

Are You Marrying the Right Person? Healthy Signs and Red Flags¹

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But love is blind and lovers cannot see

The pretty follies that themselves commit

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act II,
Scene 6

*Love is an ideal thing, marriage a real thing; a confusion of
the real with the ideal never goes unpunished.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

There are very few experiences in life that are as exciting as the “real thing” of getting married. However, there are very few as disappointing as finding ourselves attached to the wrong person. Learning about what healthy relationships look like is important if we are going to make good decisions about who to marry.

Helpful Information

Dr. John Van Epp has been working with couples for years and has created a model to help them determine if their relationship has progressed in a healthy pattern of friendship. If the progression has not been healthy, individuals are instructed to pause and determine if they need to revisit previous steps in the progression that they may have skipped.

In the model, Van Epp has determined that there are five major steps that should be taken before the relationship reaches more serious levels. The steps include:



Figure 1. A red flag at the beach generally indicates hazardous conditions for water sports, but that still doesn't stop some people from going into the water anyway.

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1. Knowing
2. Trusting
3. Relying
4. Committing
5. Touch

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The steps progress in this order and at no time should one step become more advanced than the step previous to it. For example, a couple's commitment should never advance beyond their reliance on each other.

If we feel like we cannot rely on our partner, we should not commit to the relationship. As we learn that we can trust and rely on our partner, our level of commitment will increase. Agreeing to marry someone is high on the commitment scale. If something has happened in our relationship to decrease the level of trust or reliance, we should ask ourselves if we really know our partner, take time to determine our trust level, and reduce the level of commitment accordingly.

Knowing

It takes time to honestly get to know someone. Many married couples discover they are continuously learning about their spouse. Just asking questions can be annoying, yet it is important to know the other person as much as possible. Van Epp recommends “playing detective” and watching for opportunities to discover information. If our date, for example, mentions problems they have experienced in a previous relationship, it may be a good opportunity for us to ask, “Why would anyone do that?” The answer could tell us a lot about how they think and what bothers them in relationships.

Knowing about the other person is helpful for determining compatibility. The purpose of knowing the other person is not to use that knowledge to manipulate the relationship, however. In fact, some have called dating the big “fake out” because of the dishonesty about likes and dislikes, traits, and behaviors that often occurs in relationships. This fact is demonstrated well in the movie *27 Dresses* in which a marriage is about to take place between a woman pretending to be a vegetarian and a dog-lover simply because the man she thinks she wants to marry in fact is vegetarian and really does love dogs.

Trusting

Knowing our partner is not manipulating the relationship is vital to a healthy relationship. As mentioned, while dating, we tend to act on our best behavior. It is human nature to show our best traits when we are trying to sell ourselves. We all have faults, and in healthy relationships we can allow others to discover and accept these parts of us through the “knowing” process. Trusting means that we can believe the other person will not use our faults against us, hide other faults from us, and will not deceive us. We must remember that trusting should never exceed the level of knowing.

Relying

When we can honestly rely on the other person, it means we know them and can trust them. It does not mean they will never be late for a date or let us down, but it does mean that they have proven that they want to be trusted. To determine if we can rely on our partner, we can ask ourselves several questions:

- Can we count on them to listen if we have had a bad day?
- Will they call if they are going to be late?
- Do we believe they will try to follow through on plans they have made with us?
- Are they the person they represent themselves to be?
- Can we rely on them to care enough to do their best?

If our answers to most of the questions are “yes,” then we may be ready to increase our level of commitment to the relationship.

Commitment

There are many levels and gradations of commitment. A beginning level of commitment may include planning to see each other on a regular basis. A higher level of commitment could constitute wanting to date this person exclusively. As our commitment to each other deepens, we may eventually enter a pre-engagement phase, become engaged, and then make the ultimate commitment of marriage.

Touch/Physical Intimacy

Some cultures believe in waiting until there is commitment before kissing. Some current television shows promote the notion that committing to a third date is the same as committing to have sex. Physical intimacy promotes attachment and connection between people. Once a couple has had sex, it is common for them to focus on the physical relationship and to build their attachment on the physical part of the relationship. This can easily lead to an unhealthy relationship if knowing, trusting, relying, and commitment have not reached the same level of intensity.

Things You Can Use

Following these logical steps to relationship development can provide some sure signs that our relationships are developing in healthy ways. Take a minute to evaluate your friendship by asking yourself the following questions:

1. Is my relationship progressing in a positive way?

2. Have we skipped any of the steps in our relationship progression?
3. If so, and to make sure our friendship is healthy, have we gone back and spent more time on the step (knowing, trusting, relying, committing, touching) we either skipped or didn't spend enough time developing?

25 Red Flags

While there are many signs we need to pay attention to that can signify we are in a healthy relationship, there are also some specific warning signs, or red flags, we need to be aware of so we don't end up attached to the wrong person. Ogletree and Harris (2003) offer this brief checklist:

When visiting with couples, we often ask a husband or wife if any of the bizarre behaviors and practices their spouse is currently demonstrating was manifested during their dating and courtship. Surprisingly, many men and women say, 'Yes, I noticed that, but I thought once we were married it would go away.' Others will say, 'I tried not to notice it.' It is wise not to ignore the clues and hints that we term *Red Flags* in a relationship. Below is our TOP 25 checklist of *Red Flags* that we hope will be helpful to pay attention to when considering your date or prospective partner.

Does Your Partner

1. Have extreme views on political, family, religious, or world affairs?
2. Encourage you to develop your talents and progress, or do they want to keep you hidden in a closet, away from the rest of the world?
3. Allow you time for yourself, or is your partner possessive?
4. Encourage you to have your own interests, your own life too?
5. Allow you to spend time with your friends, or is your partner jealous of your friends and the time you spend with them?
6. Compare you to past boyfriends or girlfriends?
7. Take an interest in other people, or is your partner selfish with his/her time and pursuits?
8. Exhibit behaviors that suggest that the world revolves around him/her?
9. Exhibit behaviors that suggest personality faults such as deep insecurity, excessive jealousy, uncontrollable temper, and inflexibility?
10. Exhibit character flaws such as being condescending, or lying, cheating, stealing, arrogance, etc.?
11. Fail to admit mistakes and can never admit to being "wrong?" (Note: If your partner fails to see mistakes now, he/she won't be able to see them or admit to them later on in the relationship either. Look for humility and meekness, but personal confidence, as well.)
12. Often exhibit negative or critical traits?
13. Complain about your family or spending time with your family?
14. Seek to build relationships with your family or does your partner lack the skills to do so?
15. Have difficulty relating to his/her own family? (Note: This is a huge red flag that your partner will have difficulty in his/her own family relationships later on.)
16. Enjoy work or is your partner prone to laziness and irresponsibility?
17. Have the television on all the time at his/her apartment or home?
18. Criticize your personal appearance?
19. Tell you that you need to lift weights, go jogging, or join a health club?
20. Make fun of your weight or other bodily traits?
21. Verbally, physically, or emotionally abuse you?
22. Tear you down and then try to come back a few days later as "Mr. Nice Guy," promising that it will never happen again?
23. Need to make major social or emotional changes in his/her life?
24. Promise that he/she will change after the wedding?
25. Have some of the same goals, dreams, and aspirations as you do?

Adapted from D.E. Brinley & M.D. Ogletree, First Comes Love. [Covenant Communications: American Fork, Ut., 2001], pp. 75–77.

References

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Ogletree, M., & Harris, V. W. (2003). The top 25 signs to watch out for. *StrongerMarriage.org*. <http://strongermarriage.org/htm/dating/top-25>