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Are You with the Right Mate?

by

Elliott Katz was stunned to find himself in the middle of a divorce after two kids and 10 years of marriage. The Torontonian, a policy analyst for the Ottawa government, blamed his wife. "She just didn't appreciate all I was doing to make her happy." He fed the babies, and he changed their diapers. He gave them their baths, he read them stories, and put them to bed. Before he left for work in the morning, he made them breakfast. He bought a bigger house and took on the financial burden, working evenings to bring in enough money so his wife could stay home full-time.

He thought the solution to the discontent was for her to change. But once on his own, missing the daily interaction with his daughters, he couldn't avoid some reflection. "I didn't want to go through this again. I asked whether there was something I could have done differently. After all, you can wait years for someone else to change."

What he decided was, indeed, there were some things he could have done differently—like not tried as hard to be so noncontrolling that his wife felt he had abandoned decision-making entirely. His wife, he came to understand, felt frustrated, as if she were "a married single parent," making too many of the plans and putting out many of the fires of family life, no matter how many chores he assumed.

Ultimately, he stopped blaming his wife for their problems. "You can't change another person. You can only change yourself," he says. "Like lots of men today," he has since found, "I was very confused about my role as partner." After a few post-divorce years in the mating wilderness, Katz came to realize that framing a relationship in terms of the right or wrong mate is by itself a blind alley.

"We're given a binary model," says New York psychotherapist Ken Page. "Right or wrong. Settle or leave. We are not given the right tools to think about relationships. People need a better set of options."

Sooner or later, there comes a moment in all relationships when you lie in bed, roll over, look at the person next to you and think it's all a dreadful mistake, says Boston family therapist Terrence Real. It happens a few months to a few years in. "It's an open secret of American culture that disillusionment exists. I go around the country speaking about 'normal marital hatred.' Not one person has ever asked what I mean by that. It's extremely raw."

What to do when the initial attraction sours? "I call it the first day of your real marriage," Real says. It's not a sign that you've chosen the wrong partner. It is the signal to grow as an individual—to take responsibility for your own frustrations. Invariably, we yearn for perfection but are stuck with an imperfect human being. We all fall in love with people we think will deliver us from life's wounds but who wind up knowing how to rub against us.

A new view of relationships and their discontents is emerging. We alone are responsible for having the relationship we want. And to get it, we have to dig deep into ourselves while maintaining our connections. It typically takes a dose of bravery—what Page calls "enlightened audacity." Its brightest possibility exists, ironically, just when the passion seems most totally dead. If we fail to plumb ourselves and speak up for our deepest needs, which admittedly can be a scary prospect, life will never feel authentic, we will never see ourselves with any clarity, and everyone will always be the wrong partner.

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The Way Things Are

Romance itself seeds the eventual belief that we have chosen the wrong partner. The early stage of a relationship, most marked by intense attraction and infatuation, is in many ways akin to cocaine intoxication, observes Christine Meinecke, a

clinical psychologist in Des Moines, Iowa. It's orchestrated, in part, by the neurochemicals associated with intense pleasure. Like a cocaine high, it's not sustainable.

But for the duration—and experts give it nine months to four years—infatuation has one overwhelming effect: Research shows that it makes partners overestimate their similarities and idealize each other. We're thrilled that he loves Thai food, travel, and classic movies, just like us. And we overlook his avid interest in old cars and online poker.

Eventually, reality rears its head. "Infatuation fades for everyone," says Meinecke, author of *Everybody Marries the Wrong Person*. That's when you discover your psychological incompatibility, and disenchantment sets in. Suddenly, a switch is flipped, and now all you can see are your differences. "You're focusing on what's wrong with them. They need to get the message about what they need to change."

You conclude you've married the wrong person—but that's because you're accustomed to thinking, Cinderella-like, that there is only one right person. The consequences of such a pervasive belief are harsh. We engage in destructive behaviors, like blaming our partner for our unhappiness or searching for someone outside the relationship.

Along with many other researchers and clinicians, Meinecke espouses a new marital paradigm—what she calls "the self-responsible spouse." When you start focusing on what isn't so great, it's time to shift focus. "Rather than look at the other person, you need to look at yourself and ask, 'Why am I suddenly so unhappy and what do I need to do?'" It's not likely a defect in your partner.

In mature love, says Meinecke, "we do not look to our partner to provide our happiness, and we don't blame them for our unhappiness. We take responsibility for the expectations that we carry, for our own negative emotional reactions, for our own insecurities, and for our own dark moods."

But instead of looking at ourselves, or understanding the fantasies that bring us to such a pass, we engage in a thought process that makes our differences tragic and intolerable, says William Doherty, professor of psychology and head of the marriage and family therapy program at the University of Minnesota. It's one thing to say, "I wish my spouse were more into the arts, like I am." Or, "I wish my partner was not just watching TV every night but interested in getting out more with me." That's something you can fix.

It's quite another to say, "This is intolerable. I need and deserve somebody who shares my core interests." The two thought processes are likely to trigger differing actions. It's possible to ask someone to go out more. It's not going to be well received to ask someone for a personality overhaul, notes Doherty, author of *Take Back Your Marriage*.

No one is going to get all their needs met in a relationship, he insists. He urges fundamental acceptance of the person we choose and the one who chooses us. "We're all flawed. With parenting, we know that comes with the territory. With spouses, we say 'This is terrible.'"

The culture, however, pushes us in the direction of discontent. "Some disillusionment and feelings of discouragement are normal in the love-based matches in our culture," explains Doherty. "But consumer culture tells us we should not settle for anything that is not ideal for us."

As UCLA psychologist Thomas Bradbury puts it, "You don't have a line-item veto when it comes to your partner. It's a package deal; the bad comes with the good."

Further, he says, it's too simplistic an interpretation that your partner is the one who's wrong. "We tend to point our finger at the person in front of us. We're fairly crude at processing some information. We tend not to think, 'Maybe I'm not giving her what she needs.' 'Maybe he's disgruntled because I'm not opening up to him.' Or, 'Maybe he's struggling in his relationships with other people.' The more sophisticated question is, 'In what ways are we failing to make one another happy?'"

Now in a long-term relationship, Toronto's Katz has come to believe that "Marriage is not about finding the right person. It's about becoming the right person. Many people feel they married the wrong person, but I've learned that it's truly about growing to become a better husband."

Eclipsed by Expectations

What's most noticeable about Sarah and Mark Holdt of Estes Park, Colorado, is their many differences. "He's a Republican, I'm a Democrat. He's a traditional Christian, I'm an agnostic. He likes meat and potatoes, I like more adventurous food," says Sarah. So Mark heads off to church and Bible study every week, while Sarah takes a "Journeys" class that considers topics like the history of God in America. "When he comes home, I'll ask, 'What did you learn in Bible Study?'" she says. And she'll share her insights from her own class with him.

But when Sarah wants to go to a music festival and Mark wants to stay home, "I just go," says Sarah. "I don't need to have him by my side for everything." He's there when it matters most—at home, at the dinner table, in bed. "We both thrive on touch," says Sarah, "so we set our alarm a half hour early every morning and take that time to cuddle." They've been married for 14 years.

It takes a comfortable sense of self and deliberate effort to make relationships commodious enough to tolerate such differences. What's striking about the Holdts is the time they take to share what goes on in their lives—and in their heads—when they are apart. Research shows that such "turning toward" each other and efforts at information exchange, even in routine matters, are crucial to maintaining the emotional connection between partners.

Say one partner likes to travel and the other doesn't. "If you view this with a feeling of resentment, that's going to hurt, over and over again," says Doherty. If you can accept it, that's fine—provided you don't start living in two separate worlds.

"What you don't want to do," he says, "is develop a group of single travel friends who, when they are on the road, go out and flirt with others. You start doing things you're not comfortable sharing with your mate." Most often, such large differences are accompanied by so much disappointment that partners react in ways that do not support the relationship.

The available evidence suggests that women more than men bring some element of fantasy into a relationship. Women generally initiate more breakups and two-thirds of divorces, becoming more disillusioned than men. They compare their mates with their friends much more than men do, says Doherty.

He notes, "They tend to have a model or framework for what the relationship should be. They are more prone to the comparison between what they have and what they think they should have. Men tend to monitor the gap between what they have and what they think they deserve only in the sexual arena. They don't monitor the quality of their marriage on an everyday basis."

To the extent that people have an ideal partner and an ideal relationship in their head, they are setting themselves up for disaster, says family expert Michelle Givertz, assistant professor of communication studies at California State University, Chico. Relationship identities are negotiated between two individuals. Relationships are not static ideals; they are always works in progress.

To enter a relationship with an idea of what it should look like or how it should evolve is too controlling, she contends. It takes two people to make a relationship. One person doesn't get to decide what it should be. And to the extent that he or she does, the other partner is not going to be happy.

"People can spend their lives trying to make a relationship into something it isn't, based on an idealized vision of what should be, not what is," she says. She isn't sure why, but she finds that such misplaced expectations are increasing. Or, as Doherty puts it, "A lot of the thinking about being married to the wrong mate is really self-delusion."

Yes, Virginia, Some Mates Really Are Wrong

Sometimes, however, we really do choose the wrong person—someone ultimately not interested in or capable of meeting our needs, for any of a number of possible reasons. At the top of the list of people who are generally wrong for anyone are substance abusers—whether the substance is alcohol, prescription drugs, or illicit drugs—who refuse to get help for the problem.

"An addict's primary loyalty is not to the relationship, it's to the addiction," explains Ken Page. "Active addicts become cheaper versions of themselves and lose integrity or the ability to do the right thing when it's hard. Those are the very qualities in a partner you need to lean on." Gamblers fall into the same compulsive camp, with the added twist that their pursuit of the big win typically lands them, sooner or later, into deep debt that threatens the foundations of relationship life.

People who cheated in one or more previous relationships are not great mate material. They destroy the trust and intimacy basic to building a relationship. It's possible to make a case for a partner who cheats once, against his own values, but not for one who compulsively and repeatedly strays. Doherty considers such behavior among the "hard reasons" for relationship breakup, along with physical abuse and other forms of overcontrolling. "These are things that nobody should have to put up with in life," he says.

But "drifting apart," "poor communication," and "we're just not compatible anymore" are in a completely different category. Such "soft reasons," he insists, are, by contrast, always two-way streets. "Nobody gets all the soft goodies in life," he finds. "It's often better to work on subtle ways to improve the relationship."

In an ongoing marriage, he adds, "incompatibility is never the real reason for a divorce." It's a reason for breakup of a dating relationship. But when people say "she's a nice person but we're just not compatible," Doherty finds, something happened in which both were participants and allowed the relationship to deteriorate. It's a nice way to say you're not blaming your partner.

The real reason is likely to be that neither attended to the relationship. Perhaps one or both partners threw themselves into parenting. Or a job. They stopped doing the things that they did when dating and that couples need to do to thrive as a partnership—take time for conversation, talk about how their day went or what's on their mind. Or perhaps the real love was undermined by the inability to handle conflict.

"If you get to the point where you're delivering an ultimatum," says Bradbury, you haven't been maintaining your relationship properly. "It's like your car stopping on the side of the road and you say, 'It just isn't working anymore'— but you haven't changed the oil in 10 years." The heart of any relationship, he insists—what makes people the right mates for each other—is the willingness of both partners to be open and vulnerable; to listen and care about each other.

Although there are no guarantees, there are stable personal characteristics that are generally good and generally bad for relationships. On the good side: sense of humor; even temper; willingness to overlook your flaws; sensitivity to you and what

you care about; ability to express caring. On the maladaptive side: chronic lying; chronic worrying or neuroticism; emotional overreactivity; proneness to anger; propensity to harbor grudges; low self-esteem; poor impulse control; tendency to aggression; self-orientation rather than an other-orientation. Situations, such as chronic exposure to nonmarital stress in either partner, also have the power to undermine relationships.

In addition, there are people who are specifically wrong for you, because they don't share the values and goals you hold most dear. Differences in core values often plague couples who marry young, before they've had enough life experience to discover who they really are. Most individuals are still developing their belief systems through their late teens and early 20s and still refining their lifestyle choices. Of course, you have to know what you hold most dear, and that can be a challenge for anyone at any age, not just the young.

One of the most common reasons we choose the wrong partner is that we do not know who we are or what we really want. It's hard to choose someone capable of understanding you and meeting your most guarded emotional needs and with whom your values are compatible when you don't know what your needs or values are or haven't developed the confidence to voice them unabashedly.

Carly* is a nonpracticing attorney who married a chef. "I valued character, connection, the heart," she says. "He was charming, funny, treated me amazingly well, and we got along great." But over time, intellectual differences got in the way. "He couldn't keep up with my analysis or logic in arguments or reasoning through something, or he would prove less capable at certain things, or he would misspell or misuse terms. It was never anything major, just little things."

Carly confides that she lost respect for her chef-husband. "I didn't realize how important intellectual respect for my partner would end up being to me. I think this was more about not knowing myself well enough, and not knowing how being intellectually stimulated was important to me, and (even worse) how it would tie to that critical factor of respect."

The Signal to Grow

It is a fact that like the other basic pillars of life, such as work and children, marriage is not always going to be a source of satisfaction. No one is loved perfectly; some part of our authentic self is never going to be met by a partner. Sure, you can always draw a curtain over your heart. But that is not the only or the best response.

"Sometimes marriage is going to be a source of pain and sorrow," says Givertz. "And that's necessary for personal and interpersonal growth." In fact, it's impossible to be deliriously happy in marriage every moment if you are doing anything at all challenging in life, whether raising children, starting a business, or taking care of an aging parent.

Disillusionment becomes an engine for growth because it forces us to discover our needs. Knowing oneself, recognizing one's needs, and speaking up for them in a

relationship are often acts of bravery, says Page. Most of us are guarded about our needs, because they are typically our areas of greatest sensitivity and vulnerability.

"You have to discover—and be able to share—what touches you and moves you the most," he observes. "But first, of course, you have to accept that in yourself. Few of us are skilled at this essential process for creating passion and romance. We'd rather complain." Nevertheless, through this process, we clarify ourselves as we move through life.

At the same time, taking the risk to expose your inner life to your partner turns out to be the great opportunity for expanding intimacy and a sense of connection. This is the great power of relationships: Creating intimacy is the crucible for growing into a fully autonomous human being while the process of becoming a fully realized person expands the possibility for intimacy and connection. This is also the work that transforms a partner into the right partner.

Another crucial element of growth in relationships, says Givertz, is a transformation of motivation—away from self-centered preferences toward what is best for the relationship and its future. There is an intrapsychic change that sustains long-term relationships. Underlying it is a broadening process in which response patterns subtly shift. Accommodation (as opposed to retaliation) plays a role. So does sacrifice. So do willingness and ability to suppress an impulse to respond negatively to a negative provocation, no matter how personally satisfying it might feel in the moment. It requires the ability to hold in mind the long-term goals of the relationship. With motivation transformed, partners are more apt to take a moment to consider how to respond, rather than react reflexively in the heat of a moment.

In his most recent study of relationships, UCLA's Bradbury followed 136 couples for 10 years, starting within six months of their marriage. All the couples reported high levels of satisfaction at the start and four years later. What Bradbury and his colleague Justin Lavner found surprising was that some couples who were so satisfied at the four-year pass eventually divorced, despite having none of the risk factors identified in previous studies of relationship dissolution—wavering commitment, maladaptive personality traits, high levels of stress.

The only elements that identified those who eventually divorced were negative and self-protective reactions during discussions of relationship difficulties and nonsupportive reactions in discussing a personal issue. Displays of anger, contempt, or attempts to blame or invalidate a partner augured poorly, even when the partners felt their marriage was functioning well overall, the researchers report in the *Journal of Family Psychology*. So did expressions of discouragement toward a partner talking about a personality feature he or she wanted to change.

In other words, the inability or unwillingness to suppress negative emotions in the heat of the moment eliminates the possibility of a transformation of motivation to a broader perspective than one's own. Eventually, the cumulative impact of negative reactivity brings the relationship down.

"There is no such thing as two people meant for each other," says Michelle Givertz. "It's a matter of adjusting and adapting." But you have to know yourself so that you can get your needs for affection, inclusion, and control met in the ways that matter most for you. Even then, successful couples redefine their relationship many times,

says Meinecke. Relationships need to continually evolve to fit ever-changing circumstances. They need to incorporate each partner's changes and find ways to meet their new needs.

"If both parties are willing to tackle the hard and vulnerable work of building love and healing conflict, they have a good chance to survive," says Page. If one party is reluctant, "you might need to say to your partner, 'I need this because I feel like we're losing each other, and I don't want that to happen.'"

In the end, says Minnesota's Doherty, "We're all difficult. Everyone who is married is a difficult spouse. We emphasize that our spouse is difficult and forget how we're difficult for them." If you want to have a mate in your life, he notes, you're going to have to go through the process of idealization and disillusionment—if not with your current partner then with the next. And the next. "You could really mess up your kids as you pursue the ideal mate." What's more, studies show that, on average, people do not make a better choice the second time around. Most often, people just trade one set of problems for another.

Boston's Real reports that he attended an anniversary party for friends who had been together 25 years. When someone commented on the longevity of the relationship, the husband replied: "Every morning I wake up, splash cold water on

my face, and say out loud, 'Well, you're no prize either.'" While you're busy being disillusioned with your partner, Real suggests, you'll do better with a substantial dose of humility."

A Critical Difference

There's a difference between fighting for what you want in your relationship and being in direct control of your partner, demanding that he or she change, says Real.

Firmly stand up for your wants and needs in a relationship. "Most people don't have the skill to speak up for and fight for what they want in a relationship," he observes. "They don't speak up, which preserves the love but builds resentment. Resentment is a choice; living resentfully means living unhappily. Or they speak up—but are not very loving." Or they just complain.

The art to speaking up, he says, is to transform a complaint into a request. Not "I don't like how you're talking to me," but "Can you please lower your voice so I can hear you better?" If you're trying to get what you want in a relationship, notes Real, it's best to keep it positive and future-focused.

**name has been changed*