



DATING WITH INTENTION

Letting Trust, Intimacy & Investment Grow Over Time

A healthy dating relationship does not need to move **slowly** or **quickly**. It needs enough time and experience for what you *feel* about someone to be informed by what you are actually *learning* about them.

The goal of early dating isn't to secure the relationship. It's to discover whether the relationship is worth building.

1. GET CURIOUS BEFORE GETTING CERTAIN

“I like you. Now I want to learn who you are.”

Attraction, chemistry, and excitement are meaningful—but they are not the same as knowing someone.

Early dating is a time to build what Gottman calls a **Love Map**: gradually learning someone's inner world.

Pay attention to:

Who are they?

Their values • relationships • priorities • emotional world • goals • lifestyle

How do they relationship?

Communication • boundaries • accountability • affection • conflict • reliability

How do I feel around them?

Can I be myself? • Do I feel respected? • Can I say no? • Am I becoming more grounded or more preoccupied?

GUIDEPOST:

Stay curious longer than your mind wants to become certain.

2. LET TRUST BE EARNED THROUGH EXPERIENCE

“I don't have to distrust you—and I don't have to trust what I haven't experienced yet.”

Healthy trust develops through repeated experiences.



Notice whether the person:

- ✓ Does what they say they will do
- ✓ Respects your boundaries
- ✓ Shows interest in your experience
- ✓ Responds with empathy and curiosity
- ✓ Can tolerate a perspective different from their own
- ✓ Takes responsibility when something goes wrong
- ✓ Is reasonably consistent across situations and over time

Someone can have wonderful intentions and still not be the right partner for you.

GUIDEPOST:

Trust what you consistently experience, not only what you hope, fear, or have been promised.

3. LET VULNERABILITY DEVELOP IN LAYERS

“I can be authentic without giving someone immediate access to every part of me.”

Emotional intimacy isn't created by disclosing everything quickly. It develops through a cycle:

Share a little → notice the response → experience safety → share more.

Ask yourself:

How did this person handle what I shared?

Did they listen? Respect it? Show empathy? Remember it? Protect my privacy? Allow me to have my own experience?

Vulnerability can deepen as emotional safety becomes more established.

GUIDEPOST:

Let someone's **demonstrated capacity to hold vulnerability** influence how much vulnerability you offer.



4. KEEP YOUR LIFE WHILE MAKING ROOM FOR SOMEONE NEW

“I’m adding a relationship to my life—not handing my life over to a relationship.”

New relationships can naturally make us want more time together. Healthy attachment, however, eventually supports both **connection and autonomy**.

Continue making room for:

Friends • family • hobbies • work • rest • responsibilities • routines • time alone

There isn’t a correct number of dates or hours together.

Instead ask:

Is the amount of space I’m giving this relationship proportionate to the relationship we actually have?

Be especially curious if you notice yourself repeatedly canceling plans, abandoning routines, becoming constantly available, or organizing your life around someone you are still getting to know.

GUIDEPOST:

Make increasing room for the relationship as the relationship demonstrates increasing substance.

5. MATCH INVESTMENT TO WHAT HAS ACTUALLY DEVELOPED

“I don’t need to give more in order to make this become more.”

Early attraction can create an urge to **over-function**:

Doing favors • solving problems • caretaking • excessive availability • emotional labor • accommodating repeatedly • planning the future • giving more than is reciprocated

Before doing more, ask:

Am I doing this because I genuinely want to—or because I’m trying to create security, earn closeness, prevent disappointment, or make myself indispensable?

Healthy relationships don’t require one person to carry the relationship into existence.

Look for **mutual investment**:

I initiate **and** you initiate.

I accommodate **and** you accommodate.



I'm curious about you **and** you're curious about me.
I make room for you **and** you make room for me.

It doesn't need to be perfectly 50/50. Look for a **pattern of reciprocity**.

GUIDEPOST:

Don't repeatedly invest at a level the relationship hasn't yet earned.

6. PRACTICE BOUNDARIES EARLY

"I can like you and still say no."

Boundaries don't interfere with healthy intimacy. They help reveal whether healthy intimacy is possible.

Early boundaries might sound like:

"I already have plans that night. How about Saturday?"

"I'm not ready for that yet."

"I'd like some time to think about it."

"I really enjoy seeing you, and I also need some time to myself this weekend."

"That doesn't work for me."

Then notice what happens.

A healthy partner doesn't have to **like** every boundary. What matters is whether they can respect your autonomy without punishment, manipulation, persistent pressure, withdrawal of affection, or making you responsible for their reaction.

GUIDEPOST:

A boundary doesn't only protect you. **It gives you information about the person you're dating.**

7. ALLOW DIFFERENCES & SMALL RUPTURES TO GIVE YOU INFORMATION

"Compatibility becomes clearer when everything isn't going perfectly."

You cannot fully evaluate a relationship during its easiest moments.

Eventually you'll experience:



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A misunderstanding • disappointment • conflicting needs • a boundary • frustration • different preferences • hurt feelings

Notice:

Can we talk about something uncomfortable?

Can both people's experiences exist?

Can we remain respectful?

Can either of us admit when we're wrong?

Can we repair?

Do words eventually lead to changed behavior?

Conflict isn't automatically a red flag. **How two people navigate conflict provides important information about relational safety.**

A HEALTHY PROGRESSION MAY FEEL SOMETHING LIKE:

INTEREST

"I like you."



CURIOSITY

"I want to know who you actually are."



CONSISTENCY

"Your behavior is becoming predictable enough that I can rely on some things."



EMOTIONAL SAFETY

"I can increasingly be myself with you."





RECIPROCITY

“We are both participating in building this.”



TRUST

“My confidence in you is based increasingly on experience.”



INTERDEPENDENCE

“I can rely on you without abandoning myself.”



COMMITMENT

“We know enough about one another to intentionally choose what we’re building.”

WHEN YOU NOTICE “TOO MUCH, TOO SOON”

Rather than asking:

“Am I moving too fast?”

Try asking:

“Has the relationship had enough experience to support the level of trust, intimacy, investment, access, or commitment I’m giving it?”

And when you’re unsure:

Don’t withdraw. Get curious.

You don’t have to shut down your feelings, play games, artificially withhold affection, or become hyper-independent.

You can enjoy excitement **and** gather information.

You can feel deeply **and** move thoughtfully.

You can care **without** caretaking.

You can connect **without** abandoning yourself.

You can hope for the future **without** treating the future as though it has already happened.



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A useful principle:

Let your investment grow alongside your knowledge, trust, reciprocity, and shared experience—not only alongside your feelings.