Are They Really the One?

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It’s that time of year again, love – or lack thereof— is palpably in the air. As a pair-bonding species, people seek out and form long lasting relationships with a partner. We love to love and be loved in return. Music, books, movies, and reality TV shows have long perpetuated the idea that we are destined to meet our soulmate, our forever partner, our “the one”, with dating being a major part of our lives, cross-culturally, from adolescence to late adulthood.

By now you’ve probably heard the frightening statistic that 40 – 50% of married couples in the US divorce. If people are out there looking for their forever partner, why are we so bad at it? How does one know they’ve found their perfect match or when to cut and run? Here we discuss what characterizes solid partnerships and how you can tell if you’ve found “the one.”
Missing Puzzle Piece

In the early stages of courtship, people are compelled to look for someone who has the potential to fit seamlessly into their life. We prioritize qualities in a partner that signal that they’ll be accepted by our friends and family, that they appreciate the things we dedicate our time and energy to, and that they hold beliefs similar to our own.

Though the popular adage “opposites attract” has certainly influenced how media portrays relationships, research shows that we actually tend to be attracted to people who are similar to us, be it having comparable education or social status, or even the same initials (Levy, Markell, & Cerf, 2019). Who better to “fit” into our lives than someone who is like us?

Surprisingly, this may not apply to personality. Greater personality similarity has been shown to have a negative impact on relationship satisfaction in a study following couples for 12 years (Shiota & Levenson, 2007). If you’re too similar to your partner, down the road there’s bound to be conflict.
Is Your Connection Deep or Shallow?

Because dating is motivated by a search to find the ideal partner, it’s no surprise that most people report their dating lives aren’t going well (Pew Research Center, 2019). Perhaps dating can feel difficult because we don’t always know exactly what to look for in an ideal partner or when a potential partner is worth investing in.

Taking the time to get to know one another on a deeper level, to develop friendship, understand one another’s communication styles, and see firsthand how a potential partner deals with stressful circumstances are key for determining if you’ve found “the one.”
Red Flags vs. Green Flags

Early in relationships, when you think about your “the one” you feel a surge of happiness as our reward circuits release dopamine. But initial butterflies can’t carry the whole partnership forever. When long-term commitment develops, what promotes longevity vs. relationship dissolution? Research shows that commitment, trust, better conflict resolution, and greater use of humor are predictive of long-term satisfaction. Keep an eye out for these green flags!

What are the red flags that let us know when we should jump ship? Keep an eye out for conflict patterns that include criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. These are predictive of relationship dissolution, and should be avoided at all costs (Gottman, 1998).

All too often, unhappy couples fall prey to the sunk cost fallacy, staying with partners because of all the time, effort, and money they have already invested in the relationship (Rego et al., 2018). Don’t fall prey to this! If you’re unhappy in a relationship, communicate your needs. If nothing changes, maybe that’s a sign they’re not “the one.”
Grow Together

Although the idea of a soulmate sounds magical, you might not want to embrace the idea that you have one perfect soulmate. Couples who embraced the soulmate model may experience high levels of satisfaction but are also prone to high levels of conflict and divorce (Wilcox & Dew, 2010). This is because when one thing goes wrong, it completely negates the idea that the partner is your perfect match.

People are malleable and every relationship we enter changes us. We may meet plenty perfect matches in our lives, each influencing us in different ways. All in all, it’s best to embrace a growth mindset towards romantic partnerships, allowing for change and maturation which help facilitate stability.