

The Six Most Critical Factors for Choosing a Mate

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A happy and successful partnership goes well beyond sharing common interests. Your age, values and expectations all play a part in whether you are destined to be together or doomed from the very start.

Recently, a couple I'll call Steve and Laura came to my office for counseling. Sitting at opposite ends of the couch, they hardly looked at each other.

When I asked them what brought them to therapy, Laura blurted, "We never should have gotten married in the first place! Our four years together have been plagued with nasty fights followed by long periods of strained silence. Who needs it?"

I asked Steve to give his assessment. "All that's true," he said. "But she didn't mention that we have absolutely nothing in common."

How in the world did these two get together? I wondered.

It turns out they had met during their college years where both were involved in student leadership. They looked good together as a couple, everyone said they were "made for each other," and both were tired of being single. So after six months of starry-eyed dating, filled with all the intoxicating feelings of romance, they said their vows and began their lives together.

"About a week after we returned from the honeymoon," Laura said, "it dawned on both of us—we made a huge mistake."

Then Steve hit the bull's-eye: "We were so swept away by our whirlwind romance that we failed to look at each other realistically. We never stopped to think if we were well matched for a long-term relationship."

As a psychologist who works with dozens of singles and married couples every year, I am constantly amazed at how many people stumble their way into marriage--and then wonder why their relationship grows miserably stagnant or chronically contentious. They simply did not approach this monumental decision objectively and proactively.

If you want to give yourself the best chance for a fulfilling and lasting marriage, consider the following factors for choosing a mate:

- 1. Your choice of whom to marry is more crucial than everything else combined that you will ever do to make your marriage succeed.**

This principle may sound like a no-brainer, but you would be surprised at the large percentage of singles who have the attitude that says, "I just want to get married, and once I've got my man (or woman), then we'll work things out." Lonely and worried they'll never marry, many singles are so intent on getting to "I do" that they don't invest

the necessary time and effort to make a great decision. Most of the failed marriages I have encountered were in trouble the day they began. The two people involved simply chose the wrong person to marry.

- 2. Persons often choose a mate to please someone else—a father, mother, or the person who is asking them to be married—but it is absolutely critical that they be personally satisfied.**

Your decision must be made in light of your own needs and dreams . . . not someone else's. You should listen carefully to the input of friends and family members, but don't let anyone select your marriage partner for you, and don't allow yourself to select a lifetime mate in order to satisfy someone else.

- 3. Divorce rates are significantly lower for both men and women who marry for the first time at age 26 or older.**

Why 26? Studies have shown that this is the age when most people get clear about who they are, where they're going, and how they want to get there. In our society, where adolescence often lasts until the middle 20s, identity formation is incomplete until individuals have emotionally separated from their parents and discovered the details of their own uniqueness. Most people under 26 aren't in a good position to know the kind of person with whom they could form a meaningful lifelong attachment. They simply need more life experience.

- 4. It's crucial to find a person to marry who is a lot like you.**

For couples, similarities are like money in the bank, and differences are like debts they owe. If you want to make a marriage work with someone who is very different from you, you better have a large number of similarities as permanent equity in your account. If you don't, your relationship could be bankrupt at a frighteningly early stage.

- 5. Unrealistic expectations for marriage may be the principal contributor for most early divorces.**

Many men and women enter marriage believing their spouse will meet all their needs and that their romantic feelings will never end. The truth is, successful marriages require an incredible amount of work, patience, and long-suffering. I have watched many marriages crumble because the couples expected life to be filled with ivy-covered cottages, walks on the beach, steamy love scenes, and nonstop fun. That's just not reality.

- 6. Personality or behavioral problems will not vanish when you get married.**

If there are qualities about your partner's personality or behavior that you question—such as jealousy, temper, irresponsibility, dishonesty, or stubbornness—ask yourself if you are willing to spend the rest of your life dealing with these problems. Obviously, if the person you are considering has a drug or drinking problem or trouble with sexual

integrity, you should make *absolutely sure* that he or she has worked through the problem well in advance of your marriage.

Marriage provides the conditions in which we can experience tremendous happiness and satisfaction—or grief and frustration. By thinking carefully about the above points, you'll take a big step toward a fulfilling future.