

Relationships

WHAT DO
YOU EXPECT?



A newly married couple signs their marriage certificate—a serious contract.

Next morning, they wake up together after a night of bliss and both start dropping subtle hints about being hungry, but neither gets up.



He is wondering why she doesn't take care of breakfast, because that's what his mother always did. She wonders why he doesn't make breakfast (or at least phone room service) as her father did on special occasions. Both feel a little disappointed and unloved, as though the other has broken some kind of deal. But neither knows what the deal is! They have not discussed their expectations in detail. Describing love as a contract can sound unromantic, calculating and legalistic. But in a very practical way, a marriage is made of a series of agreements or contracts. The groom probably has a few different contracts in his head:

1. Things he knows he wants and has told her he wants. ("Conscious, verbal.") For example, "I'd like four children." Perhaps they have agreed on this. Even if they haven't, at least they have begun negotiation.
2. Things he knows he wants and has not said. ("Conscious, unverballed.") For example, "When I'm the only one going to work, my wife can do all the night feeds and nappy changes of the children." This may come as a shock to her! Unless they discuss it first, she may feel used and unappreciated, and it will cause misunderstandings and possibly fights. Usually people hide these issues because they fear disapproval or anger.

Other examples may include:

- "I will make you secure and you won't need alcohol."
 - "I'll improve your social skills and take you exercising to get you slim."
 - "You will earn all the money so I can be carefree and irresponsible."
3. Things he expects but has never really thought about or said. ("Unconscious, unverballed.") For example, "My wife will be a great emotional support to me if I get stressed or down."

What if her father was a rock of emotional stability and she expects a man to be able to give comfort to his wife or children? The first time he comes home expecting comfort and she does not follow his script (because she does not know what it is), he may feel hurt and angry and start a fight.

Others include:

- "If you ever get fat, I'll leave you or have an affair."
- "I will be dominant so that I feel strong and you feel safe."

The bride will of course have at least three totally different contracts in her head. Often a couple is so "in love" that they enjoy a honeymoon period of bliss without tripping over their different expectations. They assume their lover is almost perfect and agrees with them in everything. (This rosy view is even more unrealistic if the sex is good, which is why some people choose to have a courtship without sex so that they can decide more realistically.) In this stage, many couples ignore any signs of disagreement and don't bother to discuss them. *Then clunk!*

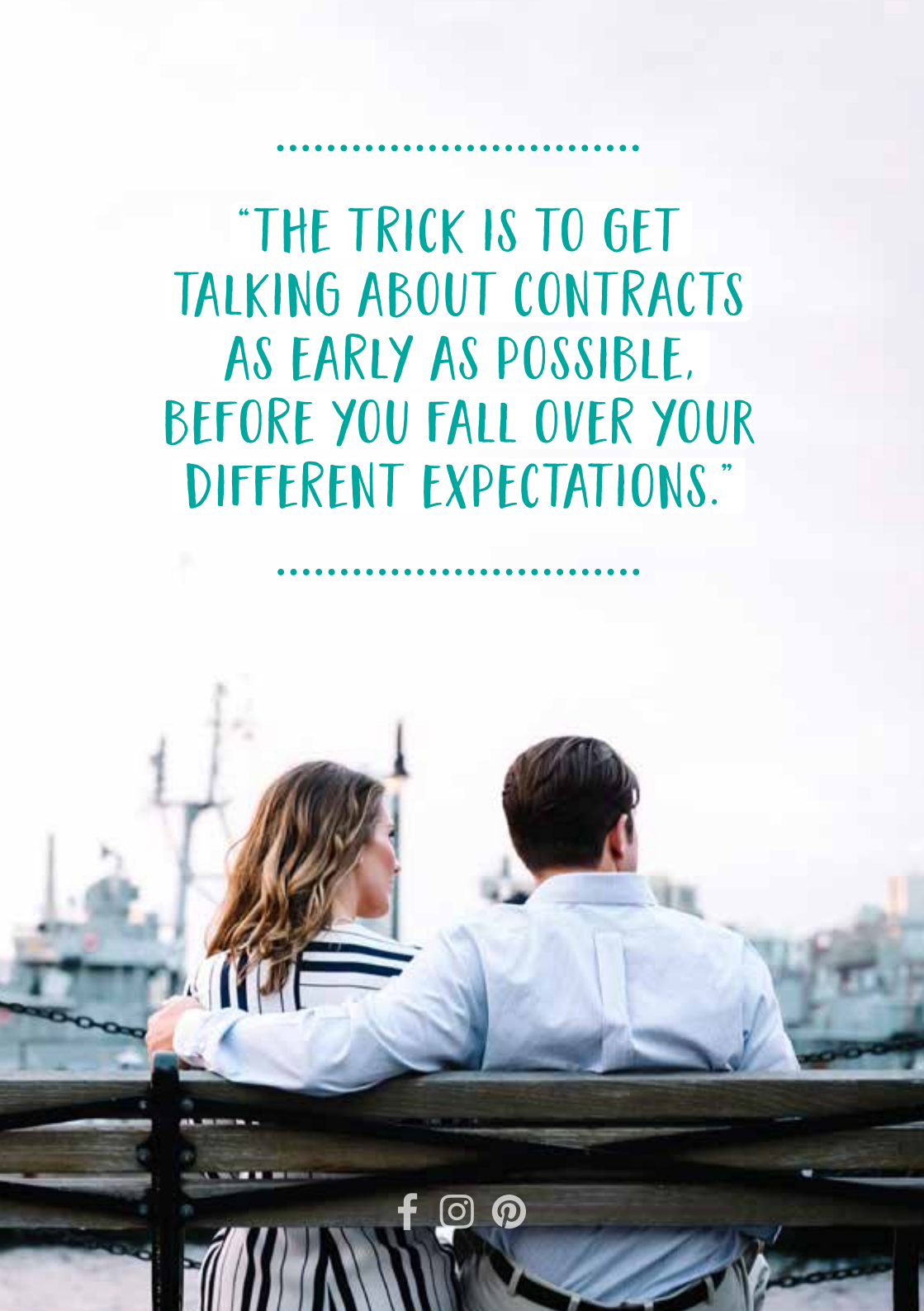


Contracts are often not kept because they are unrealistic dreams, because circumstances change or because they are never discussed! Then emotions flare. People feel betrayed and cheated—especially if they feel they have kept their side of the deal. They also feel insecure about what they can expect now. The trick is to get talking about your contracts as early as possible, before you fall over your different expectations. Ideally this happens before you marry, so that you can decide whether or not the contract is acceptable, but it's still useful even after you are a couple to clarify your expectations. This is one reason why pre-marriage counselling is a must. Even governments are beginning to invest in it.

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A couple is seen from behind, sitting on a wooden bench. The woman has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a black and white striped shirt. The man has short dark hair and is wearing a light blue button-down shirt. They are looking out over a harbor with several ships, including a large white ship and a smaller green ship. The sky is a pale blue.

What can you do about the three areas?

1. *Conscious, verbalised expectations*

These are being negotiated and are on the way to a solution.

2. *Conscious, unverballed expectations*

These can be like emotional landmines just below the ground. It's usually wise to dispose of them safely before they explode. Despite your fears, there are ways to do this so that you do not lose a leg.

For example, when they had been married 25 years and the children had left home, she went to university, which broadened her thinking and made her want to be more independent. She worried about telling her husband, because she thought he enjoyed having most of the power and responsibility, and so she kept her feelings bottled up. Eventually a counsellor encouraged her to tell him. His response was classic. He said, “Really? Great! Do it. That’s something I don’t need to worry about.”

3. *Unconscious, unverballed expectations*

These are tricky. Let's face it, you're not aware of what you're not aware of. You will probably trip over these. But when you do, hopefully you will learn to think deeply about what is behind what you and your partner are feeling. You can ask, “What happened in your family?”, “What is it you expect?” You can listen to all those family stories and pay attention at family gatherings like Christmas parties.

For example, a couple had been very happily married for one year, except that every Sunday morning, she would get snappy about something. After some gentle asking, he discovered that her father had washed all her family's cars every Sunday morning, and he worked out that this made her feel loved and looked after. She had never stopped to think about it—in fact she had never mentioned it, but always picked a fight about some side issue. She was so touched he bothered to understand her and that he washed and polished their cars the next Sunday. He cheated—he paid a carwash and sat reading a magazine, because he hated cleaning cars. But he was repaid by an open-hearted woman with a truckload of goodwill—he did not even calculate several memorable meals, romps and help with the most boring part of his tax return.



Often, contracts come with you from your family of origin. Every family has its set of assumed rules or family commandments, such as:

- Parents know best and always have the final say
- Sick people get sympathy, help and control over what happens
- The youngest children get special treatment (or the oldest children set the rules)
- The person who argues hardest and makes the other look silly will get their way

This course will look at some detailed issues that may need to be discussed. Some of them may not be relevant to you, but check whether your partner feels the same way before you ignore them. Usually only a few issues from the list will be the real “live issues” in your marriage. You might like to set aside an hour with your partner to begin working down the list. (Or you could write down your answers separately and then get together to discuss them.)

This should/will kickstart discussion that helps you understand each other more deeply. Don't worry if it takes hours to complete—that's time invested in your relationship. (Remember to speak the truth in love and if an issue really blows up, take it slowly and don't hesitate to ask for help from a qualified relationship counsellor.)

Contracts: *Mastering the fine print*

Clifford Sager, the therapist who pioneered the contract theory of family therapy, suggests people sit down and discuss their expectations in various areas of the contract. You may want to work through this list alone while your partner does the same. Then get together and discuss them. This will take more time than you think and can really open up deep conversation.

(Warning: You may want to agree at the start that if one partner starts feeling upset, you will take a break and have some fun, or find some other way of showing you love and respect them.)

1. *Expectations of the marriage itself*

How important are the following to you? How well is your marriage delivering on each? How well do you think it's delivering for your spouse?

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| • loyalty | • available sex |
| • support in hard times | • having children |
| • protection from loneliness | • economic security |
| • “happily ever after” | • status in society |
| • peace and calm in a world of chaos | • personal meaning |

2. *Expectations of your partner*

- How dependent or independent do you expect to be in your feelings and activities? What about your partner?
- How active or passive will you and they be? Who should take initiative? For what?
- How close or distant do you want to be? Do you want to share your deepest thoughts or to maintain major privacy? Are you aware when you pull away? How should that be done? Are you afraid of being left alone?
- Who will have power? Both? You, delegating some to your partner? Or your partner, as long as they can be trusted to use it unselfishly for you? Do you compete?
- Who is dominant? If 1 is total submission and 10 is total dominance, where are you? Your partner?
- If you're anxious, should they be anxious too or should they help you reduce it? And vice versa. How do you cope with anxiety and stress?
- Do you need to possess and control? To be possessed and controlled?
- Do you want to be romantically in love or just friends? How will you show love?
- Do you feel secure in your gender role? Do you need your wife to be ultra-girlie so that you feel like a man? Do you need your husband to be ultra-masculine so you feel like a real lady?
- Do you want your spouse to be a high achiever, sexy, physically beautiful, etc? How do they measure up? What is lacking? (Be especially diplomatic in your answers.)
- Do you have similar styles of learning, thinking and talking? What effect does this have?

3. Expectations about externals

- How similar are your communication styles? Can you talk and listen well?
- Are there differences in thinking styles? Is this ever a problem? How can it be positive?
- Do you share lifestyle aims and leisure pursuits?
- Do you fight about your families of origin? (See our course, "Patterns run in families")
- How similar are your views on child-rearing? Are any of your children on your side and against your mate? Vice versa?
- Do you disagree over making, spending or saving money?
- Sexually, what turns you on? Who should initiate? Does one partner want more? Are your morals similar? Does sex make you feel loved and connected? Is it fun? Why? Why not? (If you are not yet having sex, you can ask these questions about the future or your ideals.)
- Do you share values?
- Do you share spiritual beliefs?
- How do you deal with his friends, her friends and "our" friends? Do you have same-sex friends, opposite-sex friends or both? Is that OK?
- How do you divide roles? Who will make more money, keep the house, raise children, manage leisure time, etc?

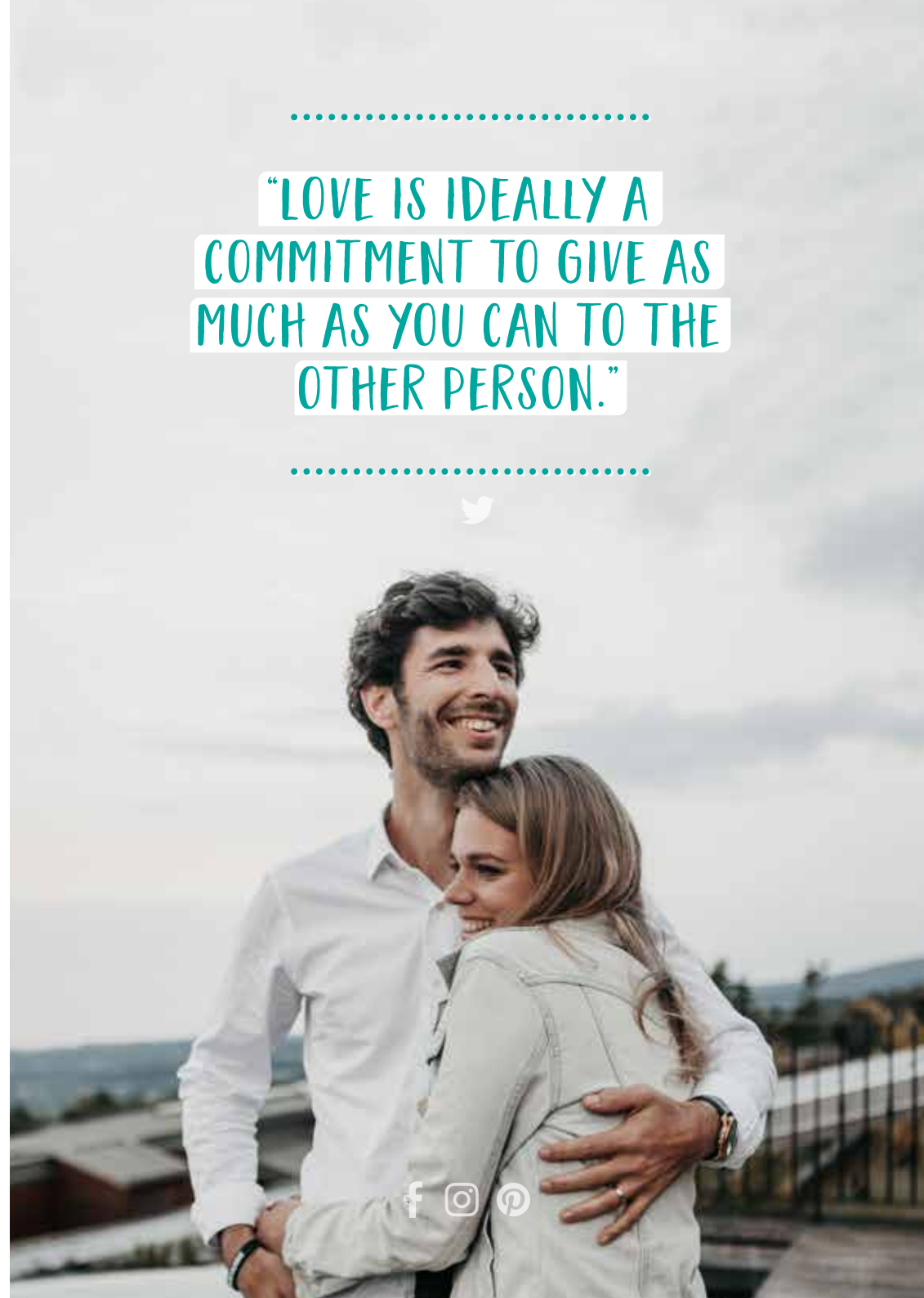
DON'T CALL A LAWYER

Let's not get too carried away with this contract idea. It does not mean that you are coldly giving this to get that. That's tit-for-tat selfishness, not love. Love is ideally a commitment to give as much as you can to the other person. It does not stop giving just because it is not getting for a while. In fact, in hard times, real love gives all the more. You are dealing with a person with faults (which you also have). Part of your contract needs to be a clause about forgiveness and ignoring some disappointed expectations so as to keep the other person feeling appreciated. Leave them space to grow. Your contract will probably change through time. Your interests and needs will change, so you will adjust what you expect from your partner and your marriage. This is normal and it is a good reason to discuss your contracts regularly.

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“MEN AND WOMEN NEED DIFFERENT TYPES OF LOVE.”

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Gender differences

Even in these egalitarian times, there are differences in the way men and women think about love and relationships. In his classic book, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, John Gray highlights some differences.

- Women talk to feel understood and connected, while men talk to give information and solve problems. For example, she tells him all about some stressful politics at work. He butts in halfway through with advice on what she should do. She feels unsatisfied—she didn't want advice, she wanted understanding. Many men need to learn to listen this way.
- Under stress, men tend to need to withdraw to their “cave” (the back shed, the newspaper, TV sport), while women want to be close and talk about what is worrying them. Gray suggests women need to ask for support in a non-demanding, non-blaming way and not to take it personally when a man needs to go to his cave. Men need to learn to listen without feeling blamed or responsible for solving the woman's problems. They need to communicate openly that they are stressed and need some “cave time”—but that they are still in love and will be back.
- Women and men can speak different languages—and we need to learn to translate. For example, a woman says, “I don't feel you're listening.” A man says, “I am so! I can quote everything you said in the past five minutes.” But that is not the point. She is really saying, “I don't feel you fully understand what I really mean to say or care about how I feel. Would you show me that you are interested?”
- Men and women need different types of love. Men need trust, acceptance, appreciation, admiration, approval and encouragement. Women need caring, understanding, respect, devotion, validation and reassurance.

Much of the rest of his book explores these differences in emotional needs and communication. Willard Harley's informative book, *His Needs, Her Needs: Building An Affair-Proof Marriage*, suggests that people have affairs for many reasons other than sex, but that a person is less likely to be tempted if their needs are met at home. He suggests men and women have different lists of needs. (Of course this is cultural and personal, so your needs may be different, but here is his priority list for your discussion.)

For men

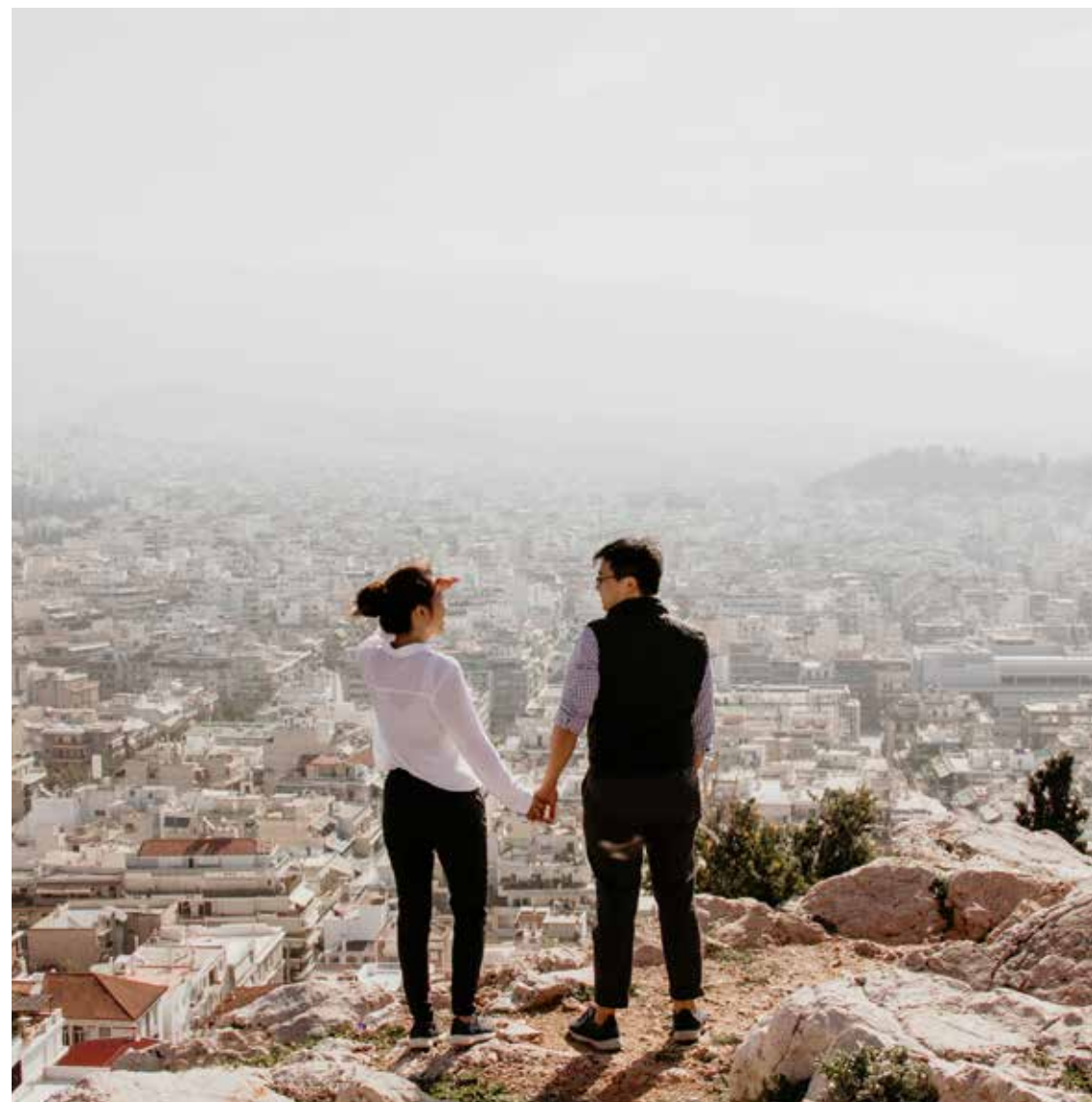
1. Sexual fulfillment
2. Fun together (recreational companionship)
3. An attractive spouse
4. Peace and calm at home
5. To be admired

For women

1. Affection
2. Conversation
3. Trust, honesty and openness
4. Financial security
5. Family commitment (be a good father)

Would your list be any different?

1. Test yourself: Would your partner's list be much different?
2. Ask your partner to tell you (gently) how could you be better in these areas. (Make sure you really understand before you react with hurt or anger.)



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