

Becoming Character Partners

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INTRODUCTION: WHEN YOU ARE IN A RELATIONSHIP

From the first encounter you have with a potential partner, and then through all stages of your relationship, you have the vital task of ensuring you thoroughly know the person's character. At times this can be straightforward and easy. Some qualities are obvious and consistent. However, many will take significant time and experiences together to discover.

You will have choices throughout your relationship that will affect your success. How you spend your time together can aid the process or interfere with it. Your skillfulness with observation and communication, as well as your partner's, will assist you in learning what you need to know.

Character affects virtually all of your words and actions, and the same for your partner. One of the primary goals of being in a relationship is to work towards marriage. As you assess whether your partner is someone you may wish to marry, it will be wise for you to ensure he or she has the qualities that provide a good foundation for a long-term commitment.

Marriage, like all of life, has times of peace and times of difficulty. Living together in harmony with someone and being parents or stepparents together takes knowledge and skill. If you ensure you have a foundation of compatibility and good character, you have a greater opportunity for a happy, successful marriage.

Chapter 1

Understanding Character and Partner Observation

Every time you are with your partner, whether alone or with family or friends, you have the opportunity to engage in observing words, actions, and interactions. This is a learning-in-action process so that you thoroughly know your partner's character and are clear whether your relationship has potential to move towards marriage.

As you observe your partner, you will likely discover details you appreciate and others you find difficult to accept. For instance, someone who gets along well with your friends may annoy your mother. You will assess what you appreciate, what requires you to accept and adjust, what you can influence to change with your partner's full agreement and cooperation, and what will not work at all. It is vital that you *celebrate your harmonies* and also *pay careful attention to any warning signs*, obtaining assistance from others as needed to understand whether an issue is truly serious.

Examine whether you are staying confident that you are a well-matched couple and there is good evidence to demonstrate this. At the same time, be cautious of misleading yourself into thinking that your partner is the only possible person for you or that there is some mystical reason you are "meant to be" together. Sometimes being in this state of mind can blind you to what is not working well in the relationship or to where there are true incompatibilities.

Successful observation, which includes understanding and processing what you see and hear, helps you keep "both eyes open" to clearly see your partner and to be sure you are choosing someone who is a good long-term match for you.

UNDERSTANDING THE OBSERVATION PROCESS

Observing is the process of gathering information through careful and directed attention. The more attentive and systematic your observations, the more knowledge and insights you will gain. You observe what the other person says and does—or does not say or do. Good observation skills allow you to perceive details about your partner's appearance, choices, character qualities, words, actions, and attitudes. Of course, hopefully your partner will be aware of your observation and will take care to learn about you at the same time. Your mutual honesty with each other will help this process.

Time and Infatuation

Part of the intent of observing and assessing your partner's character strengths is to avoid being blinded by infatuation. Infatuation, or being "in love," is usually an intense and short-lived passion. **Practicing detachment and getting to know someone thoroughly, rather than rushing blindly into romance, will help you establish a lasting relationship built on committed love.**

Relationship expert John Van Epp, Ph.D., addresses the importance of taking time to know someone intimately, no matter what age you are or your level of relationship experience. He says:

"Not until around three months into a relationship do deep-seated patterns start to become evident. ... [T]he newness of a relationship is a natural inebriating effect accompanying attraction that typically begins to wear off around the third month. We put our best foot

...

~ Reflection ~

1. What do I consider mature behavior in myself? In others?
2. How do I handle my responsibilities? Which ones do I particularly struggle to fulfill?
3. How does my partner handle responsibilities?

ESSENTIAL AND HELPFUL ACTIVITIES

Essential:

1. Identify three areas in which you want to demonstrate more maturity. Set specific behavioral goals and act on them. Periodically reflect on your progress and adjust your efforts as needed to ensure results.

Helpful:

2. Play an electronic or video game with your partner or watch your partner play with someone else. Pay attention to how they respond to the content and the competition. What type of game do they choose? How violent or vulgar is it, and how do they respond to that violence or vulgarity in it? Do they become aggressive during the play or treat it as meaningless fun? How do they handle losing? How do they act when they win? What else do you observe that might indicate their level of maturity?

OBSERVING RESPONSES TO PROBLEMS

Good character information includes how your partner handles disagreements, illness, dissension, or difficulties. What do you observe in your partner when things are not going smoothly? Do challenges bring out character strengths such as compassion, courage, or flexibility; or does your partner retreat into destructive anger, frustration, depression, or denial? How does your partner behave when feeling sad or disappointed?

Difficulties provide great opportunities for personal development. **Both you and your partner will be stronger individuals and more successful in the relationship if you learn and grow by responding well to challenges together.** This does not mean that you should find a difficult relationship in order to aid your personal development! **Be assured that in all relationships, including marriage, plenty of challenges arise naturally. You do not need to make life more difficult by choosing to be in a relationship weighed down by behavior and character problems. If you have to struggle to maintain harmony, you will spend all of your energy trying to keep the relationship going, with little left to**

Chapter 2

Observing Friendship and Character in Action

You now have a foundation of understanding character. You also are beginning to understand the importance of observation skills and how they work. Now it's time to get more practice and see how all of this works in action.

Remember that a wide variety of experiences together will give you increased opportunities to observe the quality of your character-based friendship and relationship, as well as with seeing a range of character qualities in action. Some experiences will be with the two of you alone. However, many of your best insights will come from experiences that include others.

Time with family is vital. Not only will you learn from those interactions, but family members who are not infatuated with your partner may see aspects that are invisible to you. Time with friends will also be valuable.

FRIENDSHIP-BASED RELATIONSHIP

Relationship experts John Gottman and Nan Silver define friendship as "...a mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other's company." Their research shows that "...happy marriages are based on a deep friendship." Couples in such marriages "...tend to know each other intimately—they are well versed in each other's likes, dislikes, personality quirks, hopes, and dreams. They have an abiding regard for each other and express this fondness not just in the big ways but in little ways day in and day out." This information supports the wisdom of developing a firm friendship before a relationship becomes so serious that it may lead to marriage.¹

If you develop a friendship that provides mutual support and understanding and then decide to marry, you will ensure your marriage a strong foundation. You will already have practiced being companions, confiding in each other, supporting and helping each other through difficulties, sharing joys, and turning to each other for fun and relaxation. Ideally, you will be closer to your spouse than to any other human being.

Understanding Friendship

Descriptions of close friendship often include the following:

- Good communication, ability to share honestly about both positive and difficult matters
- Acknowledgement and affirmation of positive qualities in each other
- Enjoyment of quiet, peaceful time together
- Frequent play, fun, and laughter
- Acceptance; allowing both partners to be themselves
- Support and appropriate sympathy, empathy, and help during difficulties
- Enthusiasm for individual and shared achievements
- Loving, spiritual connection
- Encouragement
- Loyalty
- Trust that shared information will not be used hurtfully

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Chapter 3

Linking Character and Communication

Your character qualities, and of course your partner's, affect your choice of words, your tone of voice, your attitude when listening, and really all aspects of communication. Effective communication is a skill to learn and practice with your partner. The more you both incorporate qualities such as compassion, truthfulness, love, moderation, and respect when you speak to one another, the better.

You and your partner may need to remind each other occasionally, and even more often on bad days, that you are partners, friends, and allies—not opponents, enemies, or adversaries. If you and your partner choose to build your relationship upon unity, friendliness, cooperation, and mutual appreciation, your life together and attitudes toward each other will be happier and more peaceful. In this chapter, you will gain greater insight into how character strengths when misused can cause relationship missteps or dissension and how to turn that around in a positive direction.

Ideally, you and your partner will practice and develop communication skills together. However, your partner may be reluctant to participate, perhaps feeling as if you are forcing the matter. Some people think communication skills training is unnecessary or inappropriate because of cultural or family attitudes.

Many people feel unsure about their communication skills, especially if they have been criticized. The more you learn about communication on your own, the better you can model effective techniques and encourage or influence your partner to try them. Every change you make, no matter how small, will affect your partner and your relationship.

ACTIVE AND CONSCIOUS LISTENING

Effective communication occurs when two people exchange messages and both understand the intended meaning of the messages. **Communication works best in a relationship when you express yourself from your higher nature and use character strengths.** A key aspect of effective mutual communication is attentive listening. Have you ever noticed that if you rearrange the letters of LISTEN they form the word SILENT? **Silence makes it possible to listen fully to your partner with your ears, mind, eyes, and heart, and to see something from your partner's perspective.** "...Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry..."¹

By listening fully, you can help your partner feel respected, loved, validated, and appreciated. Your partner will gain confidence and feel more loving toward you. The gift of your full attention encourages your partner to listen well to you in return. Poet and author Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote, "It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen."²

Listening for understanding contributes to effective problem-solving discussions. When you are successful at resolving issues, you reduce or prevent dissension and disunity between you. **Conscious listening enhances trust, love, and unity between you and your partner.** According to spouses Kathlyn Hendricks, Ph.D., and Gay Hendricks, Ph.D., conscious listening includes three levels of skill and depth:

Level One: Listen for the words—Give a simple, concise, and accurate summary of what you have heard the speaker say.

Chapter 4

Connecting Character and Sex

Physical intimacies, including sexual touch and intercourse, have become the norm in dating relationships in many parts of the world for people of all ages. When you care for someone, the pull to be physically intimate can be very strong. Popular media makes having sex very early in a relationship look like positive behavior. It also conveys that it's fine to make very fast decisions about the long-term viability of a relationship based on strong physical attraction.

Of course you *do* want to know that there is a spark of attraction between you and a partner. **However, it is clear that sexual touch alters relationships. Sexual intimacy while you and a partner are getting to know each other, or as a method of getting to know each other, increases the difficulty of objectively assessing a partner's character. It shifts the focus onto physical attraction rather than exploring and developing the other far more important dimensions of your friendship-based relationship.**

As you read the sections that follow, think about the sexual choices that you have made previously, what choices you are committing to today, and what your commitment is to yourself and to a future partner. In a world where sex is so pervasive and prominent, the choices will often not be easy ones for you to make or stay committed to fulfilling. You may feel confused at times, change your commitments, or try new choices. These sections present you with a foundation for whatever you choose to do.

DEFINING SEX AND INTIMACY

Sex is primarily a physical act of intimate touch, but it has mental, emotional, and spiritual components. Some people define sex from a physical standpoint as occurring only when there is sexual intercourse. However, it is actually broader than that, because it includes any intentional contact that arouses a sexual response, whether you are by yourself or with a partner. Therefore, sex also includes actions such as:

- Talking explicitly about sex
- Listening to sexually explicit musical lyrics
- Viewing sexual images (pornography or some television shows and movies)
- Reading books that arouse the desire to have sex
- Fantasizing and masturbating
- Manual sex as a couple
- Oral sex

If you choose not to engage in sex in a relationship, it includes avoiding all of these above actions and more. Even couples who make the choice to have sex will be wise to have respectful limits that eliminate engaging in a number of these activities. As you think about your choices, you will also assess which ones are more likely to expand your lower physical nature rather than develop your higher spiritual one, and therefore reduce your self-respect.

Sex and intimacy are concepts that are often paired together. They can be connected, but they are also quite different. Intimacy is an emotional feeling of familiarity and closeness that is based upon the shared and accumulated experiences between two people. These experiences include every

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Date: _____

Worksheet 2: Practicing Observation Skills

Purpose: To improve your ability to observe others effectively. Choose your partner (preferable) or someone else to observe for a few days. Let the person know about your observation plan and obtain agreement to proceed.

Instructions:

- A) Make specific notes of your observations in the table below. In the first column, note the person's words, gestures, and actions.
- B) In the second column, note any character strengths you think the person demonstrated.
- C) In the third column, note your appreciation for, concerns about, or interpretations of what you observed.

Words, Gestures, Attitudes, or Actions	Character Qualities	Observation Notes

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19 ~ Excellence

Excellence is striving to achieve high standards and a superior quality of work and effort, as well as fulfilling one's potential for character growth and development.

Someone practices Excellence effectively when he/she:

- Goes beyond the minimum required and gives his/her best in every effort, selflessly paying attention to the details that make a difference to others, enhance their experience, and achieve superior results and outcomes
- Gains the necessary knowledge and then practices tasks, skills, talents, character qualities, and positive behaviors until performing them consistently and effectively
- Welcomes opportunities for continual improvement
- Creates beneficial outcomes that endure or that others can sustain long-term
- Achieves outstanding success through working cooperatively with others
- Approaches tasks in a productive and effective way
- Develops character strengths and works to fulfill positive purposes in life

Someone needs to strengthen Excellence when he/she:

- Treats responsibilities carelessly
- Performs work in a sloppy way
- Neglects relationships with others
- Avoids developing character qualities, talents, and capacities
- Settles for mediocrity, adopts society's minimum standards, or sets such low standards of achievement that he/she fails to fulfill his/her potential or be of effective service to others

Someone misuses the strength of Excellence when he/she:

- Approaches tasks in an overly meticulous and time-consuming way with a focus on perfection
- Places a higher emphasis on making things perfect than on treating others with courtesy and kindness
- Treats others and himself/herself inflexibly and impatiently, ignoring personal limitations
- Holds an attitude of superiority toward others
- Reacts intolerantly to someone or something that does not meet his/her standards
- Allows competition with others to be the primary motivation for achievement

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