

The Nonnegotiable List

Get Clear on What You *Must* Have in a Relationship

Have you ever fallen in love? Or have you had that “in love” feeling? Maybe even more than once in your life? When you first meet someone and an arrow pierces your heart, your mind is high on its own chemical reaction, which makes it hard to make rational decisions about the relationship or the person that you potentially could spend many years with, or even the rest of your life. This chemical reaction can last for months—even up to three years—but what happens after you drop from the rush? You start seeing things more clearly, and you start seeing the person for who he or she truly is.

You see, we are natural story tellers—our minds will create whatever illusion makes the person and our relationship fit the story that we want. However, as the high wears off we start seeing that in reality some of the pieces of the puzzle do not fit into the story our mind has created. This can be good and bad.

It can be good because you may realize that some of the newfound traits or characteristics of your partner or relationship actually complement you and make you better as a person. You may find that some of the less-desirable things that you were blinded from seeing initially are minimal compared to the wonderful things that the relationship has to offer. On the other hand, you may realize that you and your partner have totally different views on life, expectations, communication styles, temperaments, levels of commitment, ethics, personalities, dreams, and so on.

Unfortunately, for many people the humbling realizations that occur after the “in love” experience happen at a point in time when it’s difficult to part from the relationship, even though it may not serve either party. For example, the couple may be living together, gotten engaged or married or, even more challenging, had a child together. If life is demanding with a partner who has different viewpoints on life, imagine having to find common ground on parenting.

Before you start a relationship, one of the most important things to do is establish a list of nonnegotiables. This list is vitally important because you already know that your guard will come down as soon those “in love” chemicals hit. It is too easy to forget your standards, boundaries, desires, and needs when you’re high on love. Having a well-thought-out list of



nonnegotiables will help you make clear decisions when you fall for someone new, instead of just following an old pattern or judging the relationship based on the initial attraction.

If you just started or are already in a relationship, it is not too late to make the list. It is for YOU, so remember that you do NOT want to show the list to your potential or current partner. Why? Because people can make changes temporarily, especially in the beginning or a relationship, and try to be something that they are not. They may not try to deceive their partner on purpose, but because they are in love they may try to meet the other's nonnegotiables without even knowing it isn't truly who they are. It is vitally important to let your partner be who he or she is, rather than encouraging that person to be who they are not. When you see that individual's true colors, only then can you make the determination as to whether he or she is a good long-term partner for you.

What are Nonnegotiables?

A non-negotiable list is just that—things that you are not willing to negotiate in your life long term. It is up to you to define the characteristics you will and will not be willing to accept in your partner, your relationship, and your life. Then, make a commitment to yourself not to settle. Remember, this list is for you. Be honest with yourself. If you absolutely cannot and will not stand for something, draw a line and stick to it. And, if you know you would be able to make accommodations for something, even if it's not ideal, it doesn't belong on your list. This isn't a wish list—it's an "absolutely" list—it's a list of positive traits you *absolutely* want and negative traits you *absolutely* don't want (rephrased as a positive trait you do want).

How Do I Start on My list?

First, write down ALL the things you can think of that you know you do not want, as well as those things that you must have. Do this for both your relationship and for your partner. A good source for ideas is to think back on your past relationships and reflect on what did and did not work. Also reflect on other relationships you experienced as a child and adult. Items on the list can be as critical as "no domestic violence" or as fanciful as "must be romantic" or "must be spiritual." Other, more practical requirements could include: "must have emotional control" and "must clean after themselves." The list will vary drastically from individual to individual.

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Reread and refine: Are they really non-negotiable?

After writing the list, put it away and let it simmer in your brain for a couple of days. Then, take a look at it and go through each item one by one, asking yourself whether they are truly non-negotiable. For example: Is your partner not doing dishes really a deal breaker if he or she has all the other qualities that you desire? Then, next to each item write a:

- **D (for definitely)** if it is something that must or must not be part of your relationship
- **M (for maybe)** for things that you may be willing to negotiate
- **T (for take of my list)** for things that you could deal with (or without) if the most important factors were present.

Can you change a non-negotiable if the person has other great qualities?

Sure, however be warned that two things may happen:

- 1) You will realize that it was really negotiable
- 2) You will find out after some time that you compromised on something that was truly non-negotiable and you find yourself having to make very difficult decisions since you both have invested time and energy into the relationship. Therefore, before you are quick to drop a trait or factor from non-negotiable status, take the time to truly assess the situation. Most importantly, make sure you are not in the midst of the “in love” chemical high when you do this, as the purpose of the non-negotiable list is to prevent poor judgment during this phase.

How to Use Your List

If a potential or current partner does not meet any two items on the non-negotiable list, get out of the relationship immediately. Undesired behaviors or traits will become amplified as time passes because the longer you are in the relationship the more comfortable the person is going to feel. Do not stick around to see if the situation or characteristic changes. People can change, but it's rare and can only be lasting if it is initiated by his or her own true, inner desire.

Go forward into your relationship with the confidence that having a non-negotiable list gives you—the knowing that you know yourself and your desires and needs and are willing to

commit to yourself to meet them. Visualize the relationship that you deserve and do not falter from that vision. And, remember, do not share the list with a partner.

Once you're in a relationship long enough to see your partner for who he or she is—when your brain chemicals are no longer in high gear and you have thoroughly assessed the relationship against your non-negotiable list—then it's possible share each other's list. By honestly sharing needs and desires with a truly compatible partner, you will open up to an even deeper level of love, understanding, and commitment.

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