

## *Getting Connected, Staying Connected* **Values, Beliefs, Behaviors, and Cultural Differences**

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When choosing a partner, it is best to pick a person who is mostly compatible with your beliefs and values. However, there will always be some things on which you don't agree. A couple can deal with differences by listening to each other and agreeing from the start that you don't have to see the world in precisely the same way. This is No. 12 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.

### **Can We Love Each Other When We Aren't Precisely the Same?**

The short answer to this long question is, "Certainly." The longer answer is, "To do this successfully, you've got to learn to really listen to each other, respect each other, and spend a lot of time talking from the heart about who each of you are and how your backgrounds and views of the world are different. And this is okay."

### **Why Are People so Uncomfortable with Differences?**

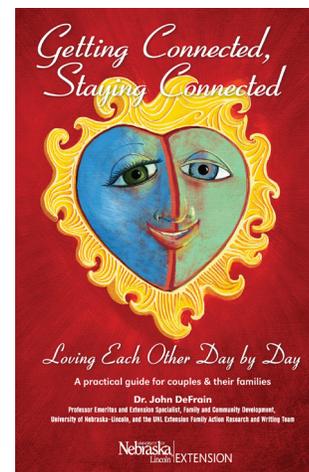
Couple relationships being what they are today, we are increasingly mixing and matching up as partners come from very different ethnic and cultural groups. Feelings of attraction and love toward our partner help us transcend what we may have been taught about color and culture. We are increasingly finding ourselves attracted to *outsiders* — people outside our so-called tribe. To build a strong relationship with this outsider we are in love with may take some extra care, caution, and consideration.

### **Values and Beliefs = Expectations**

All human groups, including families and couples, need values and beliefs to guide them. Values and beliefs that have been learned from childhood seem hard-wired into us as adults. They form the basis of our expectations. When you are a child and say to another child, "That's not how we do it at our house!" it's just an observation of a different way of thinking or doing. When you are in a couple relationship and one person says, "Why do you do *that*?" it may be heard by the partner in a different way, such as, "That's not how we did it at our house!" which although factual, may feel like an attack and a failure to meet the expectations of the partner.

When picking a partner it is wise to pick a person who is basically compatible with the broad belief system you embrace. But don't ever expect a perfect fit because we are all unique individuals and there are infinite ways to look at the world.

Be satisfied with agreement on the general principles of the good life. To demand in great detail what our partner should believe is looking for trouble. Of course, for couples and families to function well, they have to be in general agreement on basic principles of successful living.



**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](http://amazon.com).**

These principles are likely to include age-old beliefs that are endorsed by all the great and enduring religions and philosophical models for humankind: love one another; treat each other with kindness; find meaning and purpose in life by dedicating oneself to the greater good; believe that you are not the center of the universe but only a drop of water in the ocean of life, and so forth. Fighting over the details is a recipe for trouble in a relationship.

### **Prioritizing Values**

A value is something you hold as important. Consider the following checklist of couple values and *individually* number from 1-15 in priority order the things you each value the most. Once you have each developed your list, discuss together why each set of values is important and how you can work together to strengthen your support of each other's values.

- Nature
- Time alone
- Spirituality
- Social events
- Money
- Prestige
- Power
- Health
- Appearance
- Education
- Home ownership
- Sharing household tasks
- Sexuality
- Time together
- Talking about issues

### **Looking at Differences with Confidence**

It is especially important for a couple to talk through their differences and be united, for the couple will sooner or later face the extended family — the mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters on both sides of the kinship network. The extended family is likely to focus on differences rather than similarities and the discussions will begin all over again.

If the partners can help extended family members see the newcomer from the inside out, the extended family may welcome the new person into the fold. If the couple has not worked together carefully and thought through all these things as a team, however, they may be split apart by the extended family's initial objections to the "outsider."

### **Reality and Rose-Colored Glasses**

After the initial excitement phase when the romantic period of the relationship starts to cool a bit, the differences between the two individuals may look a bit bigger (or much bigger). This can be especially true as couples disclose and exhibit more of their personal beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. As they interact with each other regularly on a day-in, day-out basis, things about the partner that might

not have surfaced or been acknowledged may become more obvious and unnerving. Things that seemed small in the early romantic phase of the relationship can start to grate as the months and years go by, and this is the point at which good communication and conflict resolution skills are essential.

By listening to each other and agreeing from the very beginning that you don't have to see the world in precisely the same way — you don't have to be clones of each other — these differences can be dealt with positively.

Love flourishes in an atmosphere where people are free to be who they are and believe what they wish to believe. If one of the partners aspires to leadership in the relationship, the kind of leadership that is most helpful and productive is *servant leadership*. Servant leaders don't try to dictate to their partner and other members of the family. Instead, they dedicate themselves to helping their loved ones grow, learn, and become happier, more engaged, and fulfilled in life.

### **The Big Issues: Religion, Politics, Sex, On and On ...**

- Can a Christian love a Buddhist?
- Can a Muslim love a Hindu?
- Can a Republican love a Democrat?
- Can a man love a woman?

Taken altogether these seem like an odd collection of questions, don't they? But look closely and the meaning is clear: Many people around the world get wound up about religious differences and believe they cannot be resolved; similarly, many see political differences as hopelessly divisive.

The important ground rule we have noted before still applies here: During these discussions over differences, the couple has to keep telling themselves that they are on the same team. They are not on opposing teams trying to beat each other, but on the same team working together to find a solution to a difficulty and, thus, improve the quality of their relationship.

This is not easy to do, of course. But it is essential to keep trying!

### **Differences May Be Tied to Individual Temperament**

Temperament or personality traits can be a significant factor in some relationships. Both partners may have very similar traits and closely share values, beliefs, and behaviors. Other couples may be polar opposites. Most times these temperament choices are either comforting or exciting. When we have little issues to discuss, temperament — coupled with how we learned to handle differences — can make the situation like the dead of winter or the 4th of July!

Although no person will only have qualities of one of these temperament styles, some individuals will display much stronger examples than others. No temperament or personality type is *wrong*, and no temperament is more *right* than any of the others. The importance of realizing temperament differences is that it is one more tool for couples to use when coming to a greater understanding of each other and how they can make the best of each other's differences. It's important to realize that we aren't all going to think alike, and it's okay *not* to think like everyone else.

## The Little Issues: These Can Be Big Ones, Too

So what are some of these so-called *little issues* we refer to? One that most couples deal with at some time in their relationship is how to handle holidays important to both extended families. There are traditions and expectations to consider, as well as finding time for everyone to get together without causing distress for the couple or the extended family. Like it or not, there are times when a couple has to admit that the extended family really is part of the equation of the individual. Little traditions influenced by family, community, and childhood rituals are imbedded in each of us. And they aren't always going to be complementary to the traditions that are important to our partner. Another less complex issue is the proverbial *toilet seat up or down* discussion. But, you get the picture: Little things can become Big Things if we don't have the courage to discuss them when we are thinking rationally.

The opposite is also true. If you focus on the positive, you will find more positives in your relationship. When you think about the positive side, the negative falls away. Don't look at this process as a problem, however; instead, reframe it as a sign of ongoing growth in the couple relationship — another chance to strengthen your love for each other.

### Little Issues

We all have *little issues* we can identify. Here are a few common little issues to get you thinking. Add to, cut, or change this list to reflect the items on your personal *Couple Little Issues* list in a more positive way.

- He tracks mud on the carpet and doesn't clean it up.
- She leaves laundry hanging in the shower.
- She parks her car over the line in the garage.
- He will never empty the dishwasher.
- He never dresses up when going out for the evening.
- She is always late.

Once your list is created, it is important to discuss your entries.

- Why do you feel this way about each issue?
- Where did you learn to make this an important issue?
- Is this an issue the two of you can be more flexible on?
- How can it be changed, or does it really need to be changed?

### Strengths to Share

Now think about the things you *really appreciate* about your partner. These may be traits or characteristics you are very aware of. Or, you may realize there are several traits you haven't acknowledged, but to you, these are very special characteristics about your partner. Make a list of these special traits.

Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- He always asks how my day went.
- She takes time to talk at night even if she has other tasks planned.
- He always empties the trash.
- She always looks beautiful.
- He never leaves the house until he kisses me good-bye.
- She is great with the kids.
- He always pays the bills on time.
- She's willing to go to ball games with me.

Each of you takes your appreciation list and in a quiet, relaxed environment, shares your thoughts about each item with your partner. When you are the message recipient, don't object to the compliments, just savor them. When you are the speaker, enjoy the gift you are giving.

### Differences Can Be a Source of Strength for Couples and Families

Throughout its history, America aspired to be a melting pot, a place where people from around the world immigrated and blended together to become one united people. This has happened to some degree, especially for those in the white majority. But for those who look different, the task has been much more challenging and the barriers to full acceptance remain high.

Think of your family and the families of your friends: What kind of ethnic and cultural mix do they have? Is there a mix between farm and city? Private education and public? Blue collar and white collar? Chances are there is a good deal of diversity in the micro-world of your own family. And if things are going well in these families with diverse members, odds are that the family members are not spending much time thinking about how *different* everyone is, but instead, are focusing on the family members' *strengths and similarities*.

**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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