

Relationships that Work: Introspection and Expectations

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Brian, a 30-year-old Modern-Orthodox single man, attended a barbeque for single men and women. He walked into the event feeling rather skeptical about meeting anyone he could possibly date, since he has not met with success at similar events before. Brian did his due diligence by walking around the outdoor venue and by chatting with various men and women. He left for home having enjoyed himself but not interested in calling any of the several women with whom he had conversations. When Brian's friend asked him about the event the following day, Brian described it as pleasant but not exciting; and that the women in attendance were nice but average in looks and personality.

Lois, a 28-year-old Modern Orthodox woman, went out on a blind date with a man who got her number from a mutual friend. They went out for dinner, and Lois felt immediately excited by his sense of humor and flirtatious style. Time passed quickly and she was confident and eager as she anticipated a second date. Days, and then weeks passed, and she did not hear from her date again. Lois did not follow up with their go-between and added this experience on to a long list of other times when she misjudged a man's interest in her.

Miriam and Charlie met on the Upper West Side when they were in their late 20's and early 30's respectively. While they shared similar educational and professional backgrounds, enjoyed similar recreational activities and were attracted to one another, they were puzzled and concerned that their dating was punctuated by loud fights and frustration regarding feeling misunderstood by the other. They wondered about how they should evaluate their relationship: did it hold great promise of happiness based on their shared history, or were they doomed to a future of tumultuous fighting? Moreover, they wondered if there were any interventions they could utilize to build on the strength of their relationship and diminish the conflicts that in retrospect always seemed so trivial, or whether they should cut their losses, go their separate ways, and try to meet other partners with whom there was a greater sense of harmony.

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Single adults across the spectrum of society, both religious and secular, Jewish and non-Jewish, rich and poor, educated and non-educated, all face the challenge of finding their life's partner and creating a sustainable relationship. What makes some couples more easily able to find one another, while others face what feels like endless trial and error? Are there conscious and unconscious determinants that we can identify in order to help single adults better understand what their course of action and reaction is all about? It is impossible to know the answers to all these questions, and indeed, some of the answers have little to do with the psychology of human beings. But to the degree that we can be thoughtful, insightful and helpful in making loving, lasting relationships, we must do what we can!

Where does it begin? What motivates an individual to choose a life's partner of a particular type? How does one nurture and sustain a long-term relationship? How does one ensure compatibility and happiness in a marriage decades after the first years of excitement have passed?

Our early life's experiences provide a road map for our later relationships with family, friends and eventually a life's partner. As an infant, it is important that we feel secure in the responses of our parents/caretakers to provide our basic needs: food and protection from danger of all kinds. When we are raised in a safe environment and the emotional climate in our homes of origin is calm, warm and empathic, we learn as children to trust and will therefore be able to thrive physically and emotionally. Perfection is not required (or possible); rather "good enough" parenting is the goal, with just the right amount of frustration built-in to allow us as young children to learn to comfort ourselves. When our parents are attuned to their children and their needs, we grow to become adults who are able to create trusting and healthy relationships of our own. Children who are praised and listened to as opposed to those who are overlooked, dismissed and criticized, develop a strong sense of self and can later relate to others in their adult lives in honest, patient and loving ways.

Most of us fall somewhere on the spectrum of having received "good enough" parenting. Life is complicated though, and most of us also inevitably experience disappointment and/or trauma through illness, death of loved ones, and/or emotional betrayal. Even relocating from one city to another creates experiences of separation and loss. People of all ages need to learn how to mourn these losses and to cope with them through acceptance and adaptation. Losses can often provide unexpected opportunities for resilience and growth: an individual can grow emotionally wiser, deeper and stronger as she or he becomes able to remember and internalize the positive aspects of the person who was lost or the experience that was traumatic. These unexpected developments can actually enhance the potential of a man or woman to make deep and meaningful relationships as they learn to appreciate the really important priorities of life, as opposed to the superficial but commonly cited and pursued goals and values.

Furthermore, children learn how to behave as partners by observing the relationship between their own parents and other adults. Children of parents who argue will expect that yelling and even name-calling are expected and customary ways of relating to one's spouse. On the other hand, when children witness parents who demonstrate their love, care and respect for one another, they will be more likely to mimic that behavior in their own future relationships. Also, when elementary school age boys and girls (from the earliest ages) are taught to behave in

sensitive and respectful ways to one another and these honest, kind and sensitive interactions are reinforced at home and at school, they will be well-equipped with the beginning skills of dating.

If, however, men and women, for whatever reasons or circumstances, emerge from their adolescence with feelings of self-consciousness, low self-esteem and/or a level of hopelessness about their prospects for love and work, they will be at risk for contributing to their own worst fears. For this reason, it is extremely important for all young people to be encouraged by adults around them, from the earliest ages, to be introspective and to be able to honestly assess their own strengths and weaknesses in order to achieve the goals they desire and deserve. True, this task of assessing oneself in a candid and realistic way is an ongoing and lifelong process. For this reason, I highly recommend that it begins early and be done regularly so that it becomes a familiar and routine process that helps us to know ourselves and frame our expectations appropriately.

Brian's parents had divorced when he was a young teenager. Despite his parents' best efforts to maintain a normal life for Brian, he could not help but think about how this chapter of his life would impact his own future with a wife. When speaking openly to his therapist, Brian acknowledged that he feared he would also not find long-term happiness in marriage either, and therefore he unconsciously avoided the intimacy and closeness in dating that would allow a relationship to grow. Fortunately, Brian was able to do some good work with his therapist to separate his own emotional life from that of his parents, to underscore his own wish for a family and to nurture his potential into a reality. Brian's expectations for personal happiness were originally too low and therapeutic intervention offered a different reality for him.

Lois suffered from a series of disappointments that were too heavy for her to bear alone. In the years that she had dated, she suffered a broken engagement as well as the death of a dear friend. Though externally continuing to pursue a full social life, Lois admitted that she felt hopeless about her future and had a hard time following up on situations that might actually play out in her favor. While she felt excited by this date, as she did on earlier ones, she did not give him any clue of how she really felt; she had developed a persona of disinterest in order to protect herself from rejection. Lois could not initially see that her external behavior did not match her secret hope and yearning but, over time, she learned to take more emotional risks by being "real" on her dates, and this soon led to a meaningful and committed relationship for her.

Charlie and Miriam not only wanted to be married, but to have an intimate relationship that reflected their love and care for one another. Through couples' therapy they were helped to see the differences in each other and recognize that their families of origin operated in very different emotional ways. They learned that when they differed, it was not helpful to focus on who was right and wrong. Rather, it was important for them to learn how to be a couple, how to understand for themselves and then convey to one another what each one of them needed in order to feel that they were heard and valued in the marriage. This couple recognized that they also needed to return to discussing their respective expectations about basic values central to every marriage: money, religion, relationships to their families of origin and plans for their own future family. When their expectations were delineated more clearly, they did not feel as desperate a need to convey their position when disagreeing with one another. Miriam and

Charlie learned the three T's—timing, tack and tone—that need to be employed in any productive conversation, even while dealing with the most sensitive of topics.

Relationships require our careful attention and investment of time and energy. We must be honest with ourselves about our expectations and our realities, and only then can we be successful in making positive connections with, and life-long commitments to, the partners with whom we want to share our lives.