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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Selected News Releases

It's the Big Things that Count in a Relationship

ORONO, Maine -- Don't forget the flowers and candy on Valentine's Day, but remember, the true test of love is played out all year-round. It's not how well you get along that keeps a relationship solid, says a University of Maine human sexuality professor. It's how well you handle the disagreements.

For many, Valentine's Day brings painful memories of failed relationships, but it also is an opportunity to look closely at what makes a good, loving relationship, according to Sandra Caron.

Romance is great, but can fizzle as quickly as it surges, she says. "Love is not enough to make a relationship work."

Both people arrive in a relationship with baggage from past experiences, with different expectations and, too often, with an idealized picture of what life will be like and how the other partner will fit into that portrait, according to Caron. What appeared to be love at first sight can look completely different a few weeks later when incompatibilities begin to surface, she says.

A healthy relationship needs a strong foundation to survive life's inevitable ups and downs. The most important elements, according to Caron are: friendship; a sense of humor; a level of comfort where you can be yourself; intimacy, stemming from confidence in the relationship and sincerely caring about one another; and equality, illustrated by mutual respect and sharing of responsibilities.

It takes time to learn about a person, to see how he or she responds in different situations and with different people, Caron notes. The dating process allows us to make these observations, to examine what we want in a relationship and to develop the skills to make it work, she explains.

"It's easy to say 'I love you,' but don't seek commitment before compatibility," Caron advises. And don't ignore the warning signals, she cautions. Caron recommends that couples get to know one another through four seasons to see if they are as agreeable in the winter as in the summer.

The daily grind and demands of family and jobs can easily push even the best of relationships to the back burner, says Caron. Valentine's Day, she suggests, is an opportunity to set aside some special time to positively reflect on the relationship, to remind yourself and your partner that it is meaningful, and to move it to the top of the priority list.

Released: February 9, 1998

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