

## Missteps on the Path to Finding Love

Navigating all of the “Dos and Don’ts” of dating can be quite the labyrinth these days. It’s become such a complicated issue for so many people that when you use Google to search for “dating don’ts,” there are over five million results. Clearly, a lot of people are looking for some direction.

I work with clients everyday who seem to have all of the qualities of a highly desirable mate, but try as they may, they continue to remain single; or have one after another first dates; which don’t lead to relationships; and/or have a history of several short-lived relationships, each lasting just a few months. If you’ve been struggling to find a happy healthy relationship, perhaps there are adjustments that could be made to make your efforts more fruitful. There are several common mistakes people tend to make in the early stages of dating and relationships; which cause the relationship to end (sometimes, before it’s ever really started). If you’ve found yourself dating one person after the next and can’t seem to find lasting happiness, you may be engaging in one or more of the following unhealthy behaviors.

### Changing Yourself

It’s not uncommon to meet someone so amazing, that you feel like you have to change something about yourself to be with them. I once had a client who dated a woman for several months who was a deeply devoted sports fan (specifically, football; and even more specifically, the Eagles). He was so attracted to her, and so badly wanted to be liked by her, that he told her he was also an Eagles fan. After a period of time, it became evident to her that he wasn’t really all that interested in football in general, much less her beloved Eagles. In one of our sessions, he shared, “I figured that once she got to know me, it really wouldn’t matter if we liked the same sports.” Unfortunately, it mattered much more than he could have ever imagined.

Being from Montana (a state that doesn’t have a major league football team) the poor guy had no idea that pretending to like football in a relationship with a diehard Eagles fan was actually a very big deal and would end up being the downfall of their relationship. I recall at one point he said, “I don’t get why she cares so much. It’s just a dumb game—what’s the big deal? Who let’s themselves get all emotional over a football game?” [Note: Having been born and raised in the Philadelphia area, I believe I may have actually had an automatic, unconscious physical response in which I leaned back a bit in my chair, uncertain of what her reaction might be to hearing this statement—but preparing myself for the worst]. In the family in which she was raised, watching and supporting the Eagles was regarded as something sacrosanct. I can only describe the explosive argument that followed his statements as being comparative in nature to what one might expect to hear during a very heated debate about the existence of God, between a devout Roman Catholic and an Atheist. It escalated very quickly, it was emotionally charged, and neither were able to offer any validation to the others point of view.

If you find yourself changing details about who you really are, to be more like the type of person you *think* the other person is looking for, the relationship is almost sure to fail. This behavior includes doing things you wouldn't normally want to do, dismissing your own core values and ethics, and/or feigning interest in some or all of their interests instead of expressing your own. Eventually, your authentic interests, values and beliefs will surface, which may likely lead to significant conflicts in the relationship, due to your misrepresentation. The first step toward avoiding this mistake is to take time getting to know yourself and who you really are. Once you feel confident in being who you are, all you need to do is focus on being your most authentic self with others.

### **Compromising Too Much**

Before entering any relationship, it's vital that you know what your wants and needs are from a partner in a relationship. Frequently, people are afraid to express their relationship wants and needs, especially if they are unsure about how the person will respond to those needs. It's important to push through the fear, and just be honest with yourself and with the person you're dating. It may be uncomfortable to communicate your needs, but if you think the person is someone you would really like to commit to, it's essential to be assertive, clear and specific about your needs in a relationship. For example, if you know that physical touch and intimacy are a core need for you, this should be communicated early in the relationship. In return, they may express that they have very low levels of desire for physical touch and affection. In such scenarios, it's not uncommon for one partner to suppress their need for physical touch and affection early in a relationship, with the unfounded belief that the other may be uncomfortable with physical affection now, but won't be later. Thus, core needs are compromised, based on the faulty assumption that things will change as a deeper connection in the relationship is formed. Unfortunately, when their lack of desire for physical touch and affection doesn't change, it becomes major source of discontent in their relationship. Compromising their need for physical touch and affection by suppressing it over a long period of time has a tendency to cause emotional pain, as well as thoughts or feelings of being unattractive, undesired, and possibly even unloved by the other.

Too frequently, I see people try to stifle their needs or hide parts of themselves to "make it work," and ultimately they end up unhappy in the relationship because they've compromised too much of what they needed, in order to fulfill the needs of the other. In the end, resentments are built because one sacrificed too much of themselves. To avoid this mistake, you must be honest with yourself about what you really need from a partner and push through any fears you may have about communicating those needs.

### **Being Too Eager**

There's a not-so-fine line between expressing genuine interest in someone, and becoming too eager, too fast in your pursuit of a relationship with them. It may be hard to hold back your excitement when you feel like you've met someone you really click with, but coming on too strong in the beginning may come across as needy or desperate and/or pushy and

pressured; all of which tends to be a turn off. Here are some of the telltale signs of what I refer to as being “obsessively eager” to be in a relationship with someone:

- Frequent phone calls despite not hearing back from the person
- Frequent text messages despite not receiving responses back
- Oversharing personal details about your life
- Immediately trusting the person
- Going against your own values to please them
- Ignoring your relationship wants or needs to accommodate theirs
- Trying desperately to please them
- Making them a priority and/or scheduling your life to accommodate theirs
- Engaging in sexual intimacy despite your own feelings of discomfort
- Disclosing that you want to have babies with them, before the appetizer has arrived on the first date

While the stereotype tends to be that women rush into relationship too quickly, my experience in working with individuals has shown me that men do it just as frequently. I believe the difference is that television and movies typically typecast this behavior from women as being desperate & needy; whereas men in this role are typecast as the underdog who lacks the experience to get the girl. But I digress...

If you're someone who tends to get overly excited by the prospects of dating someone who seems highly compatible, remind yourself to slow down. If you're right, then this person isn't going anywhere. Take your time and just enjoy being in the moment with them (versus thinking about the happily ever after that you hope will be in your future). Pay attention to how frequently you are attempting to communicate with them via phone, text, email, etc. Does it seem like there is a balanced, back and forth of communication? If not, I recommend that you stop reaching out and wait for them to contact with you. To quote the late-great Maya Angelou, **“Never make someone a priority, when all you are to them is an option.”**

## **Idealization**

In the beginning of almost all new relationships, there is a period where it seems like all the stars have aligned, the sun is brightly shining, the birds are chirping, and the person we've just met is the most amazing human being on the planet. This initial stage of the relationship is called Limerence, and it typically lasts from the first 6-12 months of a relationship. Limerence is the result of a biochemical process created in the brain. In an article written about the biochemical roots of limerence, David Sack, M.D., explains that, “Responding to cues from the hypothalamus, the pituitary gland releases norepinephrine, dopamine, phenylethylamine (a natural amphetamine), estrogen and testosterone. This chemical cocktail produces the euphoria of new love and begins to normalize as the attachment hormones (vasopressin and oxytocin) kick in, typically six to 24 months into a relationship” (2012).

In the wake of the release of this “chemical cocktail” people tend to selectively focus on the positive personality traits and behaviors and either knowingly disregard, or genuinely don't see, the person's negative personality traits, flaws, faults, imperfections, etc. During this period of time, it's very difficult to distinguish limerence from genuine, romantic love.

When someone has moved beyond this stage, they are able to see the person as a whole, with both positive and negative traits and behaviors. However, some get stuck in this stage, and continue to idealize the person, putting them up on a pedestal. These relationships tend to end for a variety of reasons, the most common being that the person cannot possibly live up to their partner's idealized expectations, as they are flawed human beings, with faults and imperfections—just like the rest of us.

♥I wish you all the best in your search.♥

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Dr. Dianna Palimere is a Psychosexual Therapist and Licensed Clinical Social Worker. She has been working in the field of mental health for the past 15 years, dedicating the past eleven years to specializing in clinical sexuality. She holds a Bachelors degree in Psychology, a Masters degree in Social Work, a Masters degree in Human Sexuality Education, and a PhD in Clinical Human Sexuality. Utilizing a holistic approach to therapy, she incorporates a variety of clinical interventions in her work with individuals, couples, and families. She is devoted to helping people achieve sexual health and healing through her work as a psychotherapist in her private practice in Pike Creek, DE; as well as in her work with local nonprofit organizations. To learn more about her or to schedule an appointment, visit her website:

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