

SOME MYTHS ABOUT LOVE, INTIMACY, AND RELATIONSHIPS

Everyone has his or her own set of myths about intimate relationships that can come from both your childhood experiences and the culture-at-large. These myths create unrealistic and unhealthy expectations and core beliefs about relationships with partners. Below are some examples of these types of myths. See if any of these relate to your expectations about your current and past partners and try to think of any other myths you have believed that were not even be mentioned here. Having these sorts of unrealistic expectations frequently triggers anger, resentment, and bitterness in intimate relationships when you start to discover that your partner is not going to fulfill all these expectations that you have for them.

“MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MY PARTNER WILL ALWAYS INVOLVE THE SAME INTENSITY, ENERGY, AND ‘MAGIC’ THAT IT DID WHEN WE FIRST MET”

In fact, there are “ebbs and flows” in intimate relationships. People move apart and, hopefully, back together over the course of a long-term committed partnership. Some people lose track of this notion when they are in the midst of the infatuation phase shortly after they have first met their “true love.” In this phase, they have often fallen “head over heels” in love, can’t stop thinking about the other person, and feel totally connected to and completely consumed by their new lover. This is a romantic and “heady” time for many couples, when they view themselves as the “soul-mates” whom they have been seeking throughout their entire lives (even though, in reality, they actually don’t know one another all that well).

However, given the realities of busy day-to-day living and life itself, with doing your jobs, handling your finances, dealing with your children and their many activities, figuring out how to relate to your in-law’s and extended family, caring for ailing parents, and everything else that distracts you from the infatuation’s intense and all-consuming focus on the other person, it is not possible to maintain this total absorption with your partner. Some people, because the intensity and ecstasy have been replaced with a sense of turmoil (as well as serenity and comfort at times), start to believe that the “magic” has left and that there is now something very “wrong” with their relationship. They may try to recreate the old feeling of excitement the “easy” way, by finding a new partner and starting an affair or by completely exiting the relationship that has become “stale” in their minds by separating or getting a divorce.

Excitement and romance are not necessarily qualities that are inherent in a long-term intimate relationship, but they can definitely be part of what happens if the relationship becomes an important priority in both peoples’ lives. There is an absolute need to stay connected to a partner but, after the infatuation phase, it involves conscious planning, energy, time, and emotion to insure that this connection is maintained and nurtured. Healthy and happy couples are clear that intensity and excitement exist at times, but that the foundation of their relationship rests on companionship, genuine friendship, respect for one another, and their ability to work at and deal effectively with whatever life brings to them.

***“IN ORDER TO HAVE A TRULY GOOD RELATIONSHIP AND BE TRULY COMPATIBLE,
PARTNERS NEED TO HAVE THE SAME QUALITIES AND INTERESTS”***

This myth involves the idea that there is a particular “soul-mate” somewhere out there for you and that this person is exactly like you. He or she will have the same feelings, the same thoughts, the same wants and needs, the same life experiences, the same values, the same character attributes, and the same interests. In other words, this person will be your “clone” and being with him or her, because of these similarities, will lead to eternal and blissful happiness.

First of all, it isn't very likely that you will find a person who is just like you. All of us are different, in some sense, from those around us. This is especially true in a heterosexual relationship, where you are different genders (there can be a huge difference between the experiences of males and females in our families of origin and our culture). Second, being with someone just like you has a high probability of leading to either a life of boredom or to a lot of “fireworks.” The latter situation can occur especially if they have issues with disrespectful anger, control, shame, and negativity themselves. I attempted something like this second scenario in my 20's with a partner. It was a catastrophe! We made each other incredibly miserable during the six-month span when we attempted to live together.

It can actually be helpful to have some similarities with a partner in terms of interests and qualities. There certainly needs to be some common ground on which to build a life together. However, couples in healthy relationships can also have very differing interests and qualities and it is often from these differences that your own individual growth as a person can arise. Differences can offer you a alternative vision of who you can be and how you can change parts of yourself, if you wish to make the choice to do so. Differences can also bring excitement and zest to your relationship together and teach you new things about yourself and the world around you.

“THE TWO OF US WILL BECOME ‘ONE’”

This is a classic when it comes to myths about relationships and is often touted by a variety of societal institutions. The sad part about this myth is that, in order for two people to merge and truly “become one,” they each need to start as or transform themselves into half a person rather than being the fully engaged and functioning human being that they really are and have the capability of being. The idea that we become “less” as a result of becoming fully involved with someone else implies that we lose important parts of our own personhood when we enter an intimate relationship. That does not need to happen and is anything but a healthy expectation in a relationship with a partner.

“MY PARTNER WILL ALWAYS BE THE SAME PERSON THAT SHE/HE WAS WHEN WE FIRST MET”

This myth assumes that we made a bargain in the beginning of our relationship with one another. It reads, “*This is what I signed on for so you can't change the ‘rules of the game.’*” The problem with

this myth is that an important goal in life is to heal and grow and become the very best person we can. Personal growth is a natural part of living and an integral part of a fulfilling life. Hopefully, we all continue to grow until we leave this earth.

A partner may decide to that it is important to have children (even if that was not what they thought originally). A partner may want to work outside the home (or stay home with the children that you do have) or even make a major change in their career direction. A partner may want to go back to school and pursue additional education as a life goal (even if this was not a priority at the beginning of the relationship). A partner may want to develop friendships, interests, or hobbies even if these were not a part of who they were when you first met. A partner may come to look at the world in a different way, changing beliefs and values that were once very different from what they are now.

All of these can be stimulating and growth-producing for your partner and, potentially, for you as well...unless you decide that it is not okay for them to change that original “contract” that you believe you had with them. Often, change is perceived by the other person as threatening, i.e. *“Maybe my partner will pay less attention to me, be less interested in me, or even end the relationship if they focus attention on other people or activities.”* This can be true, especially if a partner focuses on destructive or “risky” people, activities, or behaviors. But it does not necessarily have to be the case. In fact, new attitudes, people, and experiences, if brought back to the relationship, can help both of you change and grow and make your life together that much more interesting and stimulating.

“MY PARTNER WILL AUTOMATICALLY KNOW MY WANTS AND NEEDS AND WILL ALWAYS BE THERE TO TAKE CARE OF THEM FOR ME”

Part of this myth involves the notion that a good partner is a gifted and all-knowing “mind reader,” but unfortunately, there aren’t many of us out there who have this kind of ability. Making guesses and assumptions about what is going on with someone else leads to big problems and basically just doesn’t work in an intimate relationship. Truly understanding and connecting with one another requires ongoing and effective communication and being assertive and clear about what you want and need in your relationship. However, just because you are direct, open, and honest about your wants and needs, you still may not get them taken care of through your partner. They may see things very differently from the way that you do and may not be willing to address your wants and needs in the way that you expect them to be addressed. Accepting this reality is critical because otherwise you can become demanding, overbearing, and controlling.

The second part of this myth also highlights once again the need for friends outside your primary relationship so you are not solely dependent on your partner to take care of your feelings, wants, and needs. That kind of over-dependency on a partner has the potential to create significant frustration, resentment, and anger within you if your partner is not there for you in the way you want, setting the stage for you to become controlling, punishing, and sometimes even abusive.

“MY PARTNER WILL MAKE ME HAPPY NO MATTER WHAT ELSE IS GOING ON IN MY LIFE”

No one has the power to create happiness within you. Other people, including partners, have the power to contribute to your happiness (or unhappiness) by who they are, what they say, and how they act. But true happiness comes from within. You are ultimately responsible for creating and sustaining happiness in your life. And, for most of us, especially if we came from childhoods where we were shamed and hurt by others, there is a legacy of emotional pain that only we can truly address (with the help and support of the people closest to us, including our partners). Expecting that we can abdicate this responsibility and believing that it is a partner's life task to make us and keep us happy given our past histories and our current stressors and issues simply will not work.

“MY PARTNER WILL MAKE UP FOR MY BAD CHILDHOOD”

This is a variation on the myth discussed above. There is some truth in the idea that partners in an intimate relationship can be very helpful to you in healing the emotional pain from your past. Often, at an unconscious level, we actually look for and choose partners who have the potential to assist us in doing just this. But they cannot do it alone. You need to be a willing participant in working through your own emotional wounds from the past. And to expect that a partner will be able to do this for you is unrealistic. First of all, you need to be clear about the wounds you wish to address and you then need to be willing to allow your partner to assist you in the process of healing these. There is no magic to this happening in your life. It takes self-awareness, honesty, and hard work on your part if this is actually going to occur.

“I WILL BE ABLE TO MAKE MY PARTNER HAPPY NO MATTER WHAT IS GOING ON IN HIS/HER LIFE”

As is noted above, no one has the power to create happiness in anyone else. That is true even if your partner expects that you should be able to do this for him or her. Those sorts of expectations by the other person will only leave you feeling powerless, inadequate, and frustrated. This does not mean that you do not have a responsibility and an obligation to treat your partner in a consistently respectful, nurturing, and loving way, which means remembering that “love is a verb” and involves what you say and do and how you think about and treat your partner from moment-to-moment in your time together. Doing this can certainly contribute to your partner feeling better about himself or herself but there is no way that you alone can do it for them.

“MY PARTNER WILL ALWAYS BE WHO I WANT THEM TO BE AND DO WHAT I WANT THEM TO DO”

This myth has to do with the idea that, if someone really cares about, loves, and respects us, they will always be the person we want them to be and do whatever we think they should do. The bottom line here has to do with the idea that we have a right to be able to control what our partners do and say, who they are, and how they live their lives. That sets you up for an enormous amount of frustration and stress

because, in fact, partners are “their own person” and will, in the end, decide what is right for them. Disrespectful, punishing, and abusive anger has, as a primary goal, shaping and changing other people into who we want them to be. But this simply won’t work long-term and the eventual outcome is generally the loss of trust, safety, emotional connection, and love in the relationship and, for many couples, leads to the end of the relationship.

“I CAN CHANGE MY PARTNER AND MAKE HIM/HER INTO WHO I THINK THEY SHOULD BE”

This is another myth that has to do with our false belief that we should have the ability to control someone else, especially if we love them and they love us. Often, even in the initial infatuation phase of a relationship, people begin to sense and see things about their partners that they do not like or that they feel uncomfortable with. Often, at this stage, instead of talking about these concerns directly and openly, many people think to themselves that, when they move in together, when they become engaged, when they get married, or when they have a baby, these issues will “magically” improve and resolve themselves and “everything will be just fine.”

Sadly, that just isn’t the way it works. We and our partners, in the end, will make the decision to recognize and change parts of ourselves that the other person doesn’t like or that are unhealthy and dysfunctional for us and our relationship. No one has the ability or power to force change in another person although punishing, disrespectful, explosive, or abusive anger is frequently used as a “motivator” by the abusive person to try to create that change in the partner. In reality, it won’t work and will eventually just create more mistrust, emotional distance, and resentment for both of you.

“I CAN ‘FIX’ MY PARTNER AND SOLVE ALL HIS/HER PROBLEMS”

Often, people in our culture (especially men) are taught to be “fixers” and “problem-solvers.” We certainly are expected to do this at work and in many other areas of our lives. But a belief that you will be able to “fix” your partner is a mistaken notion that leads to all sorts of problems for you and the relationship. As has already been mentioned, in the end, people need to take responsibility for themselves. You can be an enormous asset in your partner addressing and changing problems and issues in his or her life but you can’t do it for them. They need to recognize the problem, want to do something about it, and then follow through with the steps necessary to do just that. Trying to “fix” a partner who doesn’t see the problem or who doesn’t want to address it only triggers resentment, frustration, and anger in both of you.

“MY PARTNER SHOULD AND ALWAYS WILL ACCEPT AND LOVE ME UNCONDITIONALLY”

If you think you should automatically get unconditional love from another adult, you may want to re-think your approach to relationships. In general, healthy people have clear limits and boundaries and a clear sense about what is “okay” and “not okay” in a partner relationship. The reality is that there are

many attitudes and behaviors that an adult partner may find objectionable and offensive and may end up becoming “deal-breakers” when it comes to continuing to stay in a relationship with another person. Affairs are one example of this; alcohol and drug abuse is another; and punishing and disrespectful anger expressions, especially those that involve emotional, verbal, and physical abuse, are a final example.

The idea is not that you have to be a “perfect” person. But there are, and there ought to be, conditions related to being and staying in a relationship with a partner. Angry people who proclaim, “*My partner should accept me just the way I am*” need to prepare themselves for a rude awakening. Human beings who are healthy and functional generally have some expectations for their adult partners.

Interestingly, if you and your partner really do work hard on yourselves and your relationship with one another, there is the potential for you to actually develop something pretty close to what I would define as “unconditional love,” where there is trust, safety, respect, acceptance, and a deep sense of caring, commitment, and connectedness in your relationship. But if you are looking for an “easy” unconditional love and acceptance in this life, where you don’t have to put in much effort with yourself or the relationship, it makes a lot more sense to get a dog. They can actually provide this feeling for you from the “get-go;” and they won’t ask much of anything from you in return.

“I WON’T EVER NEED ANYONE ELSE IN MY LIFE FROM THIS POINT ON” OR “I’LL NEVER FEEL LONELY” OR “MY PARTNER WILL ALWAYS BE THERE FOR ME”

Some people, especially men in our culture, believe that they truly won’t need anyone else once they are involved in a relationship with a partner. The other person is supposed to be able to take care of all their needs for emotional connection, nurturance, and love. And so, once they are involved in a committed relationship, they tend to let go of friendships and relationships that they may have previously valued. Some of this may be laziness and simply not wanting to put energy into maintaining important outside relationships. Some of it may have to do with important changes in life circumstances (e.g. moving in together with a partner, getting married, having children, moving to a new location, getting a more responsible job).

However, in general, this is not a good idea. It is unrealistic and naive to expect that your partner will completely revolve his or her life around you and be there for you at all times. After the infatuation phase, you and your partner will return to living your own lives, with all the attendant issues, distractions, problems, and concerns. Expecting that your partner will be your sole source of emotional support (men in particular often believe this to be true) is a set-up for hurt, frustration, and resentment. This myth again speaks to the critical need that both men and women have for same-sex friends with whom they can stay connected even if their partners are feeling overwhelmed and preoccupied, at times, with an issue in their own lives. We need other people in our lives as friends and confidant(e)s and having outside friendships can, in fact, bring interest, zest, and growth to a relationship with a partner. In general, women tend to maintain their outside friendships better than men but it is nevertheless important for both genders to make the commitment to do this as part of being in a healthy relationship.

“WE WILL NEVER BE ATTRACTED TO ANYONE ELSE” OR “MY PARTNER WILL TAKE CARE OF ALL MY SEXUAL DESIRES AND MY NEED FOR AFFECTION AND ATTENTION”

Many men, in fact, do notice attractive women. Men are often aroused by visual images and this includes looking at other women. That does not mean that a man needs to stare, gawk, or compare his partner to other women in their day-to-day lives together or to women he sees in the media. Noticing and being attracted to other people also does not mean that a person then has to go out and have an emotional or a sexual affair with that person. Women can likewise become attracted to other men, especially if a man is attentive, nurturing, and caring in his interactions with her when she believes that her current partner is not doing this. This also does not mean that she needs to go out and have a full-fledged affair. Attractions to others will occur at times. Whether they become destructive to the health of an intimate relationship has to do with how you or your partner respond to these feelings of attraction. Hopefully, you and your partner will, in fact, take care of your sexual needs (although you may not be “in synch” with one another at all times). But to expect that your partner will take care of all your emotional needs (e.g. for affection, attention, and connection) is probably unrealistic. As was said above, we often need others to supply some of these needs as well.

“BEING ANGRY WITH YOUR PARTNER MEANS THAT YOU DON’T REALLY LOVE HIM/HER” OR “BECAUSE WE LOVE EACH OTHER AS MUCH AS WE DO, WE’LL NEVER HAVE TO FIGHT WITH ONE ANOTHER”

Many people learned in their childhood experiences that anger, a normal and natural human emotion, was synonymous with disrespect, punishment, shame, and abuse. Given this backdrop, it makes sense that these people would often make the assumption that anger should never be a part of “real love.” But nothing could be further from the truth. Conflict and anger are, simply put, a part of the human condition and a part of human relationships, especially intimate ones. It is critical to understand that conflict just means that you and your partner disagree about something. This doesn’t mean that one of you is right and one is wrong. Nor does it mean that one of you is “good” and one is “bad.” The reality is that you are two completely different people with different childhoods and different life experiences. You are bound to see things differently and become frustrated and irritated with one another from time to time. It is how you handle the anger that arises between you that determines whether the anger and conflict in your relationship are helpful and growth-producing or destructive and damaging.

“OUR RELATIONSHIP WILL ALWAYS BE SMOOTH AND EASY” OR “TRULY GOOD RELATIONSHIPS DON’T TAKE ANY REAL WORK; THEY JUST HAPPEN”

Some people hold the simplistic and naive belief that “*our relationship should just take care of itself*” without their having to put much time, energy, and emotion into nurturing and tending it. This is a “set-up” for disaster. There are, of course, times in your life when you are too busy and preoccupied to focus on each other. This is normal. But the danger that arises here is that you will begin to “take your

partner for granted” and assume that you don’t need to do anything to keep your relationship vibrant and alive. Nothing could be further from the truth. A relationship is not a static entity but is, in fact, a living and breathing process. If you invest little or nothing of yourself into your relationship, over time it will become stale and “die.” Relationships require an ongoing investment of time, energy, and emotion in them by both parties. A relationship cannot stay healthy and grow if this does not occur.