

## **Love Isn't Blind**

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*Summary: How to form an enduring bond. Healthy relationships are built on love and trust, commitment and intimacy.*

Of all the decisions you make in your life, few are as important as who you choose to marry or live with. Make a bad choice and you can spend your days and nights mired in unhappiness or consumed by anxiety or depression, conditions that not only rob your mental health but undermine your physical health as well. You might be consigned to economic instability or subjected to physical or verbal abuse. Or you might find yourself struggling as a single parent. The consequences of a poor choice, and of marital dissatisfaction or even disruption, are far-reaching, extending even to the next generation.

So do yourself a big favor and make sure you choose a mate wisely. Yes, you need some basic relationship skills like communication, problem solving and conflict resolution. But you also need a partner who's willing to engage in all of them with you and create what most of us want more than anything -- a sense of closeness to someone else. There is, ladies and gentlemen, a science of mate selection, as it's known in the psych biz. Relationships are not mysterious entities that enter your life through a magical flash of lightning sometimes called "chemistry." That, folks, has nothing to do with the ability to form an enduring bond.

Love isn't blind at all. Healthy relationships are in fact built on love, trust, commitment, intimacy and attachment.

Step One: You meet someone you like -- and, importantly, someone who demonstrates unquestionably that feelings are mutual. Then what you need to do, contends psychologist John Van Epp, is to pace the growing closeness so that you have the opportunity to explore the attitudes and behaviors that foretell the future. Time is an important factor in this.

As you grow to know someone, says Van Epp, you determine what you can and can't trust. You also rely on him/her to meet certain needs. As time goes by, you develop some level of commitment. And finally, in a romantic relationship, there is sexual chemistry which prompts touch.

These are the five bonding forces that form the glue of your relationship, he stresses. And here's the catch -- they must grow together in a balanced way. You must keep your heart and your head in harmony. So you never let one of the five forces too far ahead of your progress in any of the others.

- Know
- Trust
- Rely
- Commit
- Touch

In other words, says Van Epp, there's a safe zone you need to stay within as your relationship grows. And the basic rule for staying in the safe zone is, never let the level of one bonding dynamic exceed the level of the previous one.

Therefore, never go farther in sexual touch than the level of your commitment, and do not form a commitment beyond the way the other person has proven reliable. And do not look to your partner to meet your needs beyond your tested trust in him/her. And do not trust someone more than what you know about them.

If you step out of the safe zone, Van Epp finds, you will overlook and minimize problems in the person for the sake of love. Did you get that? If you confer trust before you know someone, or get sexually involved before you fully know someone or before the level of commitment warrants it, then you're going to be minimizing problems with your partner, compromising your judgment and setting the stage for perpetual disappointment. Too late will you find out that your partner is a jerk.

A relationship begins with knowing someone, and the state of what you know controls the other dynamics. Your knowledge of someone grows with mutual self-disclosure and diverse experiences together, shared together over time. It's important to see the way your partner functions in a variety of settings -- with friends, with family, with bosses and coworkers, with strangers, with children.

There are five crucial areas to deeply explore and come to know during the dating process:

- Family background and childhood dynamics
- Attitudes and actions of the conscience and maturity
- The scope of your compatibility potential
- The examples of other relationship patterns
- Strength of relationship skills.

These are the areas that best predict what a person will be like as a spouse and parent. Using this approach, Van Epp insists, you can follow your heart without losing your mind.