

Finding the Right Partner

Terry Estrin, Ph.D.
Registered Psychologist

Who among us approaches romance in a rational way, checklist in hand? Some do (and I wouldn't exactly call that romance), but most of us get swept away by our feelings. And there's nothing wrong with that - as long as the person getting swept along with you has some positive attributes. So it doesn't hurt to look (even just a little bit) before you leap. In my last column, I outlined what to look for in a prospective life partner. The things that sustain a relationship over the long term are the same things that draw us together: having similar views and interests, good communication, and true friendship. This week I add two more items to the list.

When I wrote this column, I decided to consult someone much wiser than I: my seven-year-old daughter. I asked: "if you were going to marry someone, what would be the most important thing to look for?" And she answered: "someone who is caring ...and who understands what you like." I was impressed. My little girl identified kindness and empathy as the most important factors in a relationship.

Let's start with empathy. Empathy is usually defined as the ability to understand someone else's emotions. Imagine being in a relationship where the other person doesn't "get" you. Sound lonely? Without empathy, the shared experience between two people just isn't there. If you want to grow together as a couple, you have to be able to understand one another. It's usually pretty easy to tell if your partner understands you (it's a wonderful feeling), and if not, that usually means you just aren't compatible. But what about the person who seems fine, but actually lacks the ability to empathize with others? They can be harder to spot, especially if they make a good first impression (and they often do). However, there are certain personality styles to watch for: in particular, avoid the arrogant, dominant, exploitative type. Such people are highly skilled at winning you over, but in the long run reveal themselves as cruelly insensitive. Avoid them.

Kindness is important too. This may be stating the obvious, but it's really important to find someone who is kind to you and others. It's easy to identify a kind person by their actions, but sometimes the *absence* of kindness isn't immediately obvious (particularly if the person has a good "act" going). I recall many years ago, I was sitting in a girlfriend's kitchen when the neighbor's young daughter (no more than five, and in a sociable mood) walked in the back door, curious as to we were having for lunch, so I gave her a snack. After the little girl left, my girlfriend, somewhat irritated, said something to the effect that if her parents fed the little brat, she wouldn't bug us so much. I was appalled, but didn't say anything. I didn't know it at the time, but that was a really big "red flag," and had I paid attention to it, I would have been spared significant grief later on.

So here's what I suggest: if you plan on trusting your heart with someone, first observe how he/she behaves in different settings, with different people. See how they treat children, men, women, and older people. I have heard it said that the way your date treats the waiter is how he/she will treat you later on. If they are mean or insensitive to others (particularly those who are weaker) they will eventually be mean or insensitive to you. But if they are kind to others, then they will treat you that way too. As far as lessons go, this is all pretty basic, but so many of us ignore the obvious. So be careful, don't rush things, and inspect the goods before you buy.