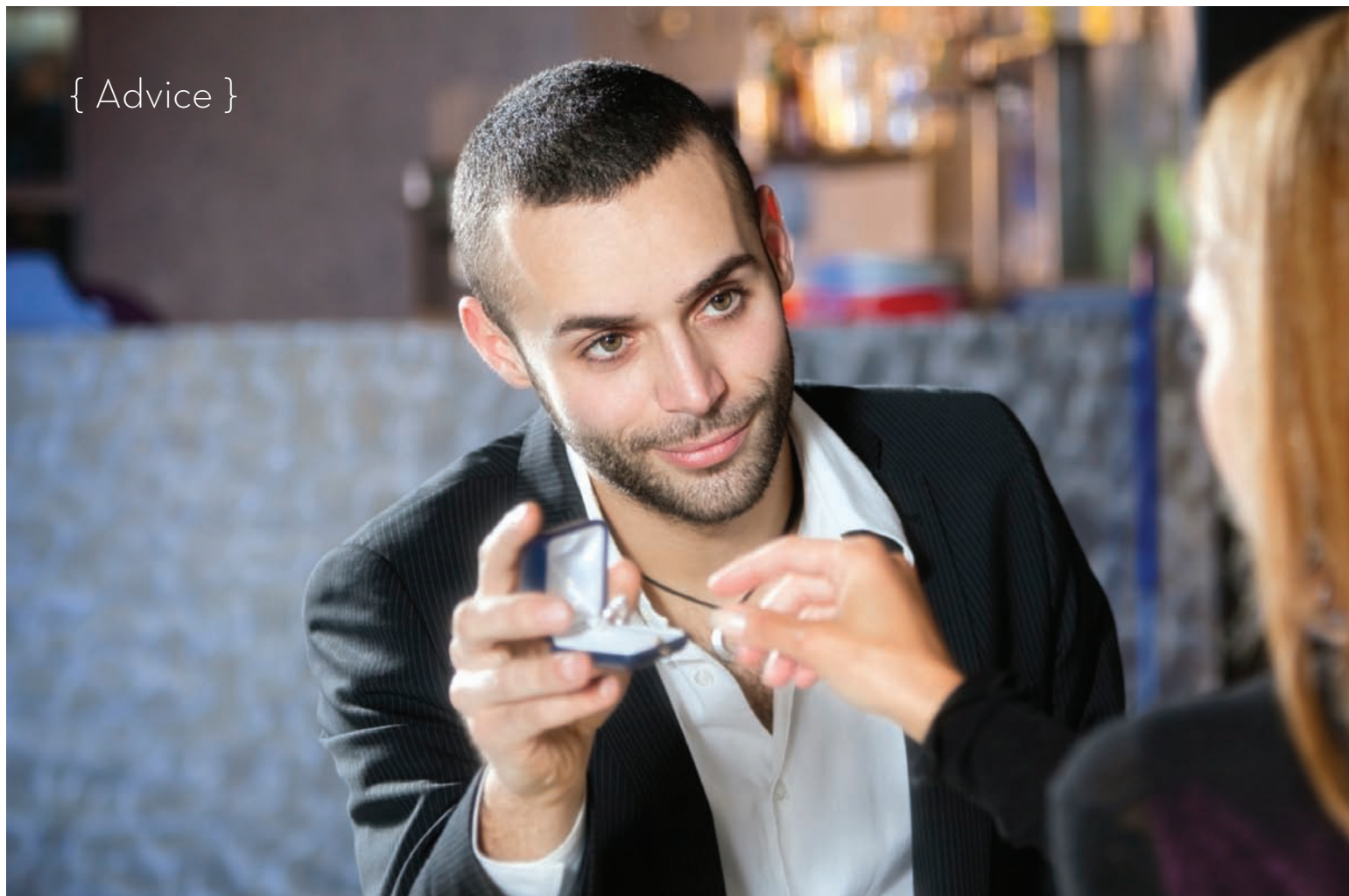


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Saying Yes ...OR NO

When the feeling is right, “Will you marry me?” can be the easiest question to answer. But if you’re unsure or need time, it can be infinitely more complicated than deciding whether to order a cosmo or martini at the next happy hour. BY JENN PRESS

Personally, my engagement only solidifies what I already knew: This is the man with whom I want to spend the rest of my life. While many people view marriage as a drastic adjustment, and it is certainly different from a legal standpoint, I think some of the best couples are ones that naturally transitioned into this next step and proceed as though the major changes are just a ring and a title.

Relationships are not about what you see in the movies or read in some storybook romance with fancy dinners and lavish

gifts. Because for real love, you don’t have to get dressed up.

It’s about finding that, dare I say, soul mate, with whom you can be your ‘I better not run into anyone today looking like this’ self; the one you can bare your very soul to and still feel safe. It’s about the person who can make you laugh until tears fall, and who will wipe them away when they do. It’s about finding a true companion with whom you can live each day, through good, bad and compromise—the one person who holds the key to your heart.

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The best relationships are the ones without a rulebook, ulterior motives, games or plans. They exist upon the sheer purpose of living life to its fullest, appreciating the beauty in imperfection and spontaneity, and celebrating differences. It's about two people who fit like pieces of a puzzle, and no matter where they are or how they find each other, they are the only two that can ever go together just right. Ultimately, it's finding the one you want to rent movies with, take long walks with and sit beside for all the days of your life.

Yes, I'll Marry You!

You've probably imagined this moment since you were a little girl playing dress-up in your mother's heels. He gets down on one knee, looks into your eyes and tells you he can't be without you—and if that isn't enough, you get to sport a rock on your left hand for as long as you both shall live.

However, a marriage is not a wedding. It's not a diamond band on someone's finger either. A marriage is a commitment far beyond the fantasy five-hour party filled with presents, music and delicious multi-tiered cake.

So how do you know when you're truly ready to settle down? For me, I pictured myself sitting at the head table of my wedding reception with my future husband by my side. Then I realized he was the person I was lucky enough to sit with at every table for the rest of my life, and I felt comforted and excited. If you're experiencing the same feelings, then you're on the right track.

"If you have a soul connection with the person and can be the real you, then you are in the right place," says Auriela McCarthy, relationship expert and author of *The Power of the Possible*.

When you're at a point when you can accept the person's weaknesses (we all have them!) and are not going into a marriage with the mindset that either of you are going to change your ways, then you're ready for the commitment. Just be sure you want to be with him for reasons beyond his performance in the sack or hefty paycheck! Be sure it's "based on your feelings, thoughts and experiences with that person and that you know them well enough that trust is demonstrated," McCarthy says. "You need to know how he reacts to different situations and make sure your man can stand on his own (that means no mama's boys, ladies!) and that he is mature enough to be making this decision as well."

Although age can certainly make a difference in your readiness to take the leap, relationship expert Dr. Jenn Berman says a lot is based on how much you've learned about yourself and relationships thus far. If you're fresh out of college and say "yes" to someone after one year of dating, that may lead to some problems down the line. However, if you're in your 30s and have had a chance to figure out who you are and what you want in a partner, it can be great to say "yes" after only a short period of time. "A lot depends on your life experience and dating experience," she says.



Getting to know people not only will help you figure out what you want in a relationship, but also what you don't want as well. If you've gotten to meet a variety of personalities and figured out what you're looking for in a partner, you'll be in a better position to know who's right for you. In other words, you may have to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet your prince!

Also, you should truly be able to trust your own feelings. If you've made positive decisions in the past and have a good track record for leading yourself in the right direction, then you can feel ready to make this choice. Otherwise, McCarthy advises to listen to the opinions of those you value—someone who has experienced a good relationship and a healthy lifestyle.

Berman recommends couples date for at least one year before they get engaged. "The first three to 12 months tend to be the honeymoon period," she says. "You're so enchanted with the other person that it's hard to see who they really are because everyone's on their best behavior." Remember not to confuse infatuation and attraction with true love and companionship.

So wait until you've seen your man in everyday situations and not just for weekend getaways full of wining and dining before you agree to live happily ever after.

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Should You Shack Up Before you Settle Down?

While the age-old theory, “Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free” leads us to believe that living together diminishes all hopes of getting married, I personally found that moving in with my now fiancé was the ideal steppingstone on the path to marriage. Living with your significant other can be the perfect insight into the future and show how well you work together on important issues like paying bills on time, keeping a clean home and respecting one another’s space. Plus, it’s refreshing to know you’re never “doing nothing” on a quiet night because you’re always with your best friend.

However, while it’s not necessary to become roomies with your guy just yet, “It’s important to live in the same city for at least 12 months,” says Berman. Although she admits it’s a catch-22 because most women wouldn’t want to relocate without an engagement ring, many men will move closer to give the relationship a solid effort. “Anyone can be on good behavior long distance for a really long time,” she says. “It extends the honeymoon period.”

The Trouble with Saying Yes Too Quickly

When it comes to accepting a marriage proposal, that’s certainly not the time to be impulsive. “Marriage is difficult on a good day, and you want to go into it feeling ready, connected, secure and confident that it’s the right person,” Berman says. “It’s for the

long term.” This definitely isn’t as carefree as buying stilettos you can return if you change your mind a few days later. Marriage is meant to be for the long haul, and if you’re not ready, the commitment becomes monumentally more difficult.

Berman says people who commit too soon often act out by partying too much, cheating, drinking and sabotaging the relationship by not treating the other person well.

In the recent flick *He’s Just Not That Into You*, Bradley Cooper’s character admitted he succumbed to the pressure of marriage and settled down before he was ready, which led him to have an affair. Sometimes people have the attitude that they will go into a marriage to “try it out” and then realize they aren’t happy.

“It is much easier to end a relationship than it is to end a marriage,” McCarthy says. “It’s a very traumatic experience to go through divorce, especially when dealing with common properties and possibly children. It’s a huge loss everywhere.”

In some situations, a woman may lose her sense of self if she takes such a big step before she is mentally and emotionally prepared to do so. For example, it might be the right guy, but wrong timing. Maybe you have a list of personal goals you want to achieve before walking down the aisle. The same goes for guys, too. My fiancé admitted he knew he was ready to propose long before he did, but wanted to establish a career first to be sure he could support a family in the future.

However, some women are so worried about the outcome

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of saying “no” that they accept the proposal to spare their partner’s feelings. “They say ‘yes’ because they’re afraid of losing him and fear the relationship will be over,” Berman says.

If you do accept and later regret it, Berman says it can lead to a broken engagement or more trouble down the line. Just as some couples in *The CW’s Hitched or Ditched* realize they have more than just cold feet a week before their nuptials, you don’t want to get to the altar and find yourself saying, “I don’t.”

Um, Sure, Let’s Get Married

First of all, I give a lot of credit to any guy who asks a woman to marry him without being absolutely sure she’ll say “yes.” However, while I’ve always thought a proposal occurred after a couple had previously decided they wanted to be together forever, this is not always the case. If it does come as a surprise and you’re unsure how to respond when he pops the question, the first thing you should ask yourself is what you’re doing in the relationship. If you realize it’s never going to happen, be up front about it. Don’t confuse the feeling of excitement in that moment with a feeling of insecurity. McCarthy says if your stomach is in knots and you realize it’s the person causing it and not fear, don’t talk yourself into it. “Trust your gut. If you have a sick feeling inside your body, you shouldn’t do it. Never, ever ignore that,” she says.

Don’t give too many explanations. Be direct and say, “I’m sorry, I appreciate this, but I don’t feel the same way.” Tell him while he may be hurting, he doesn’t want you as much as he thinks he does because you aren’t the right one for him. Make a clean break. “You can’t have a double agenda that you want to keep him in your life and not marry him,” McCarthy says. “Hopefully you will be friends at some point, but he is going through a lot of pain so give him space.”

If you are thrown off by the timing of the proposal and marriage isn’t something you’re interested in at that moment, tell him the question was unexpected and you need to get more comfortable with the idea. Berman says to tell him you really care about him, but you take marriage seriously and don’t want to jump into anything just yet.

How to Say No Without Ruining the Relationship

There is certainly no romantic way to turn down a man who just asked to spend the rest of his life with you, but just as Katherine Heigl’s character needed a little more time to decide in *Knocked Up*, you, too, may not be ready right away. Before you reject him completely, decide whether or not this is someone you can see yourself marrying in the future. If it’s a person you do want to continue a relationship with, then tell him that.

“If he loves you, he will wait,” McCarthy says. “If he’s mature, he will understand. Don’t be pressured into it.” She says



honesty is always the way to go as long as you’re sensitive to his feelings. If you love him and see the possibility of marriage in the future, tell him you don’t want to hurt him, but are happy with how your relationship is going and would like to re-visit the topic after you’ve had a reasonable amount of time to figure out your goals. Berman suggests saying, “I feel you’re the right person, but I know I’m not ready right now.”

Tell him how much better things will be when your relationship has had more time to grow and you’re both on the same level. Reassure him that you have the rest of your lives to be together if you so choose, and if he wants to be with you forever, waiting a few more months will feel like a blip on the screen.

If you realize he’s not the one, it’s important to express that for both of your sakes. Tell him how much the relationship has meant to you and how difficult it is to break his heart, and explain you care too much to give him false hope for the future.

“If it’s not the right person, you have to find a way to say ‘No, thank you’ as nicely as possible. Do your best to have open communication, and be sensitive to any hurt feelings that might be present,” Berman says.

The bottom line is you should never accept a marriage proposal until you’re ready, and you should certainly never settle when it comes to settling down.