

Relationship deal breakers: When they matter, when they don't

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I imagine your ideal mate. What would he or she look like? Do for a living? Be passionate about?

Now imagine who that person wouldn't be. What characteristics would immediately shoot up a red flag and have you hightailing it in the other direction?

In relationships, our reactions to deal breakers can be just as strong — sometimes stronger — than our reactions to the romantic moments that pepper the honeymoon phase, said April Masini, a relationship expert who writes at AskApril.com. One minute, you're dining at an Italian restaurant, sipping a pricey montepulciano that he ordered and bonding over your mutual love of Amy Schumer, then you're calling it an early night because he said he hates cats.

Dana Michel, founder of dating site MarriageMaterial.co, says that her clients are asked to list their top five must-haves, nice-to-haves and cannot-haves when they complete their profile pages. The most common deal breakers people cite include smoking, drug use, financial troubles, infidelity and not wanting children.

While those traits relate to major lifestyle choices, other deal breakers could seem futile to some — such as hair color or taste in films — but be critical to the individual.

"Deal breakers are unique to every individual and you should be honest, even if one appears superficial," Michel said. To each his own, sure, but deal breakers should also be reassessed from time to time, she said, because they can change as you mature and learn from previous dating experiences.

"What was a deal breaker in my 20s — like having no hair — was no longer an issue by my 30s," Michel said. "It became more important to find a man who was able to communicate well and willing to invest in a healthy relationship."

Separating differences from deal breakers

Figuring out how to distinguish between an annoying quirk and a deal breaker can be challenging, especially if, at first, the many pros seem to overshadow the major con.

In every relationship, there are usually three or four significant personal differences, said Paul Coleman, a psychologist and author of "Finding Peace When Your Heart is in Pieces" (Adams Media). These can vary from how people manage finances, to cleanliness, to how they prefer to spend their leisure time.

If arguments over these differences routinely pop up, that doesn't necessarily mean that they are deal breakers. Maybe the disagreement will never go away, but with sincere discussion, it could be managed fairly, Coleman said.

"Lots of happy couples have differences in relationships — the trick is to learn which ones are more important to you than the relationship," Masini said.

John McGrail, a Los Angeles-based clinical hypnotherapist, said he advises clients he works with on relationship issues to clearly identify what are truly must-haves and what could be trade-offs. The first step in this process: figuring out what matters most to you in love and in life.

"Many people really don't know what their core values truly are," he said. "It may be that what one partner considers a deal breaker is not a core value for the other partner, who is willing to compromise."

As a relationship blossoms over time, we may realize what we once deemed a must-have doesn't matter so much anymore, he added.

However, Coleman said that when traits emerge that are highly problematic — such as a bad temper, flirtatiousness with others, alcohol abuse or major differences in sexual appetite and adventurousness — it is best to move on from that relationship.

"Never accept a relationship that goes against your internal moral compass," Michel said. If a relationship makes you feel worse about yourself or causes you to change for the worse, that's a sign you should leave.

Don't count on change

"If after several weeks or months a suspected deal breaker emerges, the first thing to do is acknowledge that a red flag exists," McGrail said. "Often one party in a relationship will try to ignore or overlook one of those red flags hoping that it will change by itself or go away." It generally won't, he said.

Coleman agreed that if your partner has a trait that you are secretly hoping will go away, don't hold your breath. Instead, talk about it with your partner and see if you can reach a compromise. If you can't, it may be a good time to call it quits.

And remember: "Compromise" does not mean forcing the other person to change. It also doesn't mean that you should wait out deal breakers until they no longer matter to you.

"Expecting someone to change for you, or expecting that you can put up with someone's fallacious values or attributes, if they are counter to your core values is a recipe for a long, rocky road that usually ends in a train wreck," McGrail said.

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Tips from the experts

What happens if deal breakers pop up when you're already head over heels? Should you keep a relationship going despite a deal breaker? Our experts provided tips on how to encounter and deal with deal breakers:

Knowing yourself is key. Be honest with yourself about your expectations in life and what qualities you find attractive in a partner, Masini said. Do you want to be married? Want children? "If you don't know your deal breakers,

you're looking at relationship trouble down the line," she said.

Upon noticing a deal breaker, tread carefully. The chances of things turning out great are not high at this point, unless you decide what you thought was a deal breaker really isn't, McGrail said. Red flags shouldn't be ignored.

Be realistic about your deal breakers. If your deal breakers are so particular that they're ruining your dating life, re-analyze what you're doing, Masini said. If you have a list of two dozen deal breakers, that might be over the top.

Some deal breakers don't warrant compromise. A gambling addiction or physical abuse should be non-negotiable, Michel said. But if your partner likes video games or watching sports all weekend, a compromise is definitely feasible.

A frequent argument doesn't have to equal a deal breaker. Successful couples don't overlook differences that cause recurring arguments, nor do they approach them with a "here we go again" attitude, Coleman said. Instead, sit down and discuss a reasonable way to handle the disagreement in the future

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