

Relationship Choices During the Transition to Adulthood

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Young adulthood (ages 20 to 30) is a time of intense change - a critically important, high-stakes period. Some of the many life-defining challenges that emerge at this time include: establishing a personal identity, finding a career path, joining with a life partner, and managing intense emotions. As a result, people in their twenties are subject to immense pressures to figure out who they are, what they should be doing, and who they should be with.

The problem is that all those challenges breed anxiety, which can affect our ability to make sound relationship choices. Under stress, people tend to make decisions by doing whatever is easiest. And considering our greater than 50 percent divorce rate, it seems that many of us really are getting married for the wrong reasons. It is usually not a good idea, for example, to select a life partner solely on the basis of physical attraction, or because they provide us with a sense of direction (someone to make our decisions for us), comfort (going with the familiar), or security (choosing a partner for their financial status).

So how does a person get through their twenties and make the right relationship choices? Although it doesn't hurt to have a checklist of things to look for (and avoid) in a prospective partner, when it comes to relationships, it is equally important to understand yourself during this tumultuous time. There are of course no guarantees, but it is easier to make better decisions if you have some foreknowledge of the kinds of psychological challenges that you may face. Here are some general guidelines:

- **Expect emotional discomfort:** When there is so much change going on in your life (especially if you are living on your own for the first time), it is absolutely normal to feel some anxiety, insecurity, or loneliness. Do whatever you can to maintain your equilibrium: stay connected with friends, get regular exercise, and remember to have fun.
- **Relax.** Getting married isn't a race ("all my friends were married at 23!"). Besides, research suggests that divorce rates are lower for those who marry *after* the age of 26, probably because most of us are still working on adolescent issues in our early twenties. After the age of 26, we tend to have a better idea of who we are, what we want from life, and what to look for in a life partner.
- **Take chances.** When there's so much uncertainty in life, it's natural to seek security in "the same old thing." But is choosing a mate based on familiarity or comfort really a good basis for a relationship? If there's no "spark," the relationship will be emotionally flat (and probably stay that way). Authentic, rewarding relationships involve equal measures of love and risk. The solution then, is to expand your horizons. Try dating someone you consider "out of your league," or someone you admire - and if you feel nervous doing it, so what? It's a healthy risk.

- **Be selective.** If someone asks you out, and you find yourself thinking “I’d better say yes, because this is my only chance”, chances are you are giving in to self-doubt. We tend to choose partners whose self-esteem is similar to ours. The problem is that self-esteem tends to fluctuate. So if yours has taken a beating of late, you may find yourself saying yes to someone who you wouldn’t otherwise say yes to.
- **Consider your own needs.** Friends and family may have strong opinions as to who you should marry, and the pressure can be intense. However, remember that no matter who others say you should be with, this will be your relationship, the person *you* (not them) have to wake up with every day (on the other hand, if your friends and family are warning you away from someone, it’s usually a good idea to consider their reasons).
- **Trust your instincts.** Are you in a relationship but having doubts? Does one part of you say go and the other scream STOP? If so, talk to a trusted friend, family member, or counselor.