

February 24, 2009

## Dating 101: How to Tell When You're Ready to Commit

By Stacy D. Phillips

There is something exhilarating about taking the big leap from dating to becoming a permanent "item" and making that final commitment. But before you run off into the sunset with your mate, make sure that the time you choose to commit is the right time -- and with the right person.

As a divorce attorney, I have found over the years that most couples who wind up splitting do so because there are discrepancies or control issues over what I term the "Big Six." These six categories include: wealth/property and money; children; health, physical and mental; growth, professional and personal; intimacy and loss of love; and fear, both physical and emotional. I ask my clients to take a close look at each of these categories to determine if there are major conflicts, not only with his or her chosen mate but also conflicts within themselves.

Have you found the right person? Is it the right time? Here are eight key questions to ask your mate -- and yourself. The answers will be very telling.

**1. How do you believe we should spend our money and on what?** If your mate says, "On fun stuff and we'll get to the bills later," you better reconsider going the commitment route until your mate grows up a bit. Most marriages and long-term relationships break up due to stresses and squabbles over money. Splits happen when a couple's values in spending and saving simply do not match. Don't overlook this question. It is critical in determining whether you or your mate are a match and whether you are both ready for a mature relationship -- one that requires fiscal responsibility.

**2. What are your thoughts about starting a family?** If your mate says, "This is not something I can even think about right now," do not ignore that remark. It could be that your mate will put this decision off longer than you wish or one day stand up and announce, "I've decided against having children." You also need to be honest with yourself. Do you want children? Let your mate know this up front. You may also want to ask your mate about his/her point of view on how the children should be raised. If there are huge discrepancies in this department, there are bound to be serious problems down the road.

**3. If I get sick, how will you take care of me?** If your mate laughs off such a question with, "How do I know? I'll figure it out then," you should take that offhanded remark as a serious indicator that your mate might not be grown up enough to handle your critical needs. There is a way to test this one: How does your mate treat you when you get sick with the flu? Also, if you know deep down that you would not have the patience or fortitude to care for an ailing mate, be fair and let him/her know of your concerns. Who needs someone in his/her life who is only there for the good times?



**4. Do you envision us growing old together?** If your mate quips, "How the heck do I know, that is a long way off" or "I guess so," neither answer should satisfy you. To suggest that you or your mate is uncertain of your eventual fate together -- or cannot envision those "golden" years as a couple -- should be a neon sign with bright red lights that flash, "This may only be temporary." Commitments should be thought of as permanent, not temporary.

**5. Do you ever think about your ex?** If the answer from your mate is "Well, I do sometimes," then you want to ask the next question: "In what context?" If your mate shares stories about the fun they used to have together, this could mean your mate is not over his or her last love. And what about you? Do you still think about your ex? When? How? I highly recommend backing off the commitment stage until you and your mate can safely say that thoughts about your exes are fleeting or random.

**6. Has your mate ever told you they scared a former mate in any way?** If your mate's answer is something like "Well, yeah, I scared my ex every time I became jealous or mad," step back and think twice. Though your mate may think he/she is ready for a commitment, it may not be the right time for one. If you have had similar issues, the same may apply to you. Are you worried your mate might cheat on you or keep secrets from you or inflict emotional or physical harm on you? If the answer is yes, tackle this now, not after you have made a commitment. Maybe you or your mate could benefit from therapy, anger management, rehab, or other appropriate behavior modification assistance.

**7. Is your mate good at problem solving?** Does your mate meet challenges head on and collaborate on solutions to problems, or sweep issues under the rug? What about you? Are you mature enough to approach your mate to say, "We have a problem. Let's find a solution to it." How you handle problems together may well determine how long your relationship will last.

**8. How does my mate deal with a "screwup?"** Does my mate place blame? Does my mate take responsibility for his/her actions? How do I handle my mistakes? Do we both acknowledge our errors and resolve to deal with them? If chronic, negative behavior persists in this area, take a second look to decide if you two are a good match and if you are ready to commit. It is not unusual, for instance, to have each partner blame the other, which rarely accomplishes anything. Placing blame, or finding fault, can only worsen once you are committed.

*Stacy D. Phillips is a certified family law specialist and author of "Divorce: It's All About Control -- How to Win the Emotional, Psychological and Legal Wars." Phillips represents business executives, homemakers, and many celebrities in film, television, music, sports, and politics.*

