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NEW!



I'd always known that my partner and I shared certain characteristics. But when we ended up

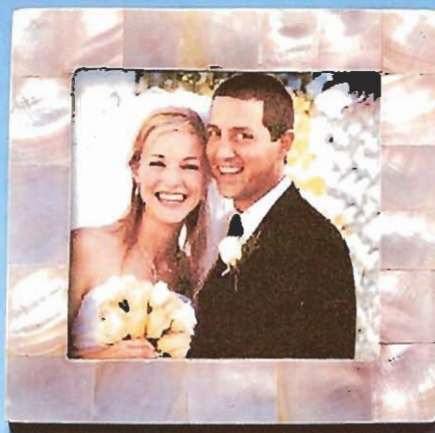
in couples' therapy, our counsellor was struck by the extent of the similarities between us. Everything she'd heard in the past hour was like a game of Snap. Dads who were never there because of work: snap. Lots of physical affection and family humour: snap. Parents who never fought or went on holiday, and who got divorced when we were 15: snap. The counselling couldn't fix us. My partner ended it and I cried, despite knowing that as well as looking like my dad, he was on course to become just as remote.

Yet we were hardly the first to fall into the trap of mimicking our parents' relationship. 'It's the first relationship we see so we think that's the way the world is,' says psychologist Reinhard Kowalski. 'The lessons we pick up from our parents are strong – our brains are too young to judge experience, so what we see has a greater impact on us, and we either emulate it or rebel against it.'

The younger you are when you get together with a partner, the stronger the influence of your parent's relationship on yours. 'Similarities are particularly important in younger couples,' says Adrienne Burgess, author of *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?* (£7.99, Vermilion). Matches in class, race, culture, politics and values are indicators that a relationship will thrive, but relationships formed in your thirties can tolerate greater individuality. 'In your thirties your families are not so involved in your relationship,' says Burgess, 'so whether you're replicating their traditions or not are less important as they won't have so many fingers in your pie.'

Are you married to your father?

We all like to think that we're self-aware enough to avoid repeating our parents' relationship mistakes. But, as Kate Rew discovers, the old patterns may have a stronger hold than we realise



Why do we repeat the past?

According to Maurice Taylor and Seana McGee, family therapists and authors of *The New Couple* (£12.99, HarperCollins), we unconsciously pick partners who remind us of our parents because we're looking for someone who will function almost as a parent towards us – giving

us their undivided attention and love. We're attracted by people who share the same qualities as our parents, both positive and negative, although those qualities may be disguised.

Although it's understandable why we pick partners who share our parents' good qualities, it's less easy to fathom why we would choose someone who shares a parent's

negative characteristics, such as being dismissive, critical or abusive toward us.

We choose such people, say Taylor and McGee, because our parents' negative attitudes towards us have left us with unresolved emotional traumas, which we can only overcome by working through them in our own adult relationships.

'If you look at your last five relationships and pull out the most positive and negative traits, you'll generally find the themes are the best and worst of your parents,' says relationship coach Michael Myerscough (www.therelationshipgym.com). 'Attraction is not accidental. There are thousands of beautiful people out there who you have no chemistry with. Those you feel drawn to will fundamentally be about your past. Your parents create a blueprint that you either replicate or react against.'

How are we affected?

Our parents' relationship can have a powerful impact. Statistically, children of divorced parents are more likely to divorce, women who grew up with domestic abuse are more likely to live with someone violent, children of alcoholics are more likely to marry alcoholics, and children who grew up with working mothers are more likely to form a double-income household. If your parents lived happily ever after it's not surprising you seek out what they had. But to end up replicating disaster relationships makes less sense.

For this reason, many of us quite sensibly try to avoid emulating our parents' relationship. But that doesn't always work, says Myerscough. 'Even when

people set out specifically to avoid a pattern they often find it again,' he says. 'It's like you're on a road going in one direction and then you think, "I don't want to do what they did!" so you turn around and go back the other way. The problem is you're still on the same road. With my clients I often find that they may not be the one who's cheated on like their mother, but they are the one who cheats. Or they may not end up with an alcoholic like their father, but they still end up with someone who's emotionally needy.'

Jessica, 34, is a management consultant. She went out of her way to avoid recreating the screaming matches her parents had, but found this left her with a lifeless relationship instead. 'Mum would tear at my father, punching and being evil,' she says. 'This left me with such a fear of fights that for three years I lived with a man so passive, we didn't have sex. I caught sight of myself at a party, in a backless dress and studded Manolo Blahnik porn shoes – all the sex I wasn't having squeezed into my outfit – and thought "this has to stop".'

'When I met Rob, my husband, the arguments soon started. Our first two years were dreadful. He comes from a family where they scream all the time. I kept telling him 'you have to stop shouting'. He kept telling me 'you have to stop walking away'. We'd both sulk for days. Now our style is a mixture of both: he's toned down the aggression and I've learnt the shouty thing doesn't mean he loves me less.'

Relationship flashpoints

The way your parents handled, or mishandled, conflict is one of the key areas where your relationship and that of your parents may overlap, says Myerscough. 'If one parent had

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Forming your own relationship blueprint How to avoid emulating your parents' relationship

■ **Listen to your dialogue: does it remind you of your mum or dad? You may unconsciously mimic them, but it doesn't necessarily reflect how you want to be.**

■ When faced with a parental pattern you would like to change, the key mix is awareness ('there's this thing I/you learnt to do') and compassion ('but it's okay and I/you can learn a new one').

■ **Make the weak point of your parents' relationship your top**

priority – so if they never argued and suddenly broke up, focus on your communication.

■ Work on your relationship with your parents. Cut the emotional umbilical cord (so you're more adult than child around them) and you're less likely to mimic them.

■ **Whatever most upsets you about your relationship is likely to be inherited from your parents – instead of going into battle over this issue ('if you don't stop doing x, I can't**

go on living'), step back and see it as a learning opportunity.

■ Study other people's relationships – exposing yourself to other blueprints gives you more choice in how you handle your own.

■ **Philandering parents are more likely to produce philandering offspring. You're less likely to fall into this trap if you remember the pain it caused you.**

■ If you've become critical, dependent or passive aggressive like one of your parents, try other responses.

a tendency to fly into a rage or blame others all the time, you don't want to repeat that,' he says. 'Nor do you want to repeat the silent-treatment response to an argument.'

However, some parents can teach good conflict-resolution skills. Psychologist Dr John Gottman has spent almost 30 years studying the 'masters and disasters' of marriage, and he has found that it is the way couples deal with conflict that makes the difference. Couples who edit themselves do better than those who say critical things on touchy subjects. This doesn't mean you have to deny your true feelings, but it does mean you should think before you speak, speak calmly, and be a little more polite and gentle than you actually feel. Couples who bring up problems gently fare better than those who are confrontational and contemptuous, and couples who know how to exit arguments (changing the topic,

being funny, giving each other emotional strokes) do better than those who stonewall or punish.

As well as conflict management, other fields where you may mirror your parents' patterns of behaviour are those of emotional responsiveness and sex. 'Emotional unavailability is an area to watch out for,' says Myerscough. 'If one or both of your parents were emotionally distant, you may find that your partner is also emotionally unavailable.' The symptoms may be disguised – you may think your partner is just a workaholic, or someone who relaxes by zoning out in front of the TV – but the underlying pattern is the same.

Problems can also occur if you and your partner's families had different approaches to sex – it can mean one of you is inhibited

when discussing sex and the other is very open. To overcome this, says Myerscough, 'you need to look back and say this is learned behaviour that can be relearned.'

What your parents can teach you

Where default styles are familiar they are not always a bad thing. Amanda, 37, is a lawyer, and got together with her partner when she was 17. 'When Pete gets stressed he withdraws and plays his guitar with this gormless look on his face. It could be annoying, but my dad does just the same. I'll be talking to Pete and he'll look up at me, registering nothing. It's so familiar it makes me feel affectionate towards him.'

Whatever the pattern, you do have the power to both accept and reject it. But on some levels 'it helps if you find someone with the same kind of wiring,' says Myerscough. What one person finds adorable (cuddling up on the sofa) another will find suffocating ('why are you so clingy?'). Independent or distant, thoughtful or neurotic, open or blunt: it depends on your viewpoint.

Falling into similar patterns to your parents is not always bad. We can pick up positive influences as well. The best lessons we can learn from our parents is how to stay together. 'If parents are mature, aware people who love each other, that's a good role model,' says Reinhard Kowalski. 'It's easier to form bonds with people who grow up with that inbuilt sense of security – they're more grounded, have a better sense of who they are, are able to empathise with others and, most importantly, they can deal with conflicting emotions of love and hate. Your parents don't have to be together to teach you that – a cooperative divorced couple can do it, too – but it's a valuable lesson.'

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