

Relationship Choice During the Transition to Adulthood, Part II

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In my last column, I explained how the challenges we face in our early twenties can generate enough anxiety and emotional instability to seriously compromise our ability to make sound relationship choices – precisely at a time when we are expected to find a life partner.

The solution to this dilemma has two parts. Part one is to understand your own reactions to those life challenges. It actually helps, for example, to expect some degree of anxiety, insecurity, or loneliness (“I’ll always be alone!”) as an inevitable byproduct of this time of dizzying change – which helps you avoid choosing a partner out of a sense of fear, desperation, or to please others. Part Two of the solution is finding a suitable partner.

What should you look for in a prospective life partner? Because every relationship is an interaction between two personalities, there is no one checklist for everybody. However, there are some basic elements common to all successful relationships, such as similarity, communication, and friendship. For many couples who run into trouble, problems in these three areas create a ripple effect, leading to emotional distance.

- **Similarities.** While it’s true that opposites attract, and big differences can be exciting in the short term, when it comes to long-term happiness, similar values, outlook, and interests are the bedrock of any relationship. Don’t worry about the small stuff: if you don’t have the same taste in clothing or like the same music, it won’t spell doom for your marriage. However, if you differ substantially in your core values, then once the honeymoon is over (or sooner), chances are you will have little to talk about, or worse, you won’t understand one another. Having a similar outlook also fosters harmony because it’s easier to share common goals. Keep in mind though, that all the similarities in the world won’t help if you don’t have the next point on the checklist: communication
- **Communication.** When getting to know someone, ask yourself: are they open with their feelings? Do we understand one another? Do I naturally want to share my hopes and dreams, or do I edit what I say? Good communication is essential to the long-term, ongoing growth of any relationship. It reduces the accumulation of grudges and resentment, whereas poor communication breeds emotional distance. Being open with one another can also be enjoyable, and helps make your relationship a place of good will and emotional renewal. However, even the combination of similar values and good communication is insufficient without one more essential ingredient: true friendship.
- **Friendship.** Here’s a simple test: do you actually like one another? If not, don’t even think about marrying him/her. It’s easy to be physically attracted to a person, and it may be tempting to select a partner because they provide financial security, but if there’s no friendship, the relationship will run out of gas, fast. So choose someone you enjoy, someone you can laugh with, and chat for hours. Friendship is essential in the long run because it creates mutual positive regard, and that also helps keeps everyday arguments from getting nasty. Remember those interviews with elderly, still-in-love couples during the final credits of *When Harry Met Sally*? There’s a good reason they were still together after fifty years: all of them, without exception, LIKED one another.

Similarity, communication, and friendship don’t necessarily guarantee smooth sailing, but if your partner has these characteristics, it’s an excellent foundation for a lifelong partnership. Why? Because these three qualities make you want to have a relationship.