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# Who Should I Date?

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Relationship Advice for  
the Real World

William P. Smith



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**Y**our mother always said there were lots of fish in the sea—but how do you know which ones to keep and which ones to throw back? You have so many choices. What do you look for? A tingly feeling? Excitement? A sense of belonging?

Those feelings are wonderful, but do they mean that you have found someone to spend time with? Or even more, to settle down with? How do you know when to hang on to someone and when to let her go? What separates Mr. Right from Mr. Oh-So-Wrong?

It's easy to look for the wrong things when you are searching for a meaningful relationship. You might be drawn to someone who is fun, good-looking, and interested in the same things as you. Those things aren't necessarily bad, but on their own they can't give you the full picture. God's criteria for choosing friends looks below the surface and focuses on their character (Psalm 119:63; Proverbs 17:7). You can become consumed with focusing on

which character traits are the most important, but since they are all variations of the same theme, simply look for someone who knows how to love well. The apostle Paul gives a great description of what real love is in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

The character traits listed below are all practical expressions of the kind of love that Paul is describing. So look for them, and use their presence (or absence!) to help you decide whether to pursue your friendship further. You might not notice them the first time you go bowling or see a play, but they won't take long to emerge. Read through this list, and keep these qualities in mind as you get to know other people.

## **Actively Listens vs. Passively Hears**

Active listening is hard work; it requires effort and practice. It means putting aside your interests and tuning into someone else's reality and experience. Active listening is self-forgetting instead of self-seeking. It's a practical expression of one of the most important qualities of a Christian: looking out for the interests of others (Philippians 2:4).

Passive hearing is easy. You simply allow the other person to become background noise, and let him drone on like a 2:00 AM vacuum cleaner infomercial. You treat him as a necessary but unwanted intrusion, and wait impatiently for him to finish so you can return to your more interesting, self-oriented life. How do you experience your friend: As someone who does the hard work of listening? Or as someone who only hears you?

## **Constructively Disagrees or Is Just Disagreeable?**

God made us to be life-long learners, and one of the primary ways we learn is from each other. Wise

people love to be instructed and taught, so they aren't threatened when you disagree with them (Proverbs 9:8–9). Instead, they use a disagreement as a way to learn wisdom, and they wisely speak their mind.

Some people, however, are just disagreeable. They are always looking to pick a fight; they always have to be right; and they always have to get their own way. A disagreeable person builds her sense of superiority, security, and self-worth through arguing, never admitting she might be wrong. How does your friend handle disagreements? Is she learning through them or just trying to prove her point? Remember, love is “not easily angered.”

### **Helps You Sound Your Best vs. Your Worst**

Have you experienced someone helping you put your feelings into words? Or have you ever exclaimed, “That’s what I was thinking, but I couldn’t get it out!” Such wonderful experiences take place when someone is committed to helping you be your best.

Sadly, you've probably also experienced someone who frustrated your attempts to put your thoughts into words. Remember how you felt when he kept cutting you off before you finished what you were trying to say? Or how you felt when she made you sound ridiculous? That only happens when your friend is committed to being the best *he* can be, even if it's at your expense.

### **Is Giving vs. Needy**

People have different motives for getting into a relationship. Some want to give of themselves so they and their friends will be stronger. God says in his Word that, in this kind of relationship, “Two are better than one...If one falls down, his friend can help him up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10). Other people want to have friends because they hope their friends will complete them. They are needy—wanting to belong, to be cared for, to look successful—and they want others to meet their needs. The apostle Paul explains the difference in his letter to the Galatians: “You, my brothers,