

Dating & Shalom Bayis

Tips and Tidbits

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Dating with Caution

The *shidduch* process is a rather unique and peculiar time in a person's life. This is because it is essentially an evaluative and exploratory organic process, whereby you ascertain if you and your date are compatible for marriage through a series of mutual experiences. While billions of people in the world who get married go through a period of so-called "dating," the manner in which *shidduchim* it is carried out is radically different. There are several variables that punctuate the uniqueness of the *shidduch* process, such as its relative short duration, making it all the more vital that a number of points be keenly understood and vigilantly remembered.

A valuable and highly recommended way of staying on track and focusing on your ultimate goal of finding a spouse is to *keep your ears and eyes open to "red flags."* This is not meant as a cliché, but literal. Red flags can refer to a number of different concerns that you hear or see and are either unique to you or generic to healthy relationships, but you must be alert and aware of them. You want to be attuned to what your date says and how they behave, and avoid getting caught up in a moment of fun. Many individuals anticipate dates being fun, and determine a "good" or "bad" date by how much fun they had. This is an unfortunate mistake. Your marriage is not going to be a series of "fun" dates with your spouse, and rating your dates in this light is a recipe to having a great time, but nothing indicative of a good prospective marriage.

In particular, given the research of what behaviors harm marriages and in fact predict divorce, you want to be alert to the following four elements, termed "the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" by Dr. John Gottman, foremost relationship expert whose longitudinal studies have yielded supportive data for what makes marriages either succeed or fail.

Criticism. Criticism is different than critiquing or complaining. The latter two relate to expressing concern about specific issues, whereas criticism is an *ad hominem* attack, whereby you condemn the other person's character and personality and essentially discredit who they are as a person. This distinction is important to bear in mind, as effective communication, particularly with your spouse, will be achieved when instead of criticizing, you complain.

Here is an example:

Complaint: "I was so worried when you didn't call me to say you were running late. I thought we had agreed about this."

Criticism: "You are so into yourself and never think about me. Why are you so selfish?"

As you can see, a complaint targets a specific point, whereas criticism speaks to the person's character, and puts it down. (Moreover, as you might notice, a complaint uses "I" statements, whereas criticism places the fault on "you").

When dating, keep an eye out for *criticism*. When something doesn't go as planned (you arrived late, you missed an exit, you forgot something), listen closely to *how* your date responds. While verbal expressions are much more conscious than nonverbal cues, they are difficult to hide behind. Given that speech is such an embedded, inherent part of a person, it sheds light on one's inner dimension. Therefore, the *subtle* words and ways a person communicates are excellent clues to who they are. In this regard, the focus is not on the content as much as on the process of expression. In other words, the *how*, not the *what*. In the above example, both statements are about the other person's late arrival. The *what* is the same. It is *how* it is expressed that spells the difference.

Criticism alone, however, is not a recipe for disaster. The problem with criticism is when it becomes a pervasive and persistent part of the relationship. It leads to feelings of rejection and hurt, which if not undone, can lead to a cyclic pattern where criticism follows criticism and eventually, the next horsemen, which is the deadliest of all, sets in.

Contempt. Let us say right off the bat and with full disclosure: *If you experience contempt in your dating relationship, do not proceed further without much careful consideration.* Contempt is caustic and deadly.

Communicating with contempt means treating others with disrespect, mocking them sarcastically, calling them names, and using hurtful body language such as eye-rolling or sneering. Contempt is aimed at making the other person feel inferior and worthless in comparison to you. In this respect, contempt goes much further than criticism. Criticism attacks your spouse's character, while contempt places you as far better and superior to him or her.

Here is an example, provided by Gottman:

"You're 'tired?' Cry me a river. I've been with the kids all day, running around like mad to keep this house going and all you do when you come home from work is flop down on that sofa like a child and play those idiotic games. I don't have time to deal with another kid. Could you be any more pathetic?"

As you can see, one spouse here assumed higher moral ground than the other by referring to them as a “*pathetic child*” involved in “*silly games*.” Research indicates that couples in contemptuous relationships are in fact more prone to developing infectious illnesses (e.g. the flu) given their weakened immune systems. Of all the debilitating and devastating forms of communication, this is the single greatest predictor of divorce. If it is therefore spotted very early in dating, it is wise to stop the relationship. If the relationship has already progressed, however, and you can have an open and direct conversation about your concerns in this regard with your date, then do so. If you still spot contempt and the feedback you provide leads to defensiveness, then run the other way. This is not a person you want to be married to.

Defensiveness. The third horseman is that of defensiveness, which is generally the response to criticism. Defensiveness is when we look to thwart taking even partial responsibility for what has occurred, and instead make rationalizations or victimize ourselves so that our partner will leave us alone. However, defensiveness is just about never successful.

“Did you call your mother to tell her we can’t make it tonight like we discussed?”

“I was way too busy today. And you know what, you weren’t busy yourself! Why didn’t you do it?”

While this may seem innocuous, it is a typical example of defensiveness as the partner does not assume any responsibility at all (even partially), and moreover, reverses the blame and fault to the other spouse. A more effective, non-defensive response would have including taking at least some responsibility and understanding the other spouse’s perspective.

“You’re right, I forgot. I should have asked if you could do it because my day would be very full. Let me make the call right now.”

You can certainly feel the difference.

While defensiveness is an understandable reaction to feeling attacked, it is simply unhelpful to getting anywhere. Nonetheless, this is important to bear in mind while dating, for patterns of defensiveness tell you that the person cannot handle honest feedback. If instead of appreciating what you remind or correct them about, they consistently become defensive, they are lacking maturity to honestly look at themselves. Instead of accepting fault, they shift blame, and that will not be a smooth relationship.

Stonewalling. The last and final horseman is stonewalling, which is usually a response to contempt (in contrast to defensiveness, which as noted above, is generally the reaction to criticism). Stonewalling is the result of the listener feeling physiologically flooded, which overwhelms them and leaves them almost paralyzed to take action. As a result, the listener withdraws and shuts down from responding to their partner. Instead of confronting the issue, they evade it and tune out and turn away. Acting busy, sitting silently or distracting oneself are common forms of stonewalling. While

stonewalling usually sets in after the above three horsemen have prevailed in the relationship, once stonewalling becomes ever-present, it becomes a hard habit to break.

In dating, if this occurs, it is more of an indication of where your relationship stands than anything. If you find that your date has a hard time communicating, it does not necessarily mean they are stonewalling, but could simply be the result of embarrassment or nerves. The sub-context in which this behavior is exhibited is key. If your dating partner simply does not talk, that may be something else to explore with them. However, if you find that stonewalling does occur, it is a sign that your relationship needs a close look before progressing further. If as early as dating stonewalling is part of it, do not dismiss it as nothing.

In the *shidduch* system, it is not uncommon to have these aspects overlooked and the determining ending factor of a relationship be something related to differences in personality, values or ideology. Given that the above four elements are more plainly evident when a relationship has developed and progressed, they can be easily pushed aside if everything else is “going well.”

The crucial word to therefore keep in mind here is *subtle*. These phrases and responses to the untrained ear and eye may seem like innocent, flippant remarks or benign, sarcastic pokes of fun, but they are far from it. If everything in your dating life is seen as smooth and perfect, then aside from the fantasy you may be experiencing, you have likely not attuned yourself to subtleties that over time could corrode your relationship. While Dr. Gottman suggests antidotes to working through each of the above horsemen, one way of preempting heartache altogether, especially before you are married, is using your head and not your heart. Date with your head, and you will be better able to see things for what they are and find your spouse who deeply respects and admires you, and you feel the same way.

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