

## **Finding Love in the Right Places**

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What key traits are people looking for in potential partners and what can they do to establish rapport when they are interested in exploring the possibilities of a loving relationship with one another? The answers to these questions are addressed by a number of recent research studies shedding light on these issues. This research indicates there are a set of essential traits that most people are interested in pursuing when seeking out potential partners. Moreover, there are basic questions that people can genuinely ask and authentically respond to that can facilitate a predictable sense of closeness in their relationship. This article summarizes these research findings and discusses how those seeking a potential partner can enhance their efforts in establishing a long-term loving relationship.

### **Key Traits**

When it comes to establishing long-term loving relationships, both men and women across cultures are seeking a surprising similar set of traits in potential partners. In a recent study conducted at Swansea University (Thomas et al., 2019), researchers investigated what key traits are the most important for selecting a mate. In this study, approximately 2,700 participants across the globe were given a “budget” to design their ideal partners. Participants selected their desired traits from a well-established set of favorable characteristics such as physical attraction, good financial prospects, kindness, humor, chastity, desire for children, and creativity.

Out of this diverse range of choices, participants in this study consistently allocated the greatest portion of their budgets (about 25%) to kindness. In addition, participants from both Eastern and Western cultures generally agreed on the following three most important traits for a desirable partner: attractiveness (physically and/or sexually appealing), kindness (generously and/or thoughtfully caring), and financial wherewithal (either actual or potential).

While the selection of the most important traits appeared to transcend cultural differences, these differences were more evident when participants considered other less primary traits. For example, Western participants were more likely to choose the traits of humor and creativity, while Eastern participants were more likely to select religiosity and chastity. Despite these differences, the overall agreement on the top three traits suggests that desirability is geared more toward universal than culturally imbued traits. Furthermore, the universality of these traits gives credence to the evolutionary hypothesis that natural selection plays a major role in shaping the most desirable traits that promote longevity in intimate relationships (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Buss, 2005).

### **Key Questions**

When it comes to establishing rapport in adult relationships, the findings of psychologist Arthur Aron and his colleagues (1997) identified the critical role that reciprocal self-disclosure plays in forming a sense of closeness. More specifically, these investigators explored the extent to which intimate rapport between two strangers can be facilitated by having them ask each other

a series of 36 personal questions. These questions are divided into three sets, with each set intended to be more revealing than the previous one.

These 36 questions are based on the principle that mutual vulnerability facilitates closeness. To quote Aron et al. (1997), “One key pattern associated with the development of a close relationship among peers is sustained, escalating, reciprocal, personal self-disclosure” (p. 364). However, this kind of vulnerability with another person—especially a stranger—is typically quite challenging and this 36-question exercise provides a structured vehicle to overcome this challenge. The different queries for each of these three sets of questions are as follows:

### Set I

1. Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?
2. Would you like to be famous? In what way?
3. Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?
4. What would constitute a “perfect” day for you?
5. When did you last sing to yourself? To someone else?
6. If you were able to live to the age of 90 and retain either the mind or body of a 30-year-old for the last 60 years of your life, which would you want?
7. Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?
8. Name three things you and your partner appear to have in common.
9. For what in your life do you feel most grateful?
10. If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?
11. Take four minutes and tell your partner your life story in as much detail as possible.
12. If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?

### Set II

13. If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future or anything else, what would you want to know?
14. Is there something that you’ve dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven’t you done it?
15. What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?
16. What do you value most in a friendship?
17. What is your most treasured memory?
18. What is your most terrible memory?
19. If you knew that in one year you would die suddenly, would you change anything about the way you are now living? Why?
20. What does friendship mean to you?
21. What roles do love and affection play in your life?
22. Alternate sharing something you consider a positive characteristic of your partner. Share a total of five items
23. How close and warm is your family? Do you feel your childhood was happier than most other people’s?
24. How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?

**Set III**

25. Make three true “we” statements each. For instance, “We are both in this room feeling ... “
26. Complete this sentence: “I wish I had someone with whom I could share ... “
27. If you were going to become a close friend with your partner, please share what would be important for him or her to know.
28. Tell your partner what you like about them; be very honest this time, saying things that you might not say to someone you’ve just met.
29. Share with your partner an embarrassing moment in your life.
30. When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?
31. Tell your partner something that you like about them already.
32. What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?
33. If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven’t you told them yet?
34. Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire. After saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to safely make a final dash to save any one item. What would it be? Why?
35. Of all the people in your family, whose death would you find most disturbing? Why?
36. Share a personal problem and ask your partner’s advice on how he or she might handle it. Also, ask your partner to reflect back to you how you seem to be feeling about the problem you have chosen.

**Finding the Loving Connection**

In her *New York Times* blog, Mandy Coltron (2015) goes so far as to state that potential partners who fall in love will typically do so as a result of the reciprocal self-disclosure they experience with one another. In her words, “I liked learning about myself through my answers, but I liked learning things about him even more” (para 12). While finding that special connection is clearly dependent on the reciprocal nature of the give-and-take that takes place in a couple’s interpersonal exchanges, the content derived from these exchanges also ends up becoming just as vital.

The vast number of people seeking long-term partners are looking for commonality and their sense of commonality is typically based on what they are able to observe and learn about one another in their interpersonal exchanges. It is well documented that partners tend to select one another based on similarities in their demographic characteristics, values, attitudes, and socio-economic status (Brehm, Miller, & Perlman, 2006). This is why the vast majority of people end up forming long-term relationships with partners who share similar appearances, backgrounds, traits, interests, and tastes (Love, 2001).

So the degree to which reciprocal self-disclosure becomes increasingly more personal and provides more opportunities for a couple to discover their mutual commonalities will likely be the extent to which they develop a close connection between each other. However, this connection is not just about vulnerability and commonality, it also depends on what each party learns about their differences—some of which are complementary and others of which portend incompatibility. Complementary differences are the divergent characteristics in each partner that offset what the other is lacking. In contrast, incompatible differences are the beliefs,

values, aspirations, habits, and/or life style choices that potential partners find objectionable about one another. While incompatible differences represent a more immediately understandable basis for impeding the development of intimate relationships, the complementary differences are less understood as important factors in helping sustain successful intimate relationships.

Complementary differences most typically manifest themselves in the matching of personality traits like those specified in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1980). The research on this phenomena suggests that successful intimate relationships involve pairing based on personality traits that are not only similar but are dissimilar as well; that is, when successful, people will tend to select mates with not only similar personality characteristics, but with dissimilar ones that can offset and help compensate for their particular personality type (Cattell, Eber, & Tatsuoka, 1970; Kiersey & Bates, 1984). Thus, for example when successful, introverts will tend to select for their own type, but will also tend to select partners who are more extraverted than they are to help them more easily socialize and balance out the limitations of their introversion.

## Conclusion

Blaise Pascal's famous 17<sup>th</sup> Century aphorism that "love has its reasons which reason knows little of" still captures the visceral and enigmatic nature of love, but it fails to reflect the ordered and predictable nature of intimacy that modern science has delineated. In fact, the current research (e.g., Aron et al., 1997; Brehm, Miller, & Perlman, 2006; Love, 2001; Thomas et al., 2019) shows there are a set of critical factors involved in establishing a lasting intimate relationship. Although love is still as much limbic as it ever was, these studies show that establishing a lasting loving relationship depends on the degree to which: (a) reciprocal personal disclosure becomes a central part of the getting acquainted part of the relationship; (b) traits of mutual kindness, attractiveness, and financial capability help cement the relationship; and (c) fundamental commonalities are shared and complementary differences are amalgamated as the relationship matures. These are some of the salient conditions—the right places—where enduring love can and does emerge.

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