

Want Lasting Love? First, Take This Test

Want Lasting Love? First, Take This Test

After her marriage unravels, a woman seeks answers in personality testing and the science of compatibility.



By Lauren Apfel

Feb. 1, 2019

I asked Claire to take the test after our third date. Things had gone well – hands touching, knees skimming, heads close. By the time I flopped into bed, I was flush with possibility. I was also quite drunk.

Claire had sounded intrigued by the 16 Personalities test, so I texted her the link. Then I opened my Notes app and typed a prediction: “Claire, INFP,” guessing she was an introvert (“I”) who preferred intuition (“N”), made decisions more from feeling (“F”) than thinking, and approached life in a flexible, open way (“P”).

It was an outcome that filled me with hope. No one is guaranteed to find love from a test, of course, but we can at least improve our odds by pursuing people with whom we stand a better chance of forging a lasting connection.

When Claire’s message lit up my screen, it was exactly as I thought: “INFP.”

I texted her a screen grab of my note, as if to say: “I see you.”

ADVERTISEMENT

“Am I really such an open book?” she wrote. “Or are you just very, very good at this?”

“The latter,” I wrote. “Definitely the latter.”

TINY LOVE STORIES

Discover our new weekly feature, Tiny Love Stories, which is essentially Modern Love in miniature — reader-submitted stories of no more than 100 words.

I became obsessed with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (many websites, including 16 Personalities, use it as a basis for their own tests) a few years ago when my nearly two-decade marriage began to unravel and I was trying to understand how things had gone so wrong. My husband, Adam, and I still made decisions well together, but we had long ago lost our emotional tie, especially when it came to being able to talk in ways that didn't involve planning or practical matters.

Was this simply where most long-term relationships ended up, or was our disconnect the result of an entrenched incompatibility? I wanted to find out.

ADVERTISEMENT

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator assigns personality types based on answers to a series of questions. Our responses determine where we fall on the spectrum of four categories: how we interact with the world (extrovert or introvert), how we process information

(sensing or intuition), how we make decisions (thinking or feeling) and how we organize our lives (judging or perceiving). The final result is a set of four letters.

I started looking for those four letters in everyone I met. What could they tell me about a person? Did they act as a secret code, a mirror or a smoke screen?

My belief in the power of this system stems from the fact that my own type — which presents itself to me consistently, no matter how many times I take the test or which version I take — is eerily spot on. Those letters, INTJ, became a mooring for me during a period of great uncertainty.

They also gave me insight as to why I wanted to leave the man with whom I had spent 19 years and had four children. A tattered treasure map of our similarities and differences, the trail of which had led us not to the glinting coins of a golden wedding anniversary but to a dead end.

ADVERTISEMENT

When I met Adam, I was an American college student in London and he was a British academic in his late 20s. He was basically the same person he is now, and so was I, but it's harder to see who people really are through the fog of courtship. Our conversations were compelling in the early days, but that kind of discourse,

as it turned out, was not his natural inclination.

Adam's personality type is ESTJ (extroversion, sensing, thinking, judging). We share the last two letters, so we agreed on a lot of the big things: We were committed to intellectual rigor, harbored a deep skepticism of organized religion, and had similar attitudes about money. Neither of us wanted children, until we both did.

But our differences (extrovert versus introvert, and his concrete, linear style of thinking and communicating versus my tendency toward abstraction and patterns) revealed themselves over time to be a source of stagnation, not growth.

While opposites may attract, being opposite in some aspects of a relationship can prove problematic. In the Simplified Myers-Briggs Type Compatibility Chart I consulted, which lists five levels of anticipated compatibility, our pairing is second to worst.

ADVERTISEMENT

Dinners and car rides became for us silent, stilted affairs. He would ask about my day but never seemed to listen to my answers or do anything to move the discussion forward. I craved conversation built on shared intuition and the back and forth of ideas; he didn't want much of that kind of conversation at all.

After our twins arrived, crashing into our family of four like a Molotov cocktail, he simply did not have the energy or the will to engage with me. And I needed that engagement to feel connected. Eventually, we stopped talking altogether, at least in any meaningful way.

Neither of us was to blame, as I see it; we were just incompatible in terms of how we process the world and derive meaning from it. We had no trouble choosing a secondary school for our oldest son with exemplary logic or getting out of the house in record time with four unruly children, but in the end, these shared personality features were not enough to sustain us.

After leaving a long-term relationship, people often fall for someone who is wholly different. If a husband was moody and disinterested, the new person is even-tempered and attentive. If a wife was overly analytical and aloof, the new person is action oriented and effusive.

ADVERTISEMENT

When I started dating online, I armed myself with the 16 personality types for exactly this reason: to right my past relationship wrongs.

Claire was one of the few people I decided to meet in real life. She and Adam did not share a single Myers-

Briggs letter. She was similar to me and different from me in entirely new ways, ways that thrilled me. Shortly after we met, I wrote about her to a friend.

“You’re bucking the pattern!” my friend replied, talking mainly about the fact that Claire is younger than I am. In the past, I had been romantically involved only with people who were older, sometimes significantly so, and had never dated a woman.

“She has tattoos!” I wrote back. Not only were Claire’s arms already generously inked the first time I saw her, a new tattoo also appeared between our first and second dates. Between dates No. 2 and No. 3, she added a sparkling stud to her left nostril.

ADVERTISEMENT

The spontaneity of these acquisitions surprised and impressed me. I was still deliberating over the single tattoo I had planned to get for my 40th birthday the November before, the pale, bare skin of my wrist a reminder of my caution.

Claire was restlessness to my stillness, late to my early, free-floating to my rootedness. What we shared, though, dwarfed all those differences: the first two letters of the Myers-Briggs scale, which confirmed a mutual intensity and introspection, a common way of talking, thinking and connecting. It felt so right.

A couple of months after we met, when she told me she had been seeing somebody else the whole time, I was floored. Not because I don't think people date more than one person at the same time, but because I thought we were alike in a way that meant she wouldn't.

A flurry of text messages followed, offering explanations: "I'll never fit in to your life," "I'll let you down," and finally, "You are superior to me in so many ways" (which was perhaps her way of saying: "It's not you, it's me").

ADVERTISEMENT

I am not superior to her, of course, though it would probably be in keeping with my personality type to present as if I am. We INTJs are an intense, exacting bunch, and notoriously difficult to please.

It took Adam years to come to the conclusion that he could never live up to my expectations. It took Claire mere months.

The tattoo I didn't get was going to be the ancient Greek word "arete," which means, among other things, excellence. But excellence probably isn't a realistic goal in romance. Neither is perfect compatibility.

ADVERTISEMENT

In love, we can try to test, predict and explain all we want, but romantic attachment will always be an inherently messy endeavor. Chemistry, history and timing can't be logged into a spreadsheet. And yet I find it hard to let go of the idea that there is some benefit, especially when it comes to long-term relationships, to seeking a promising combination of similarities and differences.

So I keep my four letters prominently displayed on my dating profile. I still want to know, early on, a potential partner's personality type. Not to diminish love's complexity. Not to make it easy. Just, I hope, to make it more likely.

Lauren Apfel, a writer in Glasgow, is co-founder and executive editor of Motherwell.

Modern Love can be reached at modernlove@nytimes.com.

.

Last modified: 00:06