

the
**NO-NO
LIST**

How to Spot Mr. Wrong
So You Can Find Mr. Right

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Published by River Grove Books
Austin, TX
www.rivergrovebooks.com

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Distributed by River Grove Books

Design and composition by Greenleaf Book Group and Sheila Parr
Cover design by Greenleaf Book Group and Sheila Parr
Cover images: ©Shutterstock/schab; ©Shutterstock/Alexander Ryabintsev;
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Cataloging-in-Publication data is available.

Print ISBN: 978-1-63299-058-7

eBook ISBN: 978-1-63299-059-4

First Edition

*To my husband, Faraj, of more than four
decades, whose love and relationship provided
the material and concept for this book.*

*And to my father, Amir, who gave me the foundation
of critical thinking and the yearning for finding
solutions to problems surrounding us.*

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Chapter 1



The Wrong Question: What Do I Want?

What Keeps Going Wrong?

When it comes to dating, do you feel as if you are doing all the right things but still picking all the wrong people? You have been told, “Just be yourself, look for someone who shares your interests and values, and you will find the right mate for you.” But you have fallen in love before, maybe more than once, and you were shocked to find that someone who once made you so happy could go on to make you so miserable. Not only did they hurt or infuriate you, but they also made you feel bad about yourself. The person you fell for was not as advertised. By the time you learned the ugly truth, you had invested so much in the relationship that you still tried to hold on to the dream. Eventually the issues grew too big to bear and one or both of you decided to give up.

Now you are dating again, wondering whether lasting love even exists and whether you should ever trust your emotions. The answer is: yes and no.

Yes, there is such a thing as lasting love,
but trusting your emotions exclusively
is probably not the best way to go.

I am not claiming that chemistry is unimportant. You need that initial spark to get things started, but you also need to understand that such a spark is not sufficient to keep things going. The truth is, if you are picking your dates the way most people do—solely looking for chemistry and what you have in common—you are doing it wrong. Don't feel bad. Even rational people do it wrong. In fact, even people who wind up with great relationships often get there by chance.

There *is* a better way.

First, let's look at the potential results of doing it wrong. It starts with asking the wrong question: What do I want? Someone funny? Smart? Attractive? Athletic? Talented? Independent? That's what Cindy and Jeff asked themselves, and look what happened to them:

What Cindy and Jeff Did Not Know

Cindy was a beautiful forty-eight-year-old woman. She had been married for a couple of years in her twenties. After that marriage ended in divorce, she dated quite a bit, but for more than twenty years she could not make any of her relationships last. By the time she turned forty-two, she was a single successful artist, working three days a week and generating a handsome six-figure income.

That is when Cindy met Jeff, a financial analyst four years her senior. Jeff had recently divorced his wife of sixteen years, had two adult children, and held a corporate job that also paid a generous six figures. That is, until the economy tanked in 2009 and he lost his job. Subsequently, he had to take a job as a book-keeper, and began making only a third of his previous income. That didn't bother Cindy.

Cindy was the kind of woman Jeff thought he wanted: beautiful and talented with an independent spirit. Similarly, Jeff was the kind of man Cindy thought she wanted: attractive and charming with a respectable job. They shared mutual interests, such as traveling, hosting parties, and going out.

Cindy and Jeff had been in and out of their relationship for six years when they decided to seek couples therapy with me. The following are a few things we unearthed during their sessions. As you read, note that the traits that originally attracted these partners turned out to hide unexpected issues:

What Cindy and Jeff Learned the Hard Way

1. Cindy at first liked the fact that Jeff enjoyed going out and having fun. The problem was, he didn't party in moderation. In fact, he was a high-functioning alcoholic. Cindy said that on weekends his drinking got out of hand and sometimes he had blackouts.
2. Jeff was very flirtatious with women. Although his flirtation was what first attracted Cindy to him, such ongoing behavior toward other women, especially his coworkers, bothered her. His behavior encouraged coworkers to call and text him at all times of the day and night. His excuse was that these women were "just friends" and that he wanted to "be there" for his friends when they needed him.

3. Jeff was a friendly guy who put himself out there for other people, which Cindy liked. But he carried it too far for Cindy's taste by remaining in close contact with his ex-wife. He answered his ex's calls and texts at all hours, even when he and Cindy were on a date or a trip together.
4. Although Jeff enjoyed the lifestyle that Cindy's income made possible—dinner dates, parties, and travel—he resented that Cindy made three times as much money as he did despite working fewer hours. He was vocal about what he considered an unfair job market that valued her talent over his education. “She makes so much, working only three days a week, as an *artist*?” he said in a demeaning voice. What's more, he directly told Cindy that she had merely gotten lucky, discounting the validity of both her talent and her independent profession.
5. Jeff loved Cindy's free spirit, but her independence did not allow him as much control of the relationship as he felt he needed.

All the signs of these character and personality differences had been present early on. But both Jeff and Cindy had intentionally muted or downplayed them in hopes that the other person would change. Through therapy, they came to realize they were not a healthy match and decided to split. Wouldn't it have been better if they had been able to see this ahead of time, rather than wasting six years of their lives and emotions on the wrong person?

How could they have known?

Here's how: by asking the right question. The wrong question is, “What do I want?” The right question is: “What *don't* I want?”

Having Things in Common Is Simply Not Enough

American culture cultivates an emphasis on knowing what we want. Among modern adults, the question, “What do I want?” seems to come up most often when seeking a mate. But how can you know what you want in a suitable life partner if you have never had one before?

It is easy to know what you fantasize. Maybe you want someone with fair hair, an athletic body, and kind eyes. Or perhaps someone educated and romantic who makes you laugh. Or maybe it is your hope that lightning will strike: you will meet Mr. or Ms. Right and love will arrive to solve all your problems. We know that is not effective. If it were, nobody who fell in love and married would ever divorce.

Experts estimate between 30 and 41 percent of marriages end in divorce. Clearly, Americans can use better criteria to find a mate.

Modern psychology suggests that it *is* important to share common interests and values with a potential partner. However, the many couples I have encountered, both personally and professionally, have led me to conclude that using the “we have so much in common” barometer alone is a terrible way to measure a couple’s potential success. Let’s say you like hiking, movies, cooking, and dogs. You can easily meet hundreds of people who like those things too. Let’s say on top of that you also prefer someone who shares your political and spiritual views, makes

family a priority, and believes in pursuing a career with a purpose. You can walk into almost any social gathering of your peers and meet someone like that, especially since most people gravitate toward groups with similar values and interests. That is how most people look for dates. But are most of the people you know having success at it?

Looking for someone with common interests and values is very popular. But it does not work.

Why is having things in common not enough? Because the same man who loves dogs, children, and long walks on the beach may also have a temper, or wandering eyes, or a drinking problem. Because the woman who loves tennis, travel, and dressing up for Comic Con may also be needy, or controlling, or a workaholic.

World-renowned psychologist Dr. John Gottman, known for his research on marital stability, has found that only 31 percent of the issues between marital partners are resolvable (*The Marriage Clinic*, John Gottman, Norton Professional Books). I believe that this 31 percent represents the areas of life in which partners share interests and values in common, the characteristics couples initially look for. It's important to consider the flip side of that number. According to Gottman, 69 percent of the issues that life partners face are *irresolvable*. In my opinion, these irresolvable issues are based on individual differences in personalities and needs. Some of these differences are non-negotiable: things we simply cannot tolerate in another person.

I like to visualize this juxtaposition of what couples share in common and what they don't as two overlapping rings. If you

take two wedding rings and turn them into a Venn diagram that represents the reality of relationships, they might look something like this:

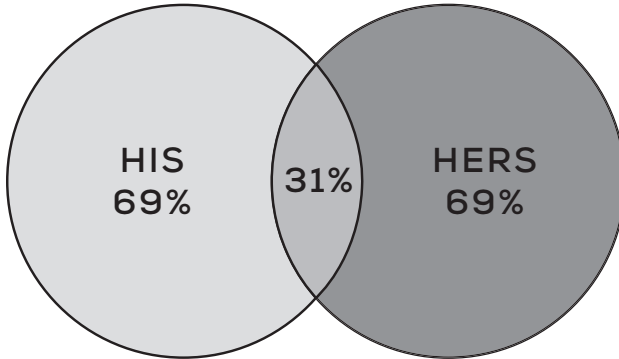


Figure 1.1

The place where the wedding bands overlap represents the 31 percent of their lives that couples share in common, while the place where the bands lie separate and alone represents the other 69 percent of their lives that couples don't share in common.

The thing all couples need to understand is that even when we have plenty in common with our partners, mostly we don't. Still, even though many of the personality and character differences between people are not negotiable, the problems they cause are conquerable. The solution I offer to people who are looking for a mate is to prepare their list of non-negotiables *before* they choose a partner. I call it the **No-No List**.

The trick is figuring out ahead of time whether those things you do *not* have in common are things you can live with. This is critical because you cannot change another person, nor should you want to. Plenty of research shows that when people lead lives that deviate from their true natures and capabilities, they are less likely to be happy than those individuals whose

goals are in sync with the way they want to live their lives. If you try to change another person, you are telling that person that he or she is somehow defective or not good enough. That puts you on unequal ground, and that is a bad place for a relationship to stand.

Each person in a relationship needs to respect the partner's 69 percent, even if that means saying goodbye, because those are the things that make each of you *you*. That 69 percent represents your individuality, something relationships are not meant to destroy, but to preserve. That 69 percent is so resistant to change because it represents your character and your personality, your experiences of the past and your hopes for the future, the values you have been taught and those you have developed on your own. So when someone tries to change this part of you, *of course* it causes resentment. It translates into, "I only love the part of you I shopped for. I don't love all of you." Nobody wants that.

People who try to change their partner's 69 percent, that outer ring of individuality, end up in unhappy marriages or relationships. Those are the married clients I see who feel stuck, confined, or imprisoned. Seeing that happen is what causes so many single people to say they don't want to get married, because "If I get married, I'll have to change myself." No wonder so many people see marriage as a sort of death. If you had to change to make yourself 100 percent suitable to another person, it would indeed be the death of the majority of yourself. Over time, if you cannot accept the other person as is, it will create resentment in both of you. You will resent your partner for not changing, and your partner will resent you for trying to force that change.

A client I know runs a social networking club. He is an extrovert and loves to be around people. When he chose a wife,

he chose someone with whom the areas inside their overlap were strong, and whose areas outside that overlap were things he could live with. Still, they both had to come to terms with accepting one non-negotiable item: he loves the social aspect of his business that sometimes requires him to be out late partying, but his wife sometimes loves to be cozy at home in the evenings and go to bed by ten.

Neither of them is right or wrong in this matter; she's not a party-pooper because she won't go out with him all the time, and he's not inconsiderate because he leaves her alone sometimes. She likes their home. He likes hanging out with friends and clients. What's more, in so many other ways they are compatible, and even in many of the areas where they aren't compatible they do support each other. There was just this one no-no for both of them. They decided it was worth it to compromise, so before they married they came to an agreement.

She more-or-less said, "I'll go out with you sometimes to keep you company, but when I'm tired don't push me. In return, I'll trust you to spend time on your own without me and to enjoy the opportunity to be alone."

He said, "I'll accept that you can't go out with me every night, so long as I can still go without worrying about you feeling neglected. I understand that sometimes you need to just crawl in bed and read a book. Meanwhile, I don't have to go out every night. Some nights, I'll be happy to curl up with you."

That works for them. Other people might find that an untenable situation. They would feel worried about leading separate lives. For such people, these items might go on their **No-No List** as big negatives: "Homebody" versus "Parties all the Time."

It can take years in any relationship to realize that some of the 69 percent of things you do not hold in common actually

matter, even if you told yourself in the beginning that they did not matter at all. Then you will face a tough decision. Some people decide it is worth it to stick together, but many just cannot go on. It is hard to blame them. If your spouse is a little sloppy, that's one thing, but a hoarder is something else entirely. It is better to ask *beforehand*, "Is this the wrong person to marry?" rather than to ask *afterward*, "Do I need a divorce?"