

*****Disclaimer:** This document was originally an e-mail that I wrote in response to a friend (a male) who asked for dating advice from a group of guys at the campus ministry I was a part of in Auburn. Marybeth and I were still dating (not yet engaged) and the language and phrasing reflect those realities. Though written specifically for that friend, I have updated and generalized it over the years as I have shared this advice with others. Before reading it, I just want to affirm that this is simply that: advice (nothing more, nothing less). It is not a cookie-cutter path to a successful dating relationship nor a set of rules by which everyone must abide. It was one of many helpful e-mails that was sent in response to my friend's request. With that said, these thoughts do come from MB and I attempting to reflect on our dating experience with integrity and I hope you find them helpful.

The Dating Sheet

Pre-Dating:

To me, trajectory is an important word in dating. There is no purpose in a dating relationship that's trajectory is not marriage. But, part of that trajectory is getting to know someone. I didn't feel as if Marybeth and I were "destined for marriage" as we started dating, but that doesn't mean we were not on the trajectory of marriage. Getting to know someone is a part of the trajectory.

Don't pursue your idealization of a guy/girl, pursue a guy/girl. When I "liked" previous girls, I didn't really like them. I liked an idealized possibility of what I wanted our relationship to be. When I pursued MB, I pursued her, not an idealization. Don't idealize a guy/girl. It is not a healthy way to start a relationship.

In a similar vein, I think many are often a lot fonder of the idea of having a significant than the actual person. In other words, when we are "interested" in another person, what we are actually interested in the security or status that we would receive if they liked us back. This is treating someone as a means rather than an end in and of themselves which is not a good foundation for a relationship. There are a couple good tests for this:

- I think a good test for this is honestly asking yourself the question: If things did not work out, would I be more disappointed in losing the person or would I be more disappointed in not having a significant other?
- Does singleness make you feel antsy? In other words, how quickly do you jump to a new guy/girl after a break-up or a rejection. If dating makes you feel antsy/if you jump to another guy/girl quickly, what does that tell you about your motivations for dating someone?

Dating:

I think boundaries (physical and otherwise) are probably the most important thing to talk about here. Concerning physical boundaries, an obvious and simple, but difficult, thing: set them. I do think this plays out differently in each relationship but making physical boundaries clear and specific is helpful to me and MB at least. Physical boundaries is two-fold: things not to do and places not to be. Things not to do explains itself. Places not to be for example would be like agreeing to not go into your (or your significant other's) room if no one else is in the apartment. One of the best ways to "keep from going too far," is to not put yourselves in the position to do so.

The church has often been so focused on physical boundaries, that we have deemphasized boundaries in other areas of dating relationships (emotional, intellectual, temporal, social, spiritual, etc.). In turn, the church's advice on dating has often been date like everyone else, but just don't have sex. Things just do not work that way though. You cannot act like a married couple (planning and integrating your whole lives around each other/having no emotional, intellectual, temporal, social, spiritual boundaries) and expect your physical boundaries to hold up. Rather, all of these facets of our relationships (physical, emotional, intellectual, temporal, social, spiritual, etc.) are interrelated and we should treat them as such by having boundaries across the board. Marybeth and I have found that when we do this, our physical boundaries actually hold up better.

When, I think about non-physical boundaries, I think the way we wield the word "love" in dating relationships is important. Biblical love is a choice (*commitment/covenant*) that involves feelings but is not just simply feelings.

Keeping this in mind while dating and letting it shape how we use the word love in our dating relationships is helpful in many ways, but two in particular. First, it is helpful with keeping the physical boundaries you set. By being careful in how we use the word "love," it is harder to hoodwink ourselves into thinking we can go further physically than we should. It reminds us that if you are dating you are not married. As Micah says, the only thing you have committed to one another is that you will let them know if you start to date anyone else. That may put a damper on things, but it is also an important safeguard for physical boundaries.

Second, it helps you keep a healthy balance between your romantic relationship and your other relationships – your relationship with your friends, family, and God. *Concerning friends*, when people pair off, it is often not too long before they almost exclusively hang out with each other and neglect their friendships. This is a big mistake. You need your Christian brothers to ground you, for spiritual encouragement (As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another), and as accountability partners if you are going to date Christianly. You should want this for your significant other as well. You cannot be their sole source for communal spiritual formation so why would you want to bear that weight and shortchange them in the process? So, if you find yourself planning your whole day or week around your significant other rather than intentionally spending time with your brothers, take a step back, have a difficult conversation with your significant other, and be intentional! It will make you a better person for your significant other in the long run. Though we fall into this trap sometimes, Marybeth and I both commit to each other to not neglect our friendships because of our relationship.

Concerning family, MB is not my BAE (before anyone else), my mom and my sisters are. That doesn't mean that I have to spend more time with them than with MB or that I can't ever choose to go hang out with her rather than them. But, it does mean that at the end of the day (until/unless MB and I get engaged/married), that my family is my priority. Our generation tends to "leave and cleave" before it should. This is actually better for MB and mine relationship in the long run though. Because, as I habituate how to serve my mom and sisters, it will translate over to my relationship with MB if/when we are married. That is the hope at least!

Concerning God, MB and I both agree to love God more than we care about the other. We think this is vital to our relationship. First, it is the best/only way to keep us together and caring for the other well. Second, it prevents us from making the other an idol, asking the other to fulfill a role that only God is meant to fulfill. If you ask your significant other to play the role of God in your life (being the source of our joy, hope, security, etc), it prevents us from serving them, and it puts tons of pressure on the other.

Thanks for asking this! It is so helpful/healthy to me to think through this stuff. MB and I do NOT live any this out anywhere close to perfect. And, I'm not just saying that. We struggle greatly, but we do agree on these principles, for lack of a better term. I think that is important too. Agreeing on these types of things with your significant other matters. MB has become my best friend, and from older couples I have learned that biblical friendship is at the core of marriage. So, don't forget to enjoy being with and for your significant other. Finally, (cue applause for my rambling to come to an end), continue asking for advice from older couples and spend time (you and your significant other) with older couples. I have probably learned more talking and hanging out with Jared, Colin, Clay, Will, Micah, Heath, etc. (and their girlfriends, fiancés, and spouses) than any other way.

Addendum

Break-Ups:

You and your significant other are first and foremost covenantal members of the body of Christ and secondarily significant others. If you hold true to this, break-ups will not be easy, but can be managed.

Engagement:

Two simple things: 1) Do pre-marital counseling. It can be one of the most rewarding and powerful experiences in your life. 2) It is about the marriage, not the wedding. In today's world, it is hard to not get caught up in all of the wedding planning and make your engagement about the wedding. You have to swim against the current of culture, but the work is worth it. Your engagement can be a great time of growth and opportunity. God often works mightily in transitions and engagement is certainly a time of transitions.