



What You Need To Know Before Getting Serious

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Gathering information about a potential partner is crucial to making decisions about the relationship. This is always a process that takes time. When dating, take every opportunity to observe behavior, listen, ask appropriate questions and learn. If you're considering a serious relationship, learn as much as you can about his or her family history, previous relationships, sexual history, drug and alcohol use, and school and job performance. This information can help you determine relationship potential before getting serious.

The following outline addresses questions to be considered before engaging and investing in a serious, committed relationship. Although no one has a perfect past or present, it is important to look at problematic areas that significantly reduce a relationship's chances for success if not addressed. The earlier you assess the red flags of unhealthiness, the easier it will be to disengage and exit the relationship. Exiting after you're emotionally invested can be much more difficult.

Some issues are not easily resolved or may not respond well to intervention of any kind. You may not want to rule out a partner on the basis of a problem if he or she is actively working to overcome it. This is especially true if your partner is seeking professional help or has received professional help in the past. People do make changes in their lives. However, make sure you are looking at the situation honestly. Avoid blinding yourself to your partner's issues or lack of progress because you're anxious for the relationship to work. Stay focused on your partner's current behavior rather than his or her "potential". Partners that do not own personal problems that can negatively impact you and the relationship will not be good candidates for counseling or your efforts to effect change. If you need help in seeing the full picture, see a counselor. The cost and time involved may save you plenty of heartbreak later.

What you need to know about a potential partner:

Family History

What is the nature of the relationship between the partner and his or her parents?

Always meet members of your partner's family, particularly the parents. By observing the family's relating style, you'll learn plenty about your partner. If the parents had a loving, caring relationship, it is more likely your partner will relate to you in the same way. The early parental relationship in particular has significant impact on future relationships.

How do his or her parents relate to their children and to your potential partner in particular?

Your partner's relationship with his or her parents and the relationship of siblings set the stage for future relationships. Relationship triggers and communication and conflict styles are usually developed through interactions with parents, particularly opposite sexed parents.

How was conflict resolved in his or her childhood family?

Your partner is likely to repeat the conflict patterns of his or her childhood family, especially when stressed or fatigued. You will likely to the same. If these are unproductive, unhealthy strategies, there may be trouble ahead when you and your partner have conflict. Likewise, if the family resolves conflict in an appropriate, loving way, your partner is more likely to do the same.

Was affection shown among family members? If so, how?

Pay particular attention to whether affection is shown between your partner's parents and between your partner and other family members. This is likely to be predictive of your partner's ability or inability to show affection in your relationship over time.

How were love messages communicated?

The way love is demonstrated and communicated in your partner's family has tremendous influence on how he or she shows love. Learn how love was communicated when your partner was a child. Did the parents tell their children they were loved? Did they give hugs or other displays of physical affection? Note similarities and differences between your family and your partner's family.

Is there a history of compulsive/addictive behaviors such as alcohol or drug abuse, gambling, sex addiction, etc.

Addictive behavior often runs in families. If your partner or his or her family members have a history of such behavior, there is an increased risk of addictive behavior being an issue in the relationship. A family history of such behavior may impact your partner in indirect ways even if he or she does not manifest symptoms of addiction.

Previous and Current Relationships

How many times has he or she been married?

There can be extenuating circumstances, but multiple marriages can be indicative of poor relationship and intimacy skills and/or issues that cause him or her to make poor relationship choices. This is particularly true if your partner was married two or more times.

If previously married, who initiated the divorce and for what reason?

The answer to this question may give you valuable information about potential relationship problems you may encounter in the future.

Was he or she ever sexually unfaithful to a former spouse or partner?

A partner who has been unfaithful in a relationship is at risk to repeat this history unless the underlying personal issues have been addressed.

How many romantic relationships has he or she had in the past five years? Who terminated the relationship and why?

A history of multiple relationships may be a flag signaling fear of commitment, fear of intimacy or other relationship difficulties. If the reasons the relationships were terminated suggest a trend, this is significant.

Does he or she have close friends?

If your partner doesn't seem to have any close or long term friendships, this may be an indicator of attachment issues or a clue that his or her interpersonal skills are deficient or lacking.

Are relationship difficulties most often blamed on the other party?

If your partner doesn't take any responsibility for relationship problems in previous relationships, guess who's going to ultimately get the blame for problems in the current relationship?

Does he or she have children?

Children can certainly impact a serious relationship. They need considerable nurturing and attention. Children sometimes feel threatened and hurt when their parents choose new partners and may even attempt to sabotage the relationship. If your partner's children create problems, discuss them with your partner.

If so, how much contact does he or she have with the children? What is the nature of their relationship?

Watch closely how your partner interacts with his or her children. If your partner spends quality time with the children and communicates caring and concern for them, he or she is more likely to do the same with you and your children. If your partner consistently ignores the children or allows them to be the total focus of attention and control his or her life, this may be an omen of things to come.

Sexual History

How many sexual partners has he or she had in the past five years?

A history of numerous sexual partners not only increases the risk of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, but may also be indicative of emotional intimacy issues or sex addiction.

Does he or she view sexual involvement as a casual part of dating or part of a committed relationship?

If your potential partner has a casual attitude about sex, there is probably a history of multiple sex partners. Sexual involvement under these circumstances doesn't indicate emotional investment in the relationship.

Has he or she respected the sexual boundaries of previous partners?

A partner who doesn't respect sexual boundaries will not respect your personal values and needs. If your partner hasn't been respectful of your sexual boundaries or those of other partners, the future is not likely to be different.

Does he or she brag about previous sexual exploits?

If your partner brags about previous sexual relationships, he or she may be giving others the scoop on you if the relationship has been sexual. This indicates a lack of boundaries, especially where personal privacy is concerned.

Has he or she ever been sexually abused?

A history of sexual abuse is certainly not a reason to terminate a healthy relationship, but you need to be aware that such persons may have issues that require special consideration. Sometimes these issues can interfere with sexual and emotional intimacy. This is more likely to be the case in situations where the abuse survivor has not ever engaged in counseling. Keep the lines of communication open so the residual effects of the abuse can be discussed if the relationship is affected.

Alcohol And Drug Use

How often does he or she indulge in alcohol or drug use?

One can have an alcohol or drug problem without being frequently intoxicated or high. If your partner has experienced consequences (i.e. relationship problems, job difficulties, DUIs) from drug and alcohol use, this is a red flag regardless of how well he or she seems to function.

Has he or she ever been high or intoxicated in your presence? If so, how frequently?

If your partner is frequently high or intoxicated, this is indicative of a serious substance abuse problem. If you confront your partner's behavior, he or she may try to minimize the severity of the problem. Substance abusers are very skilled at rationalizing and minimizing their behavior. If you were raised in an alcoholic family, additive behavior can be so familiar that it seems normal. Avoid getting caught up in the same game by rationalizing and minimizing your partner's symptoms.

Do most of his or her friends use drugs or alcohol excessively?

Choosing friends who abuse alcohol or drugs increases one's vulnerability to current and future substance abuse. Hanging around people who are drinking excessively and using drugs allows greater access to drugs and drug related activities.

Has he or she ever been charged with an alcohol or drug related offense?

Being charged with a DUI or drug possession could be an indicator of a problem even if your partner wasn't convicted. This is particularly true with multiple violations. Many people who are guilty of alcohol or drug related offenses slip through the cracks of the legal system. If your partner served time or received community service penalties for alcohol or drug use, take notice.

Does he or she become violent or verbally abusive when intoxicated?

It doesn't matter how great a person is sober if he or she is abusive when intoxicated or under the influence of drugs. Most reported cases of domestic violence are associated with alcohol and drug use.

History of Violence

Has he or she ever been violent with others?

Has he or she ever been violent with you?

Has his or her violent behavior ever been reported to the police?

Four thousand women die from domestic violence annually. The FBI reports that 30 percent of the women murdered in this country were killed by their husbands or boyfriends. Even though women are more likely to be victimized, the number of female offenders is on the increase. In abusive relationships, the number of incidents of violence generally increase over time. If your partner has a history of violence and is not involved in a recovery program, your risk of being physically abused is great, especially when the relationship is under stress.

Job History

How many jobs has he or she had in the past five years?

Numerous job changes may indicate difficulty with interpersonal relationships, irresponsibility, and lack of commitment. These same traits can be problematic in relationships. There may be other reasons for frequent job changes that do not involve these issues, but a job history where more than five jobs were held in five years raises a flag no matter what the circumstances.

Was he or she ever fired? If so, why?

With companies in today's business climate down-sizing and restructuring, many employees have found themselves without jobs. However, if your partner was fired for unethical or irresponsible behavior, it is likely this same behavior will manifest itself in your relationship.

Does he or she blame others for most job related problems?

A tendency to blame others is a signal that your partner is unwilling to assume responsibility for his or her behavior. Again, this is usually a trait that generalizes to other situations, including your relationship.

Financial History

Was money an issue in previous relationships?

Financial history can provide information about a partner's level of responsibility. If your partner has consistently encountered financial difficulty, this is predictive of financial issues that can adversely affect the relationship. This is particularly true if money was an issue in a previous marriage.

Is he or she prone to spend money that he or she does not have?

Spending that appears to be exceed income can be a flag for serious problems such as a spending addiction. Your personal finances could be at risk in a relationship with someone who spends beyond his or her means. Either way, such behavior is a setup for stress and conflict in the relationship.

Does he or she strive to pay bills on time?

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If bills are not consistently paid on time, this may indicate irresponsibility in other areas as well.

Has he or she ever filed for bankruptcy? If so, how long ago?

Failure to pay bills on time or frequent bank overdrafts is evidence of financial irresponsibility that can impact other facets of the relationship. A history of bankruptcy can be a signal of more serious issues concerning money management, especially if it occurred within the past five years.

Does he or she have credit cards?

If your partner doesn't have any credit cards, he or she may have had to surrender them due to poor credit history. There *are* people who are philosophically opposed to credit cards, but they are typically few and far between. Most have at least one credit card to use in emergencies, for travel or ordering by phone. Information about your partner's financial history can be obtained by careful observation and utilizing good listening and communication skills.