

Getting Connected, Staying Connected

You Don't Marry an Individual, You Marry a Family: Successfully Merging Two Individuals from Different Family Cultures

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Merging two individuals from different family cultures can create conflict with their families of origin. The couples who deal with it most successfully have the courage and strength to decide what is best for them. This is No. 3 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

Our focus here will be on mate selection: how we pick a mate, how we successfully merge two individuals from different family cultures, and how we inevitably create a new couple and family culture that works well for this wonderful new relationship bound together by feelings of love and caring for each other. It's not just a matter of adopting the cultural values, behaviors, and rules of her family or his family, with her family's approach to living winning out over his family's approach, or vice versa.

Individuals often try to force their partner into adopting all the cultural values of the family in which they grew up, but this can be very damaging to the marriage. One partner cannot *win* while one *loses*, for ultimately the partnership loses.

How do couples deal with the inevitable guilt, frustration, and fear that often goes with the conflict they find themselves in with their families of origin? In the final analysis, the new couple represents the future, and if they are to survive as a couple, they need to have the *courage* and *strength* to decide what is best for them and then let their families of origin know that they will stand together by their decision. No one ever said marriage was easy.

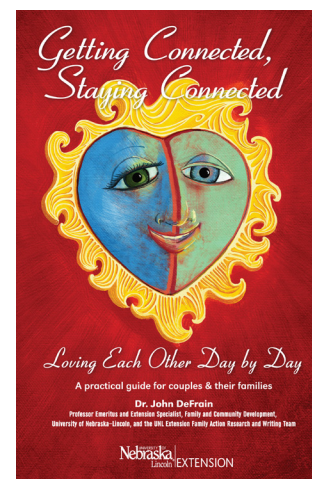
The search, if we are to be realistic in our thinking, is not for the perfect mate. The search is for a very good friend and partner to share life's ups and downs; someone who is on our side, someone who will be there in times of need, someone we can depend on.

No Matter How Similar We Are, We're Still Very Different

In the beginning phases of a relationship, if the individuals are interested in each other — if there's a bit of emotional magic in the air fired by sex hormones and pheromones — it's easy to minimize differences and accentuate similarities. If both individuals want the relationship to succeed, areas of potential conflict can be readily glossed over.

Whatever the differences, and there are many possibilities, the differences can be smoothed over for a while as we tell ourselves that we're "basically the same in all the important categories." Especially in the early phases of the relationship when romance is in the air, good judgment can fly out the window.

As the relationship progresses, however, the initial excitement steadily begins to cool, and it's harder to keep differences



For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at amazon.com.

under wrap. Things that might have seemed interesting, quaint, funny, or inconsequential rise up and begin to cause concern. For this reason, it's good to spend a significant amount of time together over a relatively lengthy period of time so that the prospective mate can be seen in many different situations and from many different angles.

Entering into a long-term intimate relationship is easily among the most important decisions we will make in our lives — arguably the most important decision of all — and who we choose as a partner should be a genuine choice rather than a potential accident we stumble into, blindly. Some now argue that we choose cars with more care and intelligence than the way we choose partners, and this just might be true in many cases.

Over time the differences will come out, because every human being is unique and different from every other human being. There are bound to be differences. These should not be ignored. The issue then becomes whether or not the differences are important differences that cannot be dealt with successfully or differences that can be managed, negotiated, or seen as differences that strengthen the relationship rather than endanger it.

“I Wish We Wouldn't Have Wasted so Many Years Trying to Fix Each Other”

The fact of the matter is, most couples probably spend too much time trying to *fix* each other. Through time, it is probably the case that most people do start to converge somewhere toward the middle, in terms of personality, beliefs, values, behaviors, and so forth. The act of living together for a long period of time forces tiny adjustments in each individual, smoothing the relationship and making day-by-day life more pleasant and workable. But, the quest to totally revamp the other person's personality and behavior are likely to be doomed from the beginning.

Broadly speaking, marital relationships fail for two major reasons: 1) people make the wrong choice in the beginning; or 2) the relationship cannot withstand the test of time and the stresses, strains, and temptations that life inevitably brings. For many couples, the relationship fails because the two major reasons combine to cause trouble.

The first thing we can do, then, to set out on the right foot is to make a good choice. One useful way to do this is to make an inventory of your strengths as a couple.

What are the strengths of your relationship? What are the areas of potential growth in your relationship?

Look for the Good Things in Your Partner and You Will Find Them

In the final analysis, it is important to remember that a focus on strengths tends to make life go smoother and happier. If we insist on digging up dirt on our partner, we're going to find it. Look for problems and you will find them, because no human being is perfect (and if a person were, that person would be impossible to live with!).

Is this a way of looking at life through rose-colored glasses? Are we saying that you should ignore problems altogether? Not at all. What we are saying is that it's easy to focus on the negative, and when this happens we easily can forget all the positive things that brought us together as a couple in the first place. The search for perfection can be oppressive for everyone involved.

Likewise, spend time praising and thanking your partner for all the good things she does to make your life joyful. When you do this, it is likely that she will continue to do these nice things. Since couple relationships work both ways, concentrate on ways to make your partner's life more joyful, more fulfilling. *Accentuate the positive* is old advice that works extraordinarily well most of the time.

For greater understanding of the topic in this publication, refer to *Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day* written by John DeFraim and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

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