elevate your RELATIONSHIP

Getting to 'Really' Know You

Dating is an exciting and challenging part of life. The heady feeling romance brings is wonderful, but the sadness experienced when a relationship ends can be devastating. Learning a little about how relationships develop can help us better cope with both the joys, and sorrows, that romance brings.

Relationships develop in stages. When two individuals are attracted to one another, they typically chat and exchange small talk. As the relationship progresses, more topics are introduced and discussed. Still, the discussion centers around superficial issues such as books, sports, or TV programs. In these early stages, idealization of the new partner is common.

When we idealize our partners, we see them as being perfect. We typically see in them all the qualities we cherish and desire. During this time, the phrase "love is blind" is quite true! Romantic love's wonderfully exhilarating feelings make it easy for us to overlook our new love's imperfections.

Remember that in the early stages of relationship development, just as you are putting your best foot forward, so are the individuals we are dating. Each of us is showing the other only the most desirable parts of our personalities and avoiding the quirks. Just as we are not revealing our tempers when our dates are 10 minutes late, neither are they openly disagreeing with things we say that they feel are wrong.

As the relationship intensifies we begin to reveal our real selves. It is only after a period of superficial, and safe, self-disclosures, such as sharing our love for Chinese food or our enthusiasm for college football, that we begin to reveal more personal and less safe information about ourselves to our partners. In turn, our partners begin to reveal more personal and less safe information about themselves to us. Sharing this new information begins to erode the idealized image we have of our partner. And, as we come to know and love the 'real' person we are dating, our relationship may become stronger and more satisfying. On the other hand, discovering that the person we are dating is not who we imagined him or her to be may be very distressing and result in the break-up of our relationship.

Here are three steps we can take to avoid the unpleasant surprises that may result from idealization and that may help us to look forward to the pleasant task of getting to know one another.

- First, be aware that idealization is occurring. When we know that our perceptions are overly positive and not especially accurate, it may help us to stay focused on reality.

- Second, remember that people have many sides, some are pleasant, and others are less desirable. This will be revealed slowly overtime as the relationship progresses.

- Third, realize that new, more personal information about our partners will be forthcoming. As our relationship develops we will share more of our real selves. This information will help us develop a better understanding of our romantic partners.

Keep in mind that the dating years are a period of self-discovery as well as a time to discover the world of relationships.

Activity

Make time to know each other. Individually, make a list of desired qualities you would like to have in a partner and evaluate if your current significant other meets the "must-have" qualities. Remember, your partner is human, so make sure the list is realistic (not everyone can have washboard abs). As your relationship progresses, return to the list and discuss with your partner whether you both have the must-have qualities. Explore new must-have qualities as you grow as an individual and as a couple.

For more resources, visit healthyrelationships.uga.edu and ElevateCouplesGeorgia.com.

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