

How To Avoid Marrying A Jerk

Jennie met Kevin through a friend at work. She thought she had met her knight in shining armor. He was such a gentleman. She had no clue that the relationship was headed for disaster. Have you ever dated the love of your life only to find out you were really involved with a jerk or jerkette? Well, you aren't alone. Thousands of people get married every year to the "person of their dreams" only to have the relationship turn into a real nightmare in a few short months.

"I have seen far too many people fall into the trap of marrying a person thinking that they knew them, but in reality they only knew about them," said Dr. John Van Epp, relationship expert and author of the soon to be released book, *How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk*.

Over the last ten years Dr. Van Epp has been committed to helping singles and singles-again in their dating and marital preparation.

"As I worked with individuals, I found myself talking with people who repeatedly became involved in unhealthy relationships," said Dr. Van Epp. "When I asked these individuals if they saw any signs of problem areas at the beginning of their relationship the answer was always 'yes.' The bottom line is, they were suffering from what I call the 'love is blind' syndrome. They had become too attached and involved too quickly and overlooked the problem areas. Even when you know what to look for in the dating process, you can still be blindsided when you allow your attachment to become too strong too soon."

Jennie admits to falling into the classic love is blind category. Kevin was quite the gentleman when it came to treating Jennie with respect and spending time with her. So while they were dating she admits that she never noticed any red flags such as the fact that he would be very jealous because she worked in a predominantly male environment and went to lunch occasionally with a group of male coworkers.

As a result of his experiences, Dr. Van Epp developed a program to help people form healthy relationships from the very beginning. Van Epp proposes that there are five areas a person should know about another person before marrying.

The Five Alerts

Getting to know people is the first bonding dynamic. There are five bonding forces that create the feeling of closeness in every romantic relationship. They are:

- getting to know about the person you are dating;
- family background;
- what a person's conscience is like;
- compatibility potential;
- relationship skills; and

- previous relationship patterns.

Because Jennie met her boyfriend through a co-worker, she felt like she knew something about him. In hindsight, she realizes that she did not have the chance to know much about him or his family because his family was not a close-knit family. “I come from a very large extended family,” said Jennie. “We are used to hugging and saying I love you. None of that was present in Kevin’s family. I never really learned much about his family background. I honestly thought that after Kevin met my family he would change and would love the closeness of a tight knit family.”

“Some people have an established friendship before they start dating,” said Dr. Van Epp. “Other relationships start out with a bang – you see someone, talk with them, end up going out and hitting it off and you are totally infatuated with them. No matter how you get together, it really does take time to get to know someone.”

Dr. Van Epp encourages people to wait two years before marrying. You may be thinking that sounds like an eternity. Van Epp believes that within three to six months you can begin to know someone, but like looking through a microscope at its lowest power you can only see certain things in that amount of time. Dating someone for an extended period allows you to see certain things that may not become evident right away. When you have dated someone for a year you begin to have history with him/her. Many couples get through their first year just fine, but in the second year issues often begin to surface that weren’t there in the past.

A relationship needs time for things to normalize. Many people are very flexible in the infancy of a relationship, but as time goes by they become less flexible. By taking things slow and easy you give your relationship time to grow up and you get to see how the person will really treat you.

Second, is the trust dynamic. As you get to know a person based on the areas listed above you shape a picture in your mind of what this person is like. From that picture comes trust.

“Trust is a picture in your mind that tells you what that person will do when you are not around,” said Dr. Van Epp. “It is a living and active definition that changes as the relationship evolves. For example, your boyfriend tells you he is going to call at 5 p.m. and he calls at exactly 5 p.m. In your mind you think, ‘he did what he said he was going to do therefore I can trust him.’ With that you begin to fill in the gaps in the trust equation that the person is trustworthy to do what they said they would do.”

After three months of dating, Jennie felt like she could trust Kevin.

“He seemed to have respect for me,” said Jennie. “He didn’t try anything, which really impressed me because most guys try to make a move on you the first time you go out. A few months later, we moved in together. It seemed like the ‘adult’ thing to do if we

were considering marriage, which we had talked about several times.”

Dr. Van Epp cautions that you must be careful not to over-exaggerate what a person has done and draw the conclusion that the person is trustworthy. Generalizations are dangerous. Just because a person has certain characteristics that you like does not mean that they are trustworthy. Knowing their family background and their history helps you to know whether or not you can trust them.

The third dynamic is reliance. As you really get to know a person you look to them to meet certain needs that you have. This forms reliance in the relationship. This is when you think that your deep needs in life can be met by this person. If you go too fast and get too close too soon you won't have an accurate picture of what it will be like with this person down the road. You should not marry a person and all of the sudden find out new things about them. According to Dr. Van Epp, reliance can be overcharged by sexual involvement. Couples who are sexually active prior to getting married often say they can depend and rely on each other, but the feeling of closeness is really fed by the sexual chemistry not true knowledge about the person.

“In real life, in long-term marriage relationships, sexual chemistry does not dominate the majority of life together,” said Dr. Van Epp. “Most of life is talking together, having a personality that blends well with the other person, having a good sense of humor, etc. Sex is part of it, but not a major portion of it.”

Fourth is the dynamic of commitment. As a relationship grows, it has different definitions. Each definition is a level of commitment. Friends have a low level of commitment, whereas best friends have a higher level of commitment to each other and soul mates have the highest level of commitment.

Based on their time together, Jennie thought that Kevin was committed to her for life. They enjoyed each other's company and seemed to have a lot in common. After 13 months of dating, Jennie and Kevin were married. As they were leaving the wedding in a limo, Kevin turned to Jennie and said, “Now that we are married, you can have all my money.”

“I thought that was the strangest statement to make to me,” said Jennie. “It was a warning sign of things to come. I was going to find out very quickly that Kevin was not committed to me. He was committed to money. Our relationship began going downhill very quickly.”

The fifth dynamic is sexual touch. This includes chemistry as well as any expression of touch from hand holding to giving a hug to complete openness. Sexual involvement tends to create a feeling of really knowing somebody when in fact you don't know them at all. Living together and sexual involvement prior to marriage tend to create barriers for your understanding of the person.

“Like Jennie, many people think that living with a person will tell you everything about another person,” said Dr. Van Epp. “Perhaps you do get to know things about a person that you might not know if you weren’t rooming with them, but there is a cost involved. It breaks down the depth of commitment that is imbedded in the marriage relationship.” Even though Jennie lived with Kevin, she had not dated him long enough to see his abusive tendencies. In spite of hearing him constantly yell at his sister, she attributed it to sibling issues, not a potential threat to their marriage.

Sexual intimacy is intended to build a feeling of bonding and closeness, but not at a time when you are trying to get to know a person. Becoming sexually intimate with a person outside of marriage can cloud the picture of the person you are dating to a point that you miss very important warning signs.

“Think of this like your stereo mixing board where each one of these dynamics is a slider that goes up and down,” said Dr. Van Epp. “There is a certain safe zone that will protect you from the ‘love is blind’ syndrome. You should never let one level exceed the previous. For example, the level of your sexual involvement should never exceed your level of commitment, which should never exceed your level of reliance. Your level of reliance should not exceed the trust picture you develop and that should not go beyond what you know about that person in the key areas.”

According to Dr. Van Epp, most if not all relationship problems occur when there is an imbalance in these five dynamics. For instance, co-dependency occurs when the reliance dynamic is at the top and what you know about the person and trust about the person is significantly lower. For the person that is sexually active, their sex level is high and their commitment dynamic is low as well as all the others. The naive person fills in the gap of their trust picture long before they actually know the person they are dating in these five areas. Their trust level is high and their real knowledge of the person is low. Never allow the level or intensity of a bonding force to exceed the level of the previous bonding force.

“If you really want to make sure you aren’t marrying a jerk or jerkette it takes time,” said Dr. Van Epp. “There is no substitute. You need to spend time talking with each other about all kinds of things. You also need to do things together. This is why electronic relationships are dangerous. It is one thing to have someone tell you about their family via the internet. It is totally different to actually spend time with their family and watch how they interact together. Based on research, there seems to be an imbedded amount of time that it takes to know someone that you can’t get around. It is certainly possible to meet someone and have this sense of love at first sight and be married for 50 years, but the risks of marrying someone you don’t know are very high. The divorce rate is twice as high for those who have dated less than two years before getting married. Therefore, time is a strong predictor of a lasting marriage. BUT, time alone doesn’t give you an accurate enough picture. When your brain knows what to look for, and your heart knows how to keep the boundaries and balances in your growing attachment, then you will be in the best position to make a marital choice you will not regret.”

The veil that had been keeping Jennie from seeing Kevin's true nature lifted when they married. The respect he had shown her in the beginning went out the window as he became verbally abusive to her. He would show up at her workplace unexpectedly to check up on her and began monitoring her spending habits. Jennie hung in there for two and a half years trying to make their marriage work.

"I kept thinking that I could make him happy," she said. "In the end I realized I could not change him."

Jennie ended up filing for divorce. Looking back she wishes she had paid attention to some of the red flags that she shrugged off as nothing major. From this point forward she says she will be more cautious in her dating relationships, careful not to repeat the same mistakes.