

# Do you really know what you want in a partner?

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So you're flocking to online dating sites with a wish list of ideal traits that you desire in a mate. Not so fast!

Once you actually meet a potential dating [partner](#), those ideals are likely to fall by the wayside, according to new research from Northwestern University and Texas A&M University.

People liked potential partners that matched their ideals more than those that mismatched their ideals when they examined written descriptions of potential partners, but those same ideals didn't matter once they actually met in person, according to a new study by psychologists Paul W. Eastwick, Eli J. Finkel and Alice H. Eagly.

"People have ideas about the abstract qualities they're looking for in a romantic partner," said Eastwick, assistant professor of psychology at Texas A&M University and lead author of the study. "But once you actually meet somebody face to face, those ideal preferences for traits tend to be quite flexible."

Say you prefer a partner who, online or on paper, fits the bill of being persistent. "After meeting in person, you might feel that, yeah, that person is persistent, but he can't compromise on anything. It's not the determined and diligent kind of persistent that you initially had in mind," Eastwick said.

The idea is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, said Finkel,

associate professor of psychology at Northwestern University and co-author of the study.

"People are not simply the average of their traits," he said. "Knowing that somebody is persistent, ambitious and sexy does not tell you what that person is actually like. It doesn't make sense for us to search for partners that way."

"Thinking about this or that feature of a person apart from taking the whole person into account doesn't predict actual attraction," Eagly said. "While some online [dating sites](#) have video features that provide some context, generally people are matched on their answers to specific questions that do not capture the whole person."

Scores from answers to questions such as "How much money do you earn?" or "Are you extroverted?" provide two-dimensional facts rather than three-dimensional humanness, Finkel said.

For those seeking prospective partners, don't be surprised if you end up ignoring your preconceived notions about what would make an ideal mate.

"Based on those ideals, you might end up liking a person upon meeting face to face, or you might have the opposite reaction," Finkel said. As Eastwick notes, it is not uncommon for someone to say, 'If you had tried to set me up with this guy, I would never have gone out with him, but I'm so glad I did!'"

**More information:** The study, "When and Why Do Ideal Partner Preferences Affect the Process of Initiating and Maintaining Romantic Relationships?" will appear in the November edition of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Provided by Northwestern University

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