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The Compatibility Myth

By Claire Hatch

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We all know that technology is changing our lives at an astounding rate. I've watched with fascination as online dating has gone from marginal to mainstream almost overnight. It seems like almost every week, I meet a couple coming in for pre-marital counseling who met online. Three years ago, that rarely happened.

I decided I should find out what these services are all about, so I logged on and took a tour of several popular services. I immediately noticed they all had something in common. All of them promised to help you find someone who is compatible with you. You may be asking yourself, What's so remarkable about that? Everyone knows compatibility is important when choosing a mate.

This is one of those times when "what everyone knows" is wrong. These days, when mental health professionals want to know what a happy marriage looks like, they turn to John Gottman, Ph.D. That's because he has spent upwards of twenty-five years observing couples and he offers us a treasure trove of information about what makes happy couples different from unhappy couples.

What does Dr. Gottman say about compatibility? He says it will help your marriage—but only a little. It is not nearly as important as respect, acceptance, emotional connection, and communication.

How can this be? After all, we all know that conflicts erupt when we want different things, whether it's what to do this weekend or how to raise our kids. The truth is, while it might appear that the stumbling block is different opinions, the bigger problem is really how we communicate about those opinions.

I once took a dancing class from a teacher who said, "If you see a couple screw up on the dance floor and then laugh, they might be married, but not to each other." You could see smiles of recognition all around the room. You and your partner might share a love of dancing, but that's not enough to keep you from getting into a ballroom power struggle.

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On the other hand, you can disagree about major life issues and still feel close and connected, if you communicate well. Dana and Steve ran into trouble after the birth of their first child. Once she was actually a mom, Dana changed her mind about her plan to return to work after two months of maternity leave. "My priorities have turned upside down," she said. "Nothing is as important as being with my daughter during this first year."

For his part, Steve was not prepared to take on the pressures of being the sole breadwinner. The harder they worked to convince each other they were right, the more they both dug in their heels. Dana accused Steve of being a bad parent, and Steve told Dana she was unrealistic.

In counseling, they learned a different approach. They learned how to make it safe to express the entire range of their feelings on the subject, without being criticized or having to justify themselves. In this climate of acceptance, they were able to see that they had more common ground than they

realized. They both wanted to be financially stable AND good parents.

I see the same thing happen in my office all the time. The more people feel criticized, the more they feel they have differences in values. When they can communicate safely and respectfully, they discover they have more common ground than they realized. Not only that, it's easier to find solutions for the differences they do have.

So, what does the compatibility myth mean for your relationship?

First, don't count on compatibility to get you through. If you are experiencing that delicious sense of "having everything in common," enjoy it, but don't settle in for an easy ride. As Dana and Steve learned, life will throw you curves and you will have to negotiate differences you can't envision now.

Secondly, you have more control over your marriage than you think. A great marriage isn't something that just happens, like the weather. It is something you create, day by day.

So, what about all those happy couples in my office that met online? Aren't they proof that "compatibility tests" work? They might be proof that compatibility attracts, but that's all. Still, I am optimistic about the future of their marriages. Not because they're compatible, but because they're wise. They're starting now to learn the communication skills that will keep them together and happy many years from now.

Claire Hatch, LICSW, is a premarital counselor who works with clients in her Seattle area office and by phone around the world. She gives presentations on relationships and conflict solutions. To learn about her Honeymoon Toolkit™ premarital counseling package or The Bridal Sanity Workbook e-book, visit www.clairehatch.com. Claire can be reached at 425 823-2273 or claire@clairehatch.com.

The 10 Myths of Successful Selling

By John Mitchell

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Myth #1 You should close early and often

Myth #2 Sell features to get a higher price

Myth #3 There's no methodology to selling – it's pure art

Myth #4 Objections are a sign of customer interest

Myth #5 Open questions are better than closed questions

Myth #6 You can't teach a person to sell

Myth #7 You have to understand the difference between wants and needs

Myth #8 Great products sell themselves

Myth #9 Making a benefit statement is the best way to open a sales call

Myth #10 All customers make up their minds in the first 4 minutes

Want to know more? Read the full Myths each month at our website www.inclusic.com – just go to articles & news!

John Mitchell is President and CEO of Inclusive, a company providing sales and marketing outsourcing in the UK and USA. He was a top performer in IBM sales for 5 consecutive years; Chief Marketing Officer of a Fortune 500 company; and CEO of a NASDAQ listed consulting company. John has written for the London Economist and has been guest lecturer at NYU, London Business School and Swiss Banking School.



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