

# Choosing a mate? Do your research

## Your heart and hormones can lead you astray, so please follow this prescription

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Our dishwasher broke and flooded part of our kitchen floor. My wife researched high and low online for the best deal on the best replacement available, with great success.

When my daughter was in high school, she did extensive research on the universities she might wish to attend and happily selected Washington University in St. Louis. It was a match made in heaven, one which helped her mature and develop into a knowledgeable and appropriately assertive young woman.

The recent lapse of our access to UPMC physicians prompted me to seek the best internists available in my remaining network. Most of my own patients tell me that they also selected me based on a careful review of local psychiatrists and their patient evaluations.

We learn to research nearly every minor and major purchase of goods and services. But when it comes to choosing our permanent mates, we often turn off our research skills and rely mostly on gut emotion.

Harry Brown, author of the wonderful book “How I Found Freedom in an Unfree World,” warns us that major decisions should never be made during periods of strong emotions. Whether good (elation) or bad (fear), they nearly always skew the choices we make, which frequently leads to bad or disastrous outcomes. He advises putting all significant decisions on hold until you’re in a state of reasonable calm.

Given the intense emotions revved up by love, or lust, it is unquestionably difficult to apply reason when it comes to choosing a spouse or romantic partner — even though this decision undoubtedly has far more impact on the trajectory of our lives than the selection of a dishwasher, a college, a primary-care physician, and, yes, even of a psychiatrist.

The first operating principle is this: Your mate’s future behavior is best predicted by his or her past conduct. The question then becomes one of how to dispassionately research this past conduct when your emotions are cranked up and when your possible life partner is on his or her best behavior during courtship.

Love and arousal are part of a software program designed by nature to get you to procreate. Much like the drug addict or smoker who struggles against biological cravings, or the obsessive-compulsive fighting the drive to do all tasks in multiples of three, a savvy lover must learn to reign in emotions and bio-psychological urges to reach a decision incorporating fact and reason. So here are some tips . . .

Start a journal. Record your observations of nice and not-so-nice interactions between yourself and your partner. Be especially on the lookout for behaviors that repeat themselves; these are likely to be hallmarks of ingrained personality characteristics that, in time, will likely grow more frequent and intense after the early ardor subsides.

Another important guide is your intended's behavior toward other people. Is he or she often kind and nurturing? Entertaining and funny? Or dismissive, selfish, withdrawn or frequently irritable? The most reliable observations are made when your mate is not aware that you are watching.

Put words to these observations, too. Record them in your log under "Others." Multiply these behaviors in intensity and frequency by a factor of two or three — this is what you likely will experience within two or three years post-vows.

Third, examine closely the relationship your mate has with his or her parents. What you see or learn is possibly the most predictive information of all.

Do they get along easily? Do they respect each other and enjoy each other's company? Is there humor in their interactions? Or are they frequently fighting, distant or dismissive with each other? Whatever the case, your lovers' attitudes and feelings towards his or her parents will, without question, show up in your relationship after the honeymoon. Freud called it transference. Bank on it.

Fourth, record how you feel when you're with your intended. Do you like the person you are in his or her presence? Do you feel filled up, or empty? Happy and content, or sad and frustrated? Be honest.

And, of course, Google your mate like crazy, at least as much as you would before buying a fridge.

Collate your observations. If you cannot reach an obvious conclusion, consider talking them over with a counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist. Use the opportunity to get a read on your own personality traits, too, and how they might match or conflict with those of your mate. Even if you move forward with the relationship, you will have identified some problem areas and can prepare for them down the road.

The stakes are much too high in the choice of a mate to go only with your gut. In years past — and still in many cultures — young people were considered incapable of making appropriate partnering decisions. They are at the mercy of their hormones and emotions. Parents could coolly decide for them, employing wisdom, experience and thoughtfulness. Love might come in due course.

Our Western culture has done away with these clannish benefits, leaving young people to their own, very limited, devices.

Perhaps my prescription can serve in loco parentis: Remember, nature does not care if your partnership is rewarding as long as you procreate. She has designed your emotional drives primarily for that purpose. So be strong. Do your research. Use your head.

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