norms against sexual harassment have become stricter and vaguer.* Is asking a co-worker out on a date sexual harassment? What about asking twice? Sure, the probability that you will be fired for one vague affront remains low. The typical Discouraged Suitor, however, is already petrified of rejection. When the norm shifts from “Let them down easy” to “Zero tolerance for sexual harassment,” many lonely people choose the safe route of silent sorrow.

Personally, none of this affects me. I met my wife when I was nineteen, and have never dated anyone else. Along the way, though, I have met many silently suffering lonely souls. If Discouraged Workers deserve sympathy, don’t Discouraged Suitors deserve the same? Needless to say, this doesn’t mean that Discourage Suitors have a right to be loved or even liked. Like everyone else, however, they should be treated with good manners. Indeed, since Discouraged Suitors rarely speak up on their own behalf, should we not make an extra effort to consider their feelings?

* Morrissey, one of my favorite singers, has said made multiple inflammatory comments on sexual harassment, but there’s a kernel of truth here: “Anyone who has ever said to someone else, ‘I like you,’ is suddenly being charged with sexual harassment. You have to put these things into the right relations. If I can not tell anyone that I like him, how would they ever know?”