





FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

PREPARING TO SAY “I DO” TAUGHT ME TO EMBRACE THE PERFECTION
IN AN IMPERFECT RELATIONSHIP.

BY JAMIE FRIEDLANDER



K, I’ll go to the futon this time,” he begrudgingly moans. It’s 3:30 a.m.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll go outside...” I halfheartedly offer, my voice heavy with exhaustion. He slowly picks up three pillows and a blanket and heads for the futon in our living room. I offer up another weak, “Wait, I’ll go....” But it’s too

late. He’s already out the door.

The next morning, he comes into the bedroom and gives me a quick kiss on the forehead before heading off to work. I later text him, “Sorry about the bed,” with a red heart emoji, and head to the bathroom to do my makeup.

This exact scenario has happened more days than I can count. My fiancé, David, and I have been together for seven years, but we rarely sleep in the same bed. If we’re lucky, we’ll share our queen-size bed once a week. I’m an incredibly light sleeper (even with earplugs), and he constantly changes positions and shakes his legs while trying to fall asleep. The minute I feel his leg tremble, I snarl, “Stop it!” and he’ll bark at me to put earplugs in, and then grab his pillows and head to the living room.

This has been a problem since our relationship began. I always insist he stay in the bedroom. Happy couples share a bed, right? I once mentioned how we often don’t sleep together to a couple of my friends, and they all shot me a concerned look. “That’s not normal,” one said. I grew worried, and in my concern, I tried my hardest to make something work that clearly wasn’t ever going to. Always the more practical of the two of us, David would suggest we start the night off in separate beds, but I would never acquiesce. If we didn’t sleep in the same bed, our relationship must be doomed, right?

While on vacation in Charleston, South Carolina, for New Year’s, we had a room with a king-size bed and a couch with a pullout bed. David knew he was already feeling restless one night, so he didn’t even attempt to share the bed with me. I was annoyed, slightly tipsy and didn’t feel like fighting. I dozed off.

The following morning, after having slept separately, I woke up to a soy latte on the bedside table and a smiling David. We shimmied under the covers, cuddled and drank our coffees while laughing about how we spent *way* too much money on a fancy, four-course meal.

We didn’t share the same bed the night before, but we were having a blissful morning. It finally hit me that we didn’t need to

share a bed to be happy. We were happy, regardless of our sleeping situation. After seven long years, I finally accepted that there was no point trying to force something that wasn't going to happen. We love each other, but we cannot share a bed. Plain and simple.

By no means do we have the perfect relationship. It irks him that I spend too much time on my phone, while it bothers me that he watches so much basketball and football on TV. I feel frustrated how when he's quiet, he won't come out and tell me what's on his mind without me prodding. He feels annoyed that I'm not as spontaneous as him. Most Saturday nights I'd prefer to get in to my PJs and watch TV instead of trying a new cocktail bar.

But none of these small imperfections in the relationship matter when we're practicing our first wedding dance in the living room in our underwear or laughing while drinking green tea and eating fruit to "counteract" the fried chicken we just splurged on. Our tiny problems feel insignificant when he surprises me with a plane ticket to see my favorite band on my birthday, or when I treat him to a sushi-making class for the anniversary of our first date. The happiness overshadows the flaws.

Accepting that our relationship is not perfect allowed me—an anxious, frequently obsessive person—to relax. I had been forcing things in my life and in our relationship that perhaps just weren't meant to be. I wanted to cook more for David, because he makes dinner 90 percent of the time. But I'm just not a good cook. And I don't enjoy it. I wanted him to be more romantic and write me heartfelt letters each week like I do for him. But that's not a strength of his. He shows his love in other ways, like making me gluten-free mac and cheese from scratch after a long day at work or putting socks on my cold feet.

Once I accepted the imperfect qualities we each had and how happy we were in spite of them, I stopped worrying about the areas where we fell short.

David and I met when we were 18 at a college party in New York City. He was my polar opposite. Where I was talkative and excitable, he was quiet and shy. I studied English and journalism, while he studied neuroscience and was pre-medicine. He was 6-foot-3 and noticeably skinny, with curly black hair and the cutest dimples I'd ever seen. He was mysterious, kind, humble and genuine.

Time passed without us seeing each other, and the following year, when we were 19, we began running into each other on an almost-daily basis—at the coffee shop down the street, on the subway, at the library. After numerous chance encounters in the biggest city in the U.S., we both thought fate was trying to connect us. Little did we know our own subtle actions brought us together: I studied by the window at a coffee shop on Third Avenue and 17th Street because I knew there was a good chance I'd see David walk by. I later discovered he intentionally took that route home



so he could see me in the window, too. (He always had a cigarette in hand because he thought it looked cool, but that's a story for another time.)

He finally asked me out to dinner one night after a not-so-subtle hint from my friend. And the rest, as they say, was history. We stayed up talking until 6 a.m. on the night of our first date, standing with our noses against the windows of my dorm room, looking down Third Avenue. And we stayed up talking until 6 a.m. the day after that and the day after that. We went from complete strangers to as close as two people could be within weeks.

We were each other's first serious relationship. The feeling of navigating everything together was thrilling and comforting. If I didn't know what to say or do, it didn't stress me out because I knew he didn't know either. We didn't have anything to compare our experiences to.

Our lack of experience, however, simultaneously contributed to my idealization of our relationship. I had no previous benchmark for what it meant to be in a healthy and happy relationship, so any problems we had, even the small ones, seemed monumental.

FRANCESCO BONGIORNI

It took many years for me to realize, as I did with our sleeping issue, that problems are natural and expected, so long as they're not insurmountable.

David and I have talked about how we have both imagined what life would be like if we had broken up after college like most couples we knew. We wouldn't have had to endure the struggles that accompany many years of long-distance dating—the constant flying back and forth and the numbing loneliness that constantly lurked below the surface. If we had broken up, I probably wouldn't be living in Dallas, where he attends medical school. We both would have been able to live our lives exactly how we had planned—near our respective families and friends—mine in Chicago, his in Los Angeles and Houston. Both of our lives would have been easier.

A few years ago, while David was still in medical school, I moved back to Chicago to get my master's degree. We each had a glimpse of what life would be like if we weren't together. I could grab dinner with my twin brother or go shopping with my best friend. He could visit his parents in Houston at the drop of a hat and watch NBA games all night.

But it wouldn't be worth it. We could be happy *enough* apart from each other, but we wouldn't be truly satisfied. Being away from those I love is a tradeoff for being with the one I love most deeply. I wouldn't be happy if I couldn't share every moment—big, small, joyful and painful—with him.

I recently asked David why he asked me to marry him. We had discussed getting married for a while, but no actual timeline had ever been set.

"You came home from work one day and we were in the kitchen," he said. "You were talking about your day at work while I cooked dinner, and I thought to myself, *This is perfect. I never want to spend a day without her and without moments like these. So why not make it official?*"

In a time when fewer and fewer people are marrying and instead just living together and starting families, I've had many people ask me why, at the age of 27, we decided to get married, especially since we aren't planning on having kids quite yet. Divorce rates are a steady 50 percent. No matter how confident a person might be that his or her marriage will last, there is no way to be absolutely certain.

So why take the leap? We've already lived together for four years. What would really change, aside from me getting on his health insurance plan and jointly filing taxes?

Unlike most couples, we're each marrying the first person we ever dated. We transitioned to adulthood together. Although we're not high school sweethearts, it's pretty close. Deciding to marry the first person you dated is a leap of faith in and of itself. Neither of us really knows what it would be like to be with another

person, which is a scary thought. But I decided marrying David felt right when I thought about the most important strengths in our relationship: our honesty, trust and ability to communicate. We talk about anything and everything. There is never any shame or embarrassment in our relationship. I feel I have someone who truly has my back, no matter what. And there is really nothing else I could ask for in a partner for life.

Accepting that our relationship is not perfect allowed me—an anxious, frequently obsessive person—to relax.

We have overcome many hurdles in the past, and many more will come our way in the future. We will likely have to move for his job one day, and I envision starting my own freelance writing business in the future. But for me, marriage is a symbol that no matter what challenge we're faced with, we will persist. It could be easy to cave in to the struggles—to break up when we're forced to move cities or when our finances are shaky. Marriage signifies that we will not give up when faced with these problems.

Wedding bands are a symbol not only that we have met our match, but that we have met someone with whom we're prepared to endure the struggles. Someone who will be there when we are anxious about an upcoming deadline or feeling depressed because of chronic back pain.

Accepting the imperfect aspects of our relationship and preparing for the inevitable challenges we will face has left me as confident as I can be that our marriage will last. But of course, there's some uncertainty. You never truly know. But you can set yourself up for success. In fact, we booked a suite with two queen beds for our honeymoon in Greece. ♦

FRIEDLANDER IS THE ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF SUCCESS.