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Taking Responsibility for Really Knowing  
If You Want a Relationship  
By Sharna Striar

Society tends to set up a time frame in which we're supposed to settle down into an intimate relationship. Yet our life circumstances can hinder our conforming to this expectation. The point is that we can't let social pressures push us into such an important decision before we are psychologically ready for it. For instance, we can be so utterly consumed by our personal development, our school commitments, or our professional career that forming a relationship may be premature or have low priority. Under any of these circumstances it would be inappropriate to try to focus our energy on developing or sustaining an intimate relationship.

On the other hand, it can be the fear of intimacy that governs people's decisions about relationships and lifestyles. Commitments to another person can be frightening for someone who believes it will infringe on his/her personal independence in some ways. This fear may subconsciously manifest itself in the setting up impenetrable barriers or unrealistic expectations for a mate as a means of avoiding intimate lasting relationships. These are possible motives people should consider as they ponder their desire for companionship.

Let's look for a moment at some healthy motives for choosing a mate. One is the desire for an ongoing caring relationship--- that's the bottom line. People want someone who is willing to listen when they're down and fly with them when they're up; they want to know that when they're out after dark, someone is concerned. They want to spend their lives with someone special because they believe it will enrich the quality of their lives. And people want a home. In this mobile society where we're separated from our families of origin, we choose to make new families, create new centers where we can rest and take off our masks and armor--- and where we can give and receive freely in order to support each other's personal development.

You can begin the process of choosing a mate by having a conversation with yourself. You need to be honest about your sense of readiness to open up, to love, to trust another person, and to receive love and support. You have to decide what it is that's important to you by examining the inner most center of your being. Look at who you are, what you care about, and what you want for your future. Then try to create an image of a mate by deciding what qualities you value and like in a person. As you conjure up this picture, ask yourself if you're being realistic. You can do this by asking yourself if you possess the traits you value. In this process of imagining and of choosing, don't try to makeup for personal deficits because the traits you lack are not necessarily those you value. It's also important to remain flexible even while being clear about what you want and need. If you can accept some inconsistencies and allow for surprises, you will have a better chance of creating an environment for personal growth and healthy interaction.

Be patient and be gentle with yourself during this process. It's common for people to panic and choose a mate because they're afraid they will be alone. But it's important to ask yourself what it really means to be "alone". What, for instance, is loneliness and what is privacy? Essentially, you have to face the fact that you might be alone, and transcend any feeling of panic so that you can choose wisely and remain true to your inner self. Accepting being alone in fact, can bring you a sense of tranquility and inner knowledge.

According to Judith Bardwick, in her book In Transition, people searching for mates today are looking for specific attributes: gaining the comfort of psychological assistance from a partner, having a satisfying sex life, and being friends with their mates. Surprisingly, this latter criteria is assuming increasing importance. People want a commitment from their partner to talk things through. They want someone whom they can admire. People are also looking for partners with similar aspirations and values. An important element of this is similar spiritual values. This does not necessarily mean holding the same religious beliefs, but rather being aware of the spiritual forces within you and your partner.

Sometimes it's not so much the specific person but whether two people's lifestyles and goals are compatible. This almost necessarily involves compromise and collaboration – if you understand human nature, you know that sometimes your partner will be there for you and sometimes there will be distance between you. If you allow room for the expression of each other's autonomy and individuality as well as respect and nurture the bond between you, the relationship will most likely be healthier and long lasting.

The key when you are thinking of choosing a mate is that it's a choice. Take responsibility for knowing whether you really want a relationship at that particular time in your life, enough to be willing to modify your lifestyle. Remember, too, you're looking for balance; you don't want to select a carbon copy of yourself – you're looking for the potential of being turned on emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, and intellectually. You need to feel ready to love and support another person, and you need to understand the behaviors necessary to nurture and sustain the relationship. Most of all, if you put yourself into it, it's a life-long experience full of pleasures and confusions, predictability and surprises, learning and growing.

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