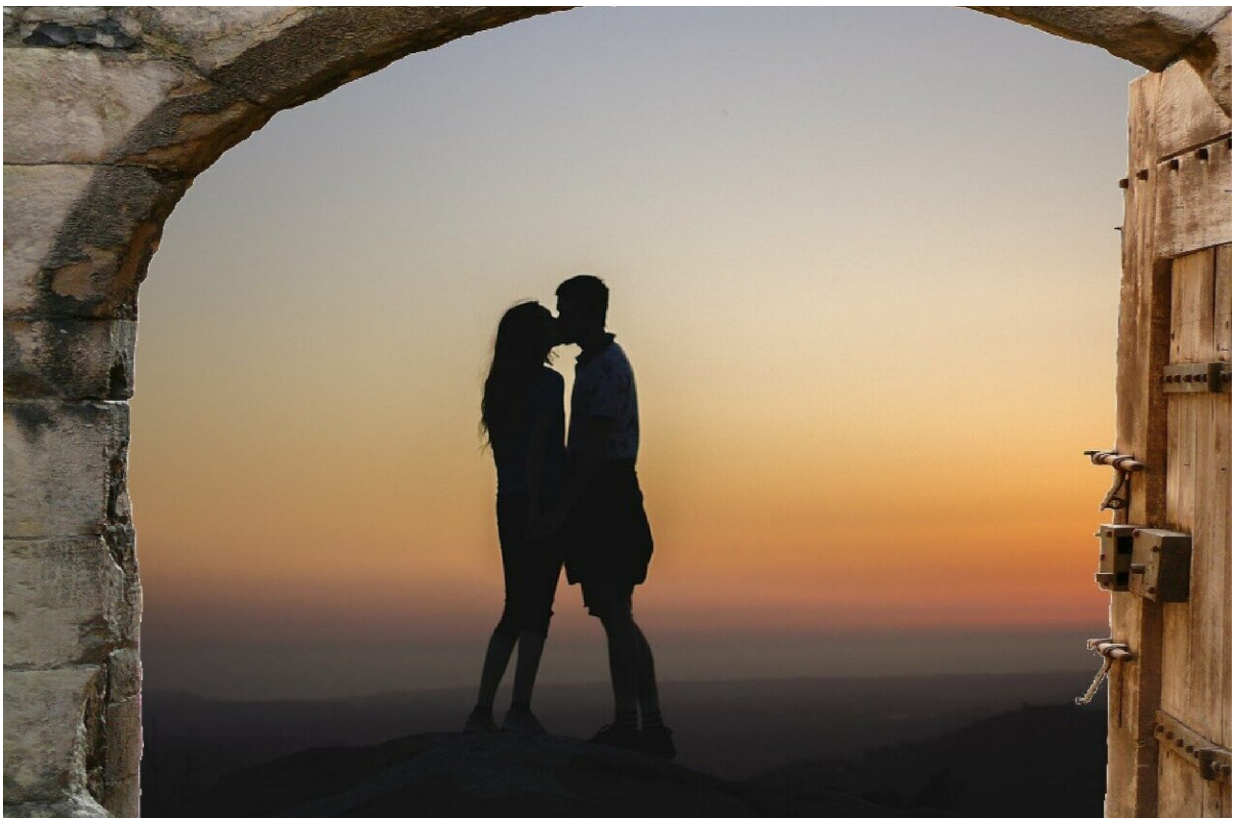


# Do we know what we want in a romantic partner? No more than a random stranger would, study says

July 6 2020, by Karen Nikos-Rose

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We all can describe our ideal partner. Perhaps they are funny, attractive and inquisitive. Or maybe they are down-to-earth, intelligent and

thoughtful. But do we actually have special insight into ourselves, or are we just describing positive qualities that everyone likes?

New research coming out of the University of California, Davis, suggests that people's ideal partner preferences do not reflect any unique personal insight. The paper, "Negligible Evidence That People Desire Partners Who Uniquely Fit Their Ideals," was published last week in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

"The people in our study could very easily list their top three attributes in an ideal partner," noted Jehan Sparks, former UC Davis doctoral student and lead author of the study. "We wanted to see whether those top three attributes really mattered for the person who listed them. As it turns out, they didn't."

In the research, more than 700 participants nominated their top three ideals in a [romantic partner](#)—attributes like funny, attractive or inquisitive. Then they reported their romantic desire for a series of people they knew personally: Some were blind date partners, others were romantic partners, and others were friends.

Participants experienced more romantic desire to the extent that these personal acquaintances possessed the top three attributes. If Vanessa listed funny, attractive and inquisitive, she experienced more desire for partners who were funny, attractive and inquisitive.

"On the surface, this looks promising," notes Paul Eastwick, a professor in the UC Davis Department of Psychology and co-author.

"You say you want these three attributes, and you like the people who possess those attributes. But the story doesn't end there."

## **What would a stranger say?**

The researchers included a twist: Each participant also considered the extent to which the same personal acquaintances possessed three attributes nominated by some other random person in the study. For example, if Kris listed down-to-earth, intelligent and thoughtful as her own top three attributes, Vanessa also experienced more desire for acquaintances who were down-to-earth, intelligent and thoughtful.

"So in the end, we want partners who have positive qualities," said Sparks, "but the qualities you specifically list do not actually have special predictive power for you." The authors take these findings to mean that people don't have special insight into what they personally want in a partner.

Eastwick compared it to ordering food at a restaurant. "Why do we order off the menu for ourselves? Because it seems obvious that I will like what I get to pick. Our findings suggest that, in the romantic domain, you might as well let a random stranger order for you—you're just as likely to end up liking what you get."

The findings have implications for the way people approach online dating. People commonly spend many hours perusing online dating profiles in the search of someone who specifically matches their ideals. Sparks and colleagues' research suggests that this effort may be misplaced.

"It's really easy to spend time hunting around online for someone who seems to match your ideals," notes Sparks. "But our research suggests an alternative approach: Don't be too picky ahead of time about whether a partner matches your ideals on paper. Or, even better, let your friends pick your dates for you."

**More information:** Jehan Sparks et al, Negligible evidence that people desire partners who uniquely fit their ideals, *Journal of Experimental*

*Social Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2020.103968](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.103968)

Provided by UC Davis

Citation: Do we know what we want in a romantic partner? No more than a random stranger would, study says (2020, July 6) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-romantic-partner-random-stranger.html>

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