

Mate selection: Happiness is achievable

Who is right for me?

The secret to finding your perfect mate

Why do we fall in love with this person, but not with that one? How do we know if this person is right for us? Romantics say it is a decision of the heart. It's down to a hormone, that's what biologists believe. Both explanations, combined, provide a realistic and exciting insight into mate choice. This integrative approach exposes some of the assumptions we make about love as a myth and shows the mistakes many people make when trying to *find* Mr. and Mrs. Right.

Ursula Nuber

MATE SELECTION: ***Who is right for me?***

So why do we fall in love with a particular person? How do we know: this person is right for me? Do we follow our heart, is it the brain, or is it just down to hormones? Biologists and psychologists do not agree when it comes to answering these questions. Nevertheless, their different approaches and explanations offer a plausible and fascinating picture of our mate choice decisions.

"We met in high school."

"We were already a couple in school."

"After the 11th grade, he moved away with his parents."

"But I could never forget her."

"He could not forget me."

"Her pretty face was like burned into my memory. And 34 years later when I walk down Broadway, I ran into her."

"We looked each other in the eyes and it was as if not a single day had passed."

"Yes, and she was just as pretty as she was at 16."

"He was still very much the same, he hasn't changed a bit."

"We got married 40 years ago, but three years later we were divorced. Then I married Marjorie."

"First you were together with Barbara."

"Right, Barbara. I did not marry Barbara, but Marjorie."

"And then he got divorced again."

"Correct. After that, I married Katy."

"Then came the next divorce."

"And a few years later I went to a funeral and met her. I was in a relationship with a short girl at the time, but I can't recall her name."

"Roberta."

"Oh, right, Roberta. But I couldn't keep my eyes off you. I remember exactly. I sneaked up to you and said - what did I say?"

"You said: What are you doing afterwards?"

"I left Roberta standing alone there, we went for a coffee and then we got married."

"Exactly 35 years after our first wedding day."

"At the time he was head of a summer camp for boys. And I was the Girls Camp director. Once we had a colourful evening and I saw him walking right at us. I thought he wanted to talk to my friend Martine, I was used to it, most men wanted to talk to Martine. But this time it was different, he came over to talk to me. He said:

"I'm Ben Small."

"From this moment on I knew. You kind of feel it in your gut, like when you're buying a melon."

So who is this man married to?

Like the couples from the movie "When Harry Met Sally" we all love to tell the story of how we chose our partners. How was it, when we met him or her first? What did he or she say, what did we feel and what happened then? Even decades after that fateful event we remember the smallest details and we never grow tired of recalling them again and again, to us and to others. Whether or not our love is still there or whether it has already gone: stories about choosing our mate never stop to fascinate us. Whether it is about ourselves or others – we never cease to be amazed at how two strangers become lovers. It is no coincidence that movies like "When Harry Met Sally" are so hugely successful and there is a reason why we all love to be voyeurs when two hearts find each other.

Heart, brain or hormones

Each couple has their very own story to tell, as it seems, and each love story has its very specific plot. But as different and mysterious the story might seem at first sight, mate selection is much less mysterious and unique than we think or we might wish it to be. Our heads are filled with the idea that somewhere on this earth there is a specific person who is a perfect match for us and who can give us the feeling of being complete. But if you ask science "why two people end up together" you will be quickly brought back down to earth.

While Blaise Pascal thought that: "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of." scientists offer today perfectly reasonable and rational explanations and leave little room for romance. The scientific answer to the question "Does feeling of love for someone comes from brain or heart, or is who we fall in love with all down to the hormones?" relegates the heart to a minor secondary role. Based on the evidence, partner selection appears to be more a matter of biology than of the mind. Numerous impressive research studies conducted by sociobiologists and anthropologists provide essentially three explanations:

- Our choice of partners is controlled by an evolutionary heritage.
- We are attracted to people who are genetically similar to us.
- Hormonal and biochemical processes trigger the feeling of "I'm in love".

According to the *evolutionary model* certain mating strategies have emerged in the course of human evolution. A very prominent representative of this approach is the evolutionary psychologist David Buss. In a large cross-cultural study that included more than 10,000 individuals across 37 cultures, Buss sought to determine the different characteristics each sex looks for in a mate and to hypothesize the evolutionary causes for these preference differences. Buss found that women desire reliable mates of a certain social status who will not abandon them and help raising their offspring.

Men, on the other hand, look for women that seem to have a good chance of bearing healthy children. We are the descendants of hunter-gatherers, says David Buss, and their desires are still part of us. "Over thousands of generations women have developed a preference for men who can show that they are willing and able to enter into a long term relationship."

But what if the woman herself is of a higher status? Then she will no longer rely on finding a reliable provider. "You'd think so", admits ethologist Karl Grammer. But "this point could not be confirmed. The higher the status of a woman, the greater the man's status must be." The answer to the question of why women do not use their financial independence and seek attractive men, lies according to Grammer in a new American study, which stated that "attractive men invest less in offspring. This not only pertains to financial investment decisions, but emotional investment as well. Therefore for women these men are not very attractive."

But what if a woman does not want children or there are children from previous relationships or she has passed the childbearing age? Will she employ a different mating strategy? Psychologist Dagmar Luszyk from the Dresden University of Technology has investigated this question in a pilot study. She evaluated 150 lonely hearts ads placed by women from the age group 20 to 39 years and 150 ads of women in the age of 50 to 69 years. Her assumption was that older women are less concerned about a man's status and that they place less emphasis on his appearance than younger women. However, this assumption was not confirmed. In the critical categories appearance of the woman, status, education and the man's financial potential - Luszyk did not find significant differences between age groups. According to her, this "suggests that the partner search in higher age groups is adequately described by the evolutionary theory of mate selection."

Similarities: a guarantee for a stable relationship

Only in one point older women seem to equate the loss of their reproductive capacity: they place less value on their partner's willingness to enter into a long-term commitment. Dagmar Luszyk believes that "the changed context older women find themselves in is evidently more important than genetically determined strategies of mate choice."

The question of which popular wisdom is right: "DC and a feather flock together" or "Opposites attract" has been clearly answered by science. Scientific studies confirm what Shakespeare already knew when he praised the "marriage of true minds": We fall in love with people who are similar to us. The genetic model of partner selection explains why this is so. Similarity guarantees a genetic bonus. The offspring of couples who are similar to each other is closer related to both of his parents than in the usual 50 percent.

Apart from this "genetic" advantage, the similarity between partners is also a guarantee for the stability of the relationship. Recent studies, presented in the summer of 1996 at the annual meeting

of the American Psychological Association in Toronto/Canada, confirm: Anyone who marries a person who is similar to him, enjoys a happier and more stable marriage than married couples who are very different from each other. The researchers found little evidence that opposites attract in the long run.

Children - an obstacle (or not)?

"Great with kids too" is frequently used in lonely hearts advertisements. So, a child from a previous marriage won't be a "showstopper" for our new relationship? Well, it's not quite that simple for single mothers or fathers on the partner market, as Heidelberg-based psychologists Viktor Oubaid and Manfred Amelang have concluded in a questionnaire survey among 203 students of Heidelberg University (*Gruppendynamik, Issue 4, 12/1995*). The participants were asked to imagine being newly in love and wanting to enter into a long term relationship with his/her new partner. Oubaid and Amelang wanted to know: What factors promote this desire and which things would hamper this wish? 18 items were given, including the following:

- The woman already has a child but has given it up for adoption. (The man has already a child. The child is living with his adoptive parents.)
- The woman/man already has a child. The child, however, died shortly after birth.
- The woman is pregnant by another man. (A former partner of the man is pregnant with his child.)
- The woman is pregnant by another man. This man died shortly after the beginning of pregnancy. (The man has a six-month-old child. The child's mother died shortly after giving birth.)
- The woman has a two year old child. She has separated from the child's father who pays child support. (The man has separated from the child's mother, with whom he shares custody.)
- The woman/man has a two year old child. The father/mother of the child is deceased.

As attractive as the fantasized partner may be, the more responsibility he/she has for the child, the lower will his/her "market value" be. A long-term relationship is seen by the respondents as the most likely outcome with a partner whose child has died. The desire for attachment is weakest if there is a pregnancy. The emotional and financial "costs" associated with an existing child are crucial. If the child has died or it is brought up by adoptive parents or the other biological parent is no longer alive, the respondents are absolutely willing to exert effort into a relationship.

The art of making contact

Choosing a mate requires making contact. But how do we establish a connection with a person we find interesting? How do we clear the first hurdle to get his attention? The behavioural scientist Christiane Tramitz from the Max Planck Institute for Human Ethology has explored this issue in her research on "feminine body language and its effect on men" from the perspective of women. Are there body language signals that determine whether men develop feelings of sympathy, antipathy or indifference for an unknown woman?

Looks: Eye contact is perceived by men as encouraging. A woman's frequent glances can make a

man talk. It seems less promising, for instance, to use eye language with shy men and males who generally have problems to approach a woman.

Averting the gaze: If a woman hardly glances at you or does so only briefly, men will read this as a clear sign: she is bored and not interested. In response, men experience the presence of a woman who avoids eye contact as tiresome and unattractive. They will not be keen to get to know the woman closer.

Upper body movements: Women are seen by men as friendly, inviting and attractive, when they bend forward with the upper body while talking. Apparently this helps men raise their self-esteem.

Turning one's back: Folded arms and turning away the body are signals that men - naturally - interpret as rejection. However, as Tramitz points out, men need "a number of clear and unambiguous signals of rejection, until they realize or will be able to comprehend that they are rejected by a woman."

Smiling: A smiling woman is seen by men as attractive, friendly and interesting.

Hair Flip: What is the effect on men when a woman, slowly and deliberately, runs her fingers through her hair the head slightly bent to one side? The reactions cannot be considered conclusive, as Tramitz observed: Among her male respondents 21 interpreted this signal as positive sign, 24 read it as a negative signal and some of them did not perceive it as a body-language signal at all.

Head Akimbo: "Head Akimbo" means both hands crossed behind the head. Men do not respond clearly to this signal. Some interpret it as a friendly, inviting gesture, for others - especially older men - it is a negative signal. Especially men who find a woman likable, cringe when she leans back and folds her arms behind her head. "They interpret the physical 'Growing' as a desire for dominance," says Tramitz. "No man wants that!"

Christiane Tramitz warns against reading certain body language signals as "right" or "wrong". "Particular signals will be received enthusiastically by some, while others will be put off by them." she summarizes her research results. "Body language does not work like a fixed set of rules, or like traffic lights, when the same light colour will always trigger exactly the same responses."

Source: Tramitz, Christiane: Irren ist männlich. Weibliche Körpersprache und ihre Wirkung auf Männer, Bertelsmann Munich, 1993

The 'average couple' will be a similar match, specifically in the following aspects:

- **Origin:** We are drawn to someone whose family world is in several important ways similar to our own, and whose psychological situation in his or her family of origin is similar to our own (such as similar sibling roles, similar role for parents, similar traumatic experiences).
- **Physical similarity:** The similarity of couples in physical appearance is often emphasized in the literature. Most partners are similar in body shape and height. They will be approximately of the same slimness or be 'similarly fat' and equally attractive or unattractive.
- **Intelligence:** Similar cognitive abilities seem to be important for mate selection and relationship satisfaction. Various studies show that couples show similar linguistic abilities and share similar memory and imagination.
- **Personality Traits:** Also in regard to their personality characteristics partners look for similarity. The degree of self-awareness (*self-monitoring*) appears to be of particular importance. People with high self-awareness tend to observe their self-expression and their behaviour closely and

they adapt it to external demands. People with this characteristic are to a lesser extent "internally controlled". They pay little attention to opinions of others and find orientation in their own feelings and beliefs.

Research now shows that people with high self-attention look for partners who are also strongly externally controlled. They place particular emphasis on the physical attractiveness of a potential partner. Internally controlled people are much more attracted by the inner values of a person's personality.

The question remains: How do "similar" persons recognise each other? How do they know right away that "he or she is a match for me?" Biologists say that it's really quite simple: We choose a romantic partner who smells good to us.

According to the french novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans the scent of a woman's underarms can "easily uncage the animal in man". Napoleon frequently confessed his interest in erotic sweat. Once he reportedly wrote his beloved Josephine: "I will be arriving in Paris tomorrow evening. Don't wash."

The anthropologist Helen Fisher reports that "in some areas of Greece, the Balkans and other Mediterranean countries, men still carry a handkerchief under their armpits during festivals so they can flutter this odor-bearing token under the noses of the women they invite to dance."

This is not superstitious folklore, but scientifically proven behaviour that plays a "significant role" in mate selection, as Karl Grammer explains. Apparently, every human being has a very specific scent that love partners - as experiments show - can distinguish from many other scents present. And this typical fragrance carries a message. When we like somebody else's scent, we instinctively recognize that "our immune systems are a good match." Conversely, our immune systems may not fit a person's whom we cannot smell in the truest sense of the word.

So is our choice of a partner just a matter of genes, apocrine glands, molecules and endorphins? Do our evolutionary heritage and our biological features decide who we fall in love with? Even biologists and anthropologists agree that their research cannot give all the definite answers about the process of mate choice. It provides only the framework, within which human behaviour appears to be highly variable.

Who fits into our "love map"?

When people fall in love, they are not just puppets of their biology, but psychological processes also play an important role. The psychological models of mate selection show clearly that the desire for healthy offspring and similarity in many features are not a sufficient explanation. It is obvious "that we will find many people likable, we will talk and communicate with them like best friends and be a good match but still, what is missing is romantic fascination. On the other hand, sometimes we do not understand how we could fall in love with a person against all reason and without any chance for deeper understanding or a lasting relationship." the renowned couple and family therapist Jürg Willi explains.

Why we fall for this particular likable person, but not for one of the many other likable people, sexologist John Money tries to explain using his *Love map model*. According to this model every person has an inner map, which is responsible for the feeling of deep intimacy when we meet our "Mr. or Mrs. Right". Our love map is shaped and formed from an early age. All our experiences are entered into this map: our mother's laughter, the strictness of our father, the rush or peace and quiet of our family home, the family's rules and preferences, disputes with siblings. The older we get,

the more our experiences and memories form a particular pattern and our love map becomes more and more precise. It will show pretty accurately the facial features, physical size, hair colour and temperament of our ideal partner.

Additionally, many other features are entered in our love map that will produce their effect unconsciously: "Some people get turned on by a business suit or a doctor's uniform, by big breasts, small feet, or a vivacious laugh... myriad obvious, as well as tiny, subliminal elements work together to make one person more attractive than the next ", Helen Fisher explains.

Positives and negatives from our childhood and youth form a grid that we unconsciously apply to a person to check whether he or she can be considered as a partner. The greater the consistency between pattern and reality, the greater the likelihood that we fall in love.

Jürg Willi however has a different explanation for why we are picking out just one of a number of potential partners. He believes that mate choice can be explained "only by event ", by the unique and unrepeatable combination of two people in a specific life setting, with their current desires, unfulfilled dreams and hope." The "initial spark of love" can only pass, Willi explains, "when two partners are filled with hope to reach and to explore new living spaces with each other and through each other in which they can realize much of what they were longing for a long time." According to *Willi's Coevolutionary model of mate selection* two people fall in love with each other when they realize: With this man / this woman *development* is possible.

Hope for development

"And then there is the desire to set a development in the beloved person in motion to grow aspects that had been buried until now and that are only now beginning to sprout and grow on the fertile ground of love." According to this model, a particular partner selection will only happen when two people share the same desire for development, when they find themselves in "corresponding readiness to develop" as Willi puts it. Then happens what everybody desires when he or she is looking for a partner for life: You get ground under your feet and start **building-up life-force**. To quote C. G. Jung: " The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed."

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„You will always meet the right person!“

An interview with behavioural scientist Karl Grammer about the role of genes, romance and love in mate selection

Psychologie Heute: According to the biological models of mate selection modern day humans are hardly different from our ancestors, when it comes to who we choose as our life partner. Our living conditions, however, have significantly changed compared to the lives of hunters and gatherers. Has our mate selection really remained unchanged?

Karl Grammer: Even after forty or fifty years of education and "enlightenment" the average choice of partners can be predicted from the theory of evolution. This is indeed an amazing fact.

PH: So, even modern women choose their partner according to his status and modern day men will select a mate for her physical attractiveness?

Grammer: It's not *that* easy. The main criterion of partner choice for both sexes is the extent to which the other person is ready to enter into a real relationship and how understanding he or she is. The only gender difference found is that for women the social status is still more desirable than physical attractiveness and that men rate physical attractiveness as more important and desirable than status.

PH: The most important question people ask is: Where do I find a suitable partner?

Grammer: That is down to chance. Your choices are limited: Depending on where you were born, what environment you're in, how mobile you are, what schools and universities you attend, you will get to know only particular people and a certain number of people. It makes no sense to say: Someone who lives in a big city with 100.000 singles has 100.000 choices. This is complete nonsense.

PH: The situation that you walk the streets and suddenly - at first glance, so to speak - you bump into the man or woman of your life, happens only in romantic movies?

Grammer: This is the absolute exception. We give such events a much higher level of importance than they truly hold and believe them to be the rule. Most people find their partners among friends, at work, in sports clubs. And chance plays a big role, of course. Chance decides who you really meet.

PH: So we do not choose our partners because we like the way they are or because we are very similar, but only because they happen to be nearby?

Grammer: It is kind of a given by the shared environment that couples are in some ways similar, of course. The research confirms, beyond all doubt, that "birds of a feather flock together." Yet chance plays an essential role in it too. Studies with identical twins who were separated at birth and grew up in very different circumstances, confirm that. Since these twins are genetically identical, they would therefore have to choose similar partners. But that is not the case and it shows that

coincidence plays a major role in mate selection - where you live, who you meet.

PH: You say both sexes pay attention when choosing a mate, especially on the credibility and reliability of their prospective partner...

Grammer: ... and this is of course guaranteed by the immediate environment. With a person who comes from the familiar environment, choice is easier. If you don't have the possibility to predict a stranger's credibility, then the process of negotiation will take a very long time.

PH: Some people still seem to end up with the wrong person, again and again. In psychoanalysis this is known as repetition compulsion and adherents to psychoanalysis believe that bad experiences during childhood with important reference persons lead to wrong partner choices. What is a possible biological explanation for this phenomenon?

Grammer: Basically, you will always meet the right person! The only problem is: Many people do not realize that the seemingly wrong partner is actually right for them.

PH: Could you explain this a bit more in detail?

Grammer: There is a sieving effect happening in mate selection. This sieving effect decides which partner you get at the end. Your own expectations, self-expression, playing a role but also the expectations of others and their self-expression are of significance here. On the mate market each pot has its price, and supply and demand regulate if this price is higher or lower.

Many of these sieving effects happen automatically. The self-expression of oneself, the impression one creates, all of this will decide who is interested in us. That is why people end up with the same type of partner. Their expectations and their self-expression determine the value they hold on the mate market, and they will find a partner of the same market value. The impression of "this is the wrong one" occurs when that person does not coincide with her own expectations.

PH: So, who's hopes are too high, will experience disappointment?

Grammer: Many people overestimate their value on the partner market by a long shot. This is a big problem. It seems to me, overconfidence and an exaggerated opinion of oneself is one of the main characteristics of our modern mass society.

PH: What causes this overconfidence?

Grammer: The media are co-responsible, no doubt. They blow up our expectations to unhealthy levels. Take women's magazines that tell their readers how the right partner choice has to happen, and think of men's magazines, where an idealized image of women is created. We know: When people are exposed to certain stimuli for a certain time, it will have a learning effect. Men were shown images of very attractive women and after a certain time these men raised their expectations for women's attractiveness significantly.

PH: If a person has difficulty in finding a suitable partner, should he or she check their own self-expression?

Grammer: I would ask myself first, if my expectations actually meet reality and my own market value.

PH: And then exercise modesty?

Grammer: Or raise expectations. It happens that someone is too humble. Most of the times, however, people have too high expectations.

PH: This is a message that will certainly not be very popular. Terms such as "market value", "price", "too high expectations" leave no room for romance.

Grammer: Of course it is very hard to admit that one's expectations are too high. We are constantly told that our expectations cannot be high enough. Everybody is supposed to be able to find the best of partners. This is a romantic idealization of mate selection, a whole "psycho-wave" is feeding on. I believe the psychologizing of every realm of life - not only the choice of a partner - is a disease of our time. The psychologizing irrationality denies the very rational aspect and causes us to lose touch with reality.

PH: If I understand correctly, you advocate that we should accept that certain basic biological conditions exist. It makes no sense trying to change things, through education or otherwise?

Grammer: Take for example the topic "Sex in advertising". Our research clearly shows that what we call the *biological primitive* still exists: Men are always taller than women, it is the man who touches the woman, never vice versa. If such advertising would not be effective, it would not be made. Having said that, we still respond to "primitive" depictions of sex or status symbols. It is a paradox: On the one hand we claim that we have left behind these biological mechanisms, but on the other side we still respond to it.

PH: Allow me a final attempt to save romance: Is there really no space for love when we choose a mate?

Grammer: Love is nothing but chemistry. It is becoming increasingly clear that specific hormonal processes are involved when people love. The substance oxytocin, a binding hormone that is released in parent-child relationships through breastfeeding and through genital stimulation in couple relationships, plays an important role.

PH: Who hasn't found a partner for life yet, should therefore lower his expectations and stop waiting for the big love? With a little patience and luck love will come around in time?

Grammer: There are really many examples for this. Just take the marriages of convenience in earlier times. They were usually very stable and the married couples often came to love each other with time.

This interview was conducted by Ursula Nuber

Dr. Karl Grammer, born 1950, studied zoology, anthropology and physics at the University of Munich, Research Fellow at the Max Planck Research Unit for Human Ethology headed by Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeld. Since 1991 Director of the Ludwig-Boltzmann-Institute for Urban Ethology in Vienna. Author of many books like: *Signale der Liebe. Die biologischen Gesetze der Partnerschaft*, dtv: Munich 1995 (*Love and Hate: The Natural History of Behavior Patterns*).