

Be Caring and Compassionate

Compassion is one of the traits that comes up most often when couples discuss what attracted them and keeps them together years later. Possessing compassion means you are able to care not only for your partner, but also for everyone in your life—family, business associates, teachers, neighbors. You are kind to others and a good listener. You express gratitude for the kindnesses of others. It also means you're willing to spend the time and effort it takes to make someone else's life better.

"I remember when one of our businesses was doing poorly, Gerry and I were both pretty worried about it," recalls Lilo. "But even though we didn't have much money, I'd try to cheer him up by making a nice meal or suggesting we go out somewhere to relax and talk about the situation. And with the children, we thought it was important to talk about other people who were in trouble and ask the kids to think how they would feel if they were in that position. We'd read a column in the *New York Times* called 'Neediest Cases,' and we'd ask each child to pick someone they wanted to help out." Lilo adds with a laugh that "when it came to teaching the children to be compassionate with each other, that was a little harder until they became adults. Now they care about the suffering of others and have a passion to try to change it."

You also have to be willing to accept your partner's caring for you. Some people find that hard. They think it is an admission of weakness. The truth is we all need help sometimes; we cannot take care of ourselves completely alone. At those times, there is nothing one is more thankful for than having a compassionate partner.

Be Honest, Trustworthy, and Reliable

Being honest couldn't be easier to describe: You don't lie, and you don't cheat. When asked, you tell the truth. Even when you're not asked, you tell the truth. If you play by these rules, you have a much greater chance of finding a partner who does the same.

If you master honesty, you're well on your way to being trustworthy and reliable. If you can consistently be depended upon to keep your promises and do what you say you'll do, you'll be a much-val-

ued human being at work, as you date, marry, and ultimately as you build a long life together. Being honest can be difficult, but in the long run it's the right way to live. But you can temper your honesty with discretion, courtesy, and tact.

Being honest couldn't be easier to describe: You don't lie, and you don't cheat. When asked, you tell the truth. Even when you're not asked, you tell the truth.

“I have two daughters in their twenties and this is what I have told them about what to look for in finding the right person: Look for someone who is honest, first and foremost,” says Beth, married to Alan for twenty-eight years. “Of course, I also tell them to find someone who loves them and whom they can truly depend on. I tell them it takes commitment, and they have to work at it. Both sides have to be willing to put their spouse ahead of themselves much of the time. Then they'll have a good marriage.”

Be Patient, Use Self-Control

It is not always easy to think before you act or speak. But that ability will keep you out of a lot of trouble in life . . . and in marriage. If you can practice patience in small ways with your partner, co-workers, and the people you encounter every day, you will find it almost second nature to continue behaving with tolerance and decency toward everyone. Getting angry is indulging yourself—and is not fair to your partner.

Exercising patience and self-control is a means to greater self-acceptance. It is a trait that will serve you well on the job. And your mate will thank you for it, too.

What Elizabeth respects and admires in her husband, Larry, is his self-control and calm demeanor, no matter what is happening in their lives. “The man I dated before Larry would yell and get angry when things didn't go his way; it was painful. Being with Larry was a huge difference—like a breath of fresh air. He loves me for what I am, not what he wants me to be.”

Arthur, who has known and loved his wife, Sarah, since he was sixteen and she was seventeen, echoes a similar sentiment.

“One of the things I admire in my wife is her patience, especially in her job as a mother,” says Arthur. “There is no way I could do the job she is doing with our daughter—she’s phenomenal.”

Accept Responsibility

One of the biggest challenges in a relationship is whether you can accept responsibility for your actions—and your inactions. Sometimes the things you don’t do (“Oops, I forgot to pick up the tickets”) can have as much impact as the things you do. Because we all make mistakes, being able to own up to them, say you’re sorry for them, and try to make up for them go a long way toward easing the inevitable tensions that arise in daily life.

Sometimes the things you don’t do (“Oops, I forgot to pick up the tickets”) can have as much impact as the things you do.

In our society it often seems like a self-centered, get-what-you-can attitude is the only way to make it. Despite the images of success and relationships we see in the media, the opposite is really true. Personal responsibility is a quality that everyone admires, whether they find it in a friend, a coworker, or a lover.

“When we were growing up, my father told me over and over, ‘Be honest. It doesn’t matter how hard it is. Be honest,’” recalls Gerry. “We were one of the last families to escape Nazi Germany before World War II, and even though time was short, I remember my father going around to everyone he did business with to make sure all his debts were paid and his accounts were settled before we left. He didn’t have to do that—people would have understood given the circumstances. But he did. So having a sense of responsibility and good character are very important to me. And I knew from the moment I met Lilo that they were important to her, too.”

Interestingly, when we become more responsible ourselves, we raise the standards of how others interact with us. If you arrive on time,

follow through on your commitments, and avoid blaming others, the people around you will do the same. If they don't, you will recognize their behavior much more quickly and you will be able to make choices about how you want your relationships with them to develop.

It is also important to recognize that you are accountable for your actions, not only in your personal relationships, but also in your role as a member of the larger community. Helping others allows you to stand out as a person of good character.

Maria and Anthony both agree that their marriage is so successful because they can depend on each other. "If I'm having a problem, Anthony is right there to help me through it," says Maria. "That's the one thing I especially admire about him. He's a good person to everybody. Right now, even when he doesn't feel all that well, he takes care of his aging aunts. He's always available to help everybody, neighbors, too."

Develop Your Individuality

Many people have a vision of a loving relationship as one in which two people are so close that they almost meld into one person with completely shared likes, dislikes, and passions. Psychologist David Schnarch calls this "a fusion fantasy."

In his book *Passionate Marriage* Schnarch argues that the strongest and happiest relationships are those in which the opposite of fusion occurs. These are couples in which each partner is able to establish his or her own unique, independent character. Through a process called *differentiation* each partner is able to become distinct without being distant, an individual without being egocentric or selfish.

"Differentiation involves balancing two basic life forces: the drive for individuality and the drive for togetherness," Schnarch writes. "Giving up your individuality to be together is as defeating in the long run as giving up your relationship to maintain your individuality. Either way, you end up being less of a person with less of a relationship."

As the psychologist Erich Fromm put it, "In love the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two." From this perspective, developing your character does more than make you a "good catch," it enables you to maintain your unique sense of self, even after you have entered into a serious, loving relationship.