

We all want the same things in a partner, but why?

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Men and women rate warmth and trustworthiness as very important in their potential partner. Credit: Priscilla Du Preez on Unsplash, CC BY

Whether it's in reality TV or glossy magazines, sex appeal, fat bank accounts, kind eyes and cute smiles are often served up as the attributes that make for anyone's dream partner. But these characteristics merely reflect gross exaggerations of important evolutionary qualities that we actually want in a long-term partner.

Based on research from both [evolutionary and social psychology](#), researchers have categorised how we appraise potential partners into three broad features. These are: the degree to which a partner exudes reproductive capacity ("vitality and attractiveness"), a partner's ability to provide ("status and resources"), and the partner's "warmth and [trustworthiness](#)".

These features act as fundamental signals a potential partner has good genes and is a good investment.

1. Vitality and attractiveness

In pop culture, vitality and attractiveness can be represented as good looks or sex appeal. But it's not completely accurate to reduce someone's [physical appearance](#) to such characteristics when we're considering them as a long-term partner. Yes, being attracted to a partner is fundamental to sexual desire and arousal, but when we take in a person's physical appearance, we take in more than whether they're good looking.

We seek to determine if they take care of their health, if they exude energy, and the extent to which they demonstrate charisma and appear outgoing. That is, the vitality and health of a person is what really matters, whether we are conscious of it or not. These qualities, reflected in a person's physical appearance, signals they have [some reproductive advantage](#).

There is some evidence to suggest men sometimes rate vitality and attractiveness higher than women, but the difference between the sexes is often small and extinguished when it comes to seeking a long-term partner. Various studies even find that men and women seeking long-term relationships [regard this quality as less important](#) than warmth and trustworthiness in particular.

2. Status and resources

What relationship science terms "status and resources" isn't about the big bank account, luxurious house or car, or the high-paying job. We're not all that materialistic, nor do we all deeply desire great wealth and social standing. In fact, studies show [most people don't need](#) a large amount of money to be happy in life.

So, status and resources is about the capacity to *provide* for one's partner and family, not about a glamorous lifestyle. From this perspective, all we are really looking for is someone who has a decent job, appears financially secure and is willing to contribute to maintaining a family home.

So this quality is really about food, shelter, and other essentials for our partners and children – both now and into the future.

3. Warmth and trustworthiness

Warmth and trustworthiness is [rated as very important](#) in a potential partner by both men and women.

From songs and movies, we might think having kind eyes and a nice smile are enough to reflect warmth and trustworthiness. But these qualities are indicators of how caring a person is and the extent to which a potential mate can meet our fundamental need for love, comfort and security. According to research into [adult attachment](#), our desire to seek comfort in times of threat and distress means we look to potential mates for signals of their capacity to be considerate, loving, kind and understanding at such times.

So, a person who seems to exude a warm persona is likely to encompass

attributes that ensure our attachment needs are met. The more reliable they are in meeting our needs for love, comfort and security, the more trusting we become of them.

Trustworthiness, in particular, is a [strong quality](#) when it comes to stability in relationships. This is because trust [reduces uncertainty](#) about the faithfulness and commitment of one's partner. People who feel more trusting of their partner report feeling more satisfied in one's relationship than those who experience a lack of trust.

Being warm and trustworthy not only signals a partner will take care of you emotionally, but that they will do the same with your children.

Keep to realistic standards

Studies suggest people who see their current romantic partner as falling short of the above characteristics tend to [evaluate their relationships](#) more negatively than those who see their partner as embodying these qualities.

This finding is especially pronounced for people who set lofty ideals and aren't willing to compromise, even when a partner doesn't fall too short on these qualities. People who have some flexibility around the extent a partner embodies these qualities are likely to report greater relationship quality than those who show no sign of compromise.

So the moral to the story is it's fine to maintain standards, but if standards are too unrealistic or lofty, a partner who largely embodies all three qualities will still be seen as falling short of the ideal.

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