

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

ETIQUETTE? IS THAT A NEW PERFUME? Updating Emily Post—how manners can help with your man

All too often, couples who leave the dating stage of their relationship for more committed waters leave behind their manners as well. This is a mistake, because treating your partner in a civilized fashion is probably the most effective way to prevent your dealings from turning into the type of encounter usually seen at Madison Square Garden accompanied by a referee. If you don't believe me, check out how you'd respond in the following situations, designed to prove that the rules of proper etiquette serve your relationship better than do those of your State Boxing Association.

1. You have just introduced your partner to your mother and you realize he is about to tell her how you met: in a hot tub during a Body Awareness Weekend at a singles' resort. Your first impulse is to hit him in the mouth. Is there a more polite way to handle the situation?

Yes. Many authorities suggest creating a diversion to defuse a potentially explosive situation. In this case, it might be effective to make gasping noises and put your hand to your throat in the universal sign for choking.

2. Your partner complains that you never offer to pick up the check when you go out to dinner. Should you reply with a sarcastic remark to the effect that *he* never picks up a dish when you eat at home, or should you consider the wild possibility that he has a valid point, and discuss it with him?

The latter solution is by far the more civilized and profitable. While there are no strict rules for how often you should pick up the check, it's only good manners to do so with some regularity. You could suggest timing your treats to coincide with a specific event, such as the arrival of Halley's comet every seventy-six years.

3. Your lover puts on a new outfit he's bought himself, a get-up that looks to you like something sported by retired golfers. When he asks what you think of it, should you tell him the unvarnished truth, or should you say something polite?

The thing to remember here is that the essence of all etiquette is kindness. There's no need to tell your lover that if you have to look at his shirt one minute longer you'll lose your breakfast. Good manners require that you say something noncommittal. Later, you

can see that the garments meet with an unavoidable accident, like a fall down the incinerator or immersion in hot borscht.

4. Your partner asks you to entertain his friend Morty, who makes his living estimating holiday-weekend death rates for an insurance company and whose conversation is limited to weighing the efficacy of the seat belt as opposed to that of the air bag. Should you smile and tell your mate that any friend of his is a friend of yours, or inform him that entertaining Morty puts you at risk of being bored to death, making you another grisly weekend statistic?

Good manners forbid letting your partner know that you consider his friend a lethal narcotic. You are bound by etiquette to entertain this bozo. However, you can avoid conversation *and* show Morty a good time by renting a couple of disaster movies and serving dinner in front of the VCR.

5. You both want to go to the movies. You want to see *The Seventh Seal*, Ingmar Bergman's nifty movie about plague and misery in the dark ages, and he wants to see *Conan the Barbarian Is Back*. What should you do?

Since compromise is an essential ingredient of polite behavior, compromise. See your exquisite choice one night, his moronic selection the next. When you go with him, do

so graciously. Don't point out how many people in the audience are under age five.

6. Your partner takes you to a restaurant that you surmise to be one jump ahead of the health authorities, but which has exceptionally well-endowed waitresses wearing exceptionally little clothing. Do you bring up these observations over dinner, thereby risking a nasty public scuffle, or do you hold your peace and eat with dignity whatever it is that passes for food in this place?

Good deportment demands that you keep your squabbles private and not make the other diners any sicker than they probably are already. In the privacy of your own home, write him a note thanking him for dinner and telling him that from now on he can frequent as many sleaze joints as he likes, but that you'd rather he not try to drag you down to his level (and that your knees won't bend that far, in any case).

Apply the principles of taste, kindness and fair play illustrated here, and perhaps you and your partner won't have so many petty little fights—and you can save your energy for those times when even Emily Post couldn't save you.

by Bette-Jane Raphael

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