

APRIL 22, 2015 | BY [BRITTANY TAYLOR](#)

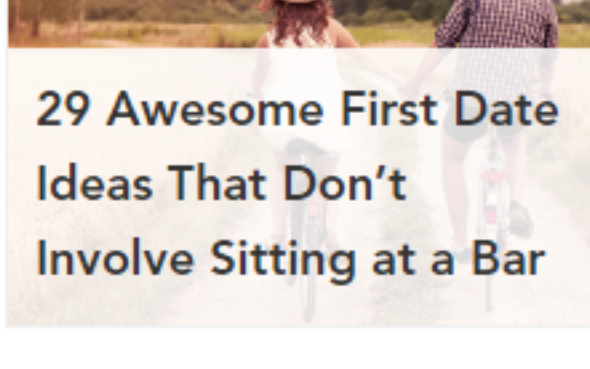
The Dating Advice You Need to Hear (From a Woman Who’s Interviewed 200+ Happy Couples)

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We’ve all spent plenty of time asking friends, family, even the little voice in our head, “How will we know when we’ve found the one?” But Ellen McCarthy, a reporter at *The Washington Post*, is really the one you should ask. She spent years covering weddings and relationships for the paper’s [On Love column](#)—and all of the conversations about true love that come with that kind of job.

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When she accepted the wedding reporter gig in 2009, McCarthy was 30 and, like the plotline to a good romantic comedy, recently single. She never suspected that strangers would show her the ropes when it came to love, commitment, and happily-ish ever after. Yet after chatting with hundreds of couples and more than a few sexperts, she’s written the book on romance—literally. *The Real Thing* is loaded with stories and lessons on finding love, all from her sweet beat. So, we naturally asked her to hand over the keys to bliss, whether it’s wedded, bedded, or just-for-now TLC.



1. Stop looking for someone who’s perfect on paper.

We have this idea of, “I have two Ph.D.s and a law degree so obviously I’m going to marry somebody whose pedigree stands up to that.” Or, “I’m of Indian descent, and I have to marry someone else who’s Indian.” Or, “I can’t date somebody who’s not into NASCAR.” We end up not looking at people as people but as packages. None of that stuff matters in the end. Ending up with somebody who is X inches taller than you isn’t going to make a marriage work.

2. Ignore other people’s expectations.

People love to say, “My son-in-law the doctor.” We fall into these traps of what will make our parents happy or what our sorority sisters or our childhood buddies expected for us, and we get boxed in. It’s all just irrelevant. It’s damaging. If you’re so busy fulfilling [other people’s expectations](#) of who you should be with, then you might miss out.

3. Don’t hit the panic button.

I think that there is a lot of pressure on people to get married—to find the one, settle down, have babies, and get on with it already. It can become a real preoccupation—it certainly was for me. That was what led me to freeze my eggs. I was worried about finding the right person, but more than that, I was worried about making a bad decision because of that pressure. I wanted to push a release valve. I think anything you can do to make your own life as [rewarding as it can be](#) in this moment is only going to make you happier now, and it’s only going to make you more attractive.

4. Go for genuine interest, not game play.

People kept saying to me, when they were talking about the early stages of dating the person they ended up with, “I just didn’t have that [anxiety](#) I had before. I was never second-guessing if he liked me. Or should I call or did I do the right thing?” It just kept coming up in interview after interview. When I started seeing my husband, I felt like there was a sincerity from which we were both approaching things. I always knew there was going to be a next date. It was something I took seriously because I had heard it over and over again from couples I’d talked to. It was a sign.

5. Aim for comfortable.

When I would sit down with couples and ask them why they ended up with this person, I can’t tell you how often they would sort of hem and haw and dance around the subject. Eventually they’d say, “I felt comfortable. I felt like myself. It felt natural.” And then they’d backtrack and say, “I know that sounds horrible and like settling. I don’t mean it to sound so bad, but that’s the truth.” Then they would talk about previous relationships where they felt lightning and they were challenged, but it came with a lot of drama.

6. Don’t force your partner to be your everything.

We don’t live in a society where our whole support system lives on one block anymore. I think that’s part of the reason we’ve come to expect our spouse to fulfill all of these roles—best friend, activity partner, co-parent, financial equal. But it’s not fair to them. We need to learn to use our village more, and let our spouse be our spouse. They can fulfill some of those roles, maybe even all of those roles some of the time, but not all the time.

7. Lay out your expectations—all of them.

Sometimes we expect that our partner will sit across from us at breakfast every morning and hold a cheerful conversation, when in fact your partner is not a morning person and doesn’t want to be verbal before that first cup of coffee. Your feelings are going to be hurt, right? Have these conversations in advance instead of assuming that things will just go the way you want them to go. It’s like giving somebody a how-to guide. They may not agree with it, and they may not meet all your needs or expectations, but at least they’ll know what they are. Then, when they sit mute across from you, poking their eggs, you don’t blow a gasket.

8. Stop thinking about sex. Start thinking about everything else.

There have been studies that show that you fall in love, and that initial first feeling of love lasts for a few months. For most of us, what takes over is what scientists call companionate love. Your marriage isn’t always going to take place on sandy beaches and across [candlelit dinners](#). It’s largely going to take place [hanging out on the couch](#), waking up in the middle of the night to take care of sick kids, and on long car trips. Who do you want to hang out with doing those things?

9. Forget about finding The One.

I tell this story of Betty and Edgar, this old couple who’ve been together for 65 years. They were so in sync. They both walked with their matching little canes and had this unbelievable rat-a-tat rapport where they completed each other’s jokes. It was exactly what you want for yourself after a 65-year marriage. I said to them, “People of my generation spend a lot of time talking about The One. What do you think about that idea?” And Betty looked like she just wanted to slap me, frankly. She was disgusted. “What are you talking about? That’s ridiculous. Listen, if I hadn’t married Edgar, I would’ve been married to somebody else for 65 years. I would have made that work.”

People are waiting for some perfect person to come down like a Greek god, and it’s crazy. You find the person with whom you can make a life and be happy. I don’t know if there is more than one of those—I think probably there is. But the idea that there is going to be this human embodiment of perfection, designed specifically for you, with whom things will always be perfect is ludicrous.

This interview has been condensed for clarity.

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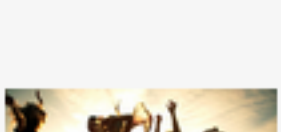
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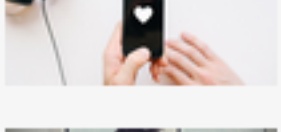
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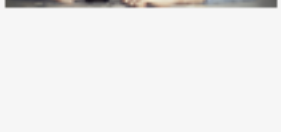
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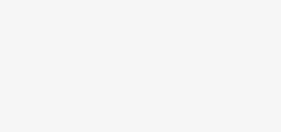
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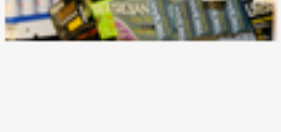
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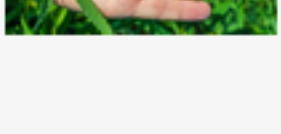
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