



KNOW



Getting to Know Your Partner Well

Introduction

How well does a person *really* know his or her romantic partner? Though a seemingly simple question, how well partners know each other has important implications for maintaining a satisfying, long-lasting relationship. Knowing involves developing a mutual understanding of one's partner, one's self, and being willing to share personal information with each other. *Know* applies to both singles, who may be just starting the process of getting to know potential dating partners, as well as couples, who might be attempting to continue to know more about each other while maintaining knowledge of each other's daily lives.



- **Know Before You Go.** For singles, *Know* applies to learning more about a potential partner to help decide if he or she would be a safe, suitable, and well-matched person with whom to begin a relationship. Jumping into a relationship without knowing very much about someone is dangerous. For many single parents, entering a relationship may be seen as a way to get out of a bad situation and lead to overlooking negative qualities of the other person (alcohol abuse, violent tendencies, criminal history, etc.). When deciding to enter a relationship, it is important for individuals to have some basic background knowledge of their potential partner to protect themselves and their family.
- **Know As You Are Going.** For those currently in a relationship, *Know* applies to maintaining and developing a greater understanding of one's partner. Whether it is the demands of a new child, stress from work, or gradual neglect over time, couples can easily get out of touch when they do not take the time to communicate and learn about each other. Each individual in a partnership changes and grows over time and it is important that each partner is aware of changes over time as well as the day-to-day stresses and events in each other's lives.

During the early stages of a relationship, partners are more likely to idealize each other and ascribe qualities and characteristics that are more positive than is truly warranted. This concept, known as positive illusions, can in some ways, be helpful. But when illusions are too extreme and individuals fail to have a solid, robust understanding of the true nature of the other person, detrimental effects can occur in relationships. Knowledge

What "Know" Looks Like

- Asking about our partner's life, thoughts, and feelings
- Being sensitive to our partner's worries and needs
- Recalling positive experiences together
- Expressing sincere interest
- Seeing things through our partner's eyes
- Discussing what you expect in the relationship



about another individual must be rooted in reality, not idealized aspirations.

Growing in knowledge about one's partner is a never-ending process that helps to sustain a healthy and satisfying relationship and allows for each partner to respond in more supportive, couple-strengthening ways. As individuals learn more about their partner, they are able to use this knowledge in supportive and appreciative ways.

Further, the more partners know about each other's daily experiences, pressures, thoughts, and feelings, the easier it is for a couple to develop an emotional connection. This commitment to learning entails an ever-evolving curiosity about each other, sharing of intimate thoughts and feelings at appropriate times and places, and being intentional about allocating quality time to each other on a regular basis.

What Do Partners Need to Know?

While an individual cannot get to know all there is about someone, certain areas appear to be particularly important to get to know for healthy relationship functioning. In addition to learning about these areas in one's partner, individuals need to give equal attention to understanding these areas about themselves.

- **Relationship Expectations.** Every person enters into a relationship with a set of beliefs about how partners should behave and what each partner should do in the relationship. These expectations range from common issues such as how much time should be spent together, to deeper matters such as how decisions are made and parenting styles.

Integrating "Know" into Child Welfare Services

- Encourage couples to become better friends. Ask them how they became acquainted as friends and have them try to use some of those same strategies with the goal of deepening their understanding of one another.
- Have couples establish a daily routine for continually getting to know one another. This could be sharing daily highlights at meal times, calling each other during breaks, or using car rides to fill each other in about the day's events. Encourage couples to spend at least 10-15 minutes every day getting to know each other better.
- Model positive partner responsiveness during meetings and conversation. Try to get to know your clients better by asking them to share information about themselves. When they share something, respond with interest and enthusiasm.
- Encourage single parents to move slowly into new relationships as they get to know new partners. Help them explore important things to learn about new partners and the influence of their relationship choices on children's safety and well-being.

Individuals' expectations typically originate from sources of one's family of origin, previous relationships, and societal ideals.

- **Core Values and Beliefs.** Every person possesses a core set of beliefs and values that shape how he or she views the world. Such core principles relate to thoughts about what makes life meaningful and purposeful, what issues are important, and what behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable. In many relationships, these topics are rarely discussed between partners, though their impact on a relationship is inevitable. Couples will not agree on everything and couples with different beliefs are not inevitably bound to failure; however, core beliefs do need to be known and differences should be acknowledged and discussed.
- **Family of Origin and Emotional Heritage.** Experiences in one's family of origin have a strong influence on adults' current attitudes and behaviors. Aspects such as parents' relationship, communication patterns within the family, and how conflicts were handled can all influence romantic relationship patterns in later life. These experiences often provide a "blueprint" or "schema" that individuals have for how relationships work.

What to Know: The 10 Ps

- **Personality**
- **Passions**
- **Plans and Priorities**
- **Previous Partners**
- **Perspective Taking**
- **Problem Solving**
- **Past Family Experiences**
- **Physical/Psychological Health**
- **Parenting Experience & Approach**
- **Provider Potential**

Why "Know" Matters to Child Welfare Services

- As single parents develop relationships with new partners, it is important for them to truly get to know potential partners so they can be sure they are not putting their child(ren) at risk and are providing them a safe environment.
- New parents – whether biological, foster, or adoptive parents – need to focus a lot of attention on children as they become part of the family. As a result, couples may lose touch with one another during this time, which can be a source of stress and isolation, and consequently impact their relationship with each other and the child. Thus, parents may need reminders to stay in touch with what is going on in other aspects of their lives and focus on continuing to get to know one another through this transition.
- Parents who have long distance relationships (e.g., those in the military; those who are incarcerated) struggle with maintaining those relationships from a distance. Consequently, when they are reunited they also struggle with reconnecting. The stress put on their relationship can affect their parenting. To lessen the risk of losing touch and the stress created when they are reunited, these couples may need help establishing rituals for keeping in touch when they are apart.
- Parents who live together and those who live apart need to know and understand what each person believes is important when it comes to raising children. Knowing how the other person wants to raise children is an important part of co-parenting.

Self-Disclosure and Partner Responsiveness

Individuals only get to know their partner to the degree that the other person self-discloses and allows himself or herself to be known. How a partner responds (or fails to respond) in these instances has a strong influence in either encouraging or discouraging ongoing self-disclosure. Thus, for knowledge and intimacy to develop, a two-part process of self-disclosure and partner responsiveness must be present within a relationship.

- **Self-disclosure** involves verbally sharing information about oneself that is not common knowledge to everyone. Self-disclosure includes sharing one's personal thoughts, feelings, desires, and previous life experiences. The process of self-disclosure also helps each partner move from idealized information to a more intimate and in-depth understanding of the other person.
- **Partner responsiveness** highlights the role of the receiver during times of self-disclosure. Positive partner responsiveness, or turning towards one's partner, occurs when partners are engaged and display care and concern for one another. However, partner responsiveness can also be negative when partners are disinterested or critical. Whereas negative responses can hinder future attempts at self-disclosure, positive responses promote continued sharing and growth.

It must be remembered, however, that social norms and cultural expectations impact a person's willingness and comfort level with self-disclosure. Couples who work together to find a healthy level of self-disclosure that both partners feel comfortable with can reach a level of knowledge that is healthy for the marital relationship.

Understanding Our Partners Influences the Way We Think of Them

Continuously getting to know one's partner helps to increase the likelihood that individuals make accurate attributions for partner behavior. Attributions concern how individuals make sense and explain events, actions, and behaviors, both of ourselves and of our partner. These attributions inform what we believe we know about why a person acted a certain way or made a particular comment, and in turn influence our behavior (how we react) and our overall relationship quality. The better each person knows his or her partner, the better he or she is able to identify whether a negative event (e.g., making a condescending remark) was due to something temporary or whether it reflects a more stable and intentional pattern that needs to be addressed.

Conclusion

Truly knowing one's partner represents an ongoing process that takes time and effort. Growing in breadth and depth of knowledge about one's partner does not occur instantly, and the importance of allowing time for such information to develop cannot be neglected. While the process of how this learning occurs may change over time, growing in knowledge about each other's thoughts, values, past experiences, current struggles, and future desires helps create emotional closeness and intimacy in a relationship.

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