What are the Top Relationship Dealbreakers?

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When we think about the kind of person we'd like to date, we often list the qualities we most desire in a partner — our *dealmakers*. But we also have our *dealbreakers* — qualities that would disqualify someone as a dating prospect, regardless of how many other wonderful traits they have. There has been a great deal of research on dealmakers, but until recently, not much at all on dealbreakers. In a series of studies, Peter Jonason and colleagues investigated the most common relationship dealbreakers and how they affect our dating choices.[1]

What are the most common dealmakers for men and women?

In the first study, the researchers just wanted to get a general sense of what traits people were likely to see as dealbreakers. They surveyed 92 college students who were asked to list their personal dealbreakers for long and short-term relationships. Most of the students didn't name that many dealbreakers, listing an average of just under 5 dealbreakers for long-term relationships and 3 for short-term relationships.

That first study generated a list of 49 possible dealbreakers. In a second study, a separate sample of 295 students rated the extent to which they felt that each of those 49 traits was a dealbreaker for them. Overall women were more likely than men to feel that these traits could be dealbreakers. The table below shows the top 9 most common dealbreakers. These dealbreakers tended to focus primarily on health (e.g., STDs, bad smells), dating behaviors (e.g., dating multiple partners, already in a relationship), and negative personality traits (e.g., untrustworthy, abusive, uncaring).

Top Relationship Dealbreakers for College Students*

Long-Term Relationships	Short-Term Relationships
Has anger issues or is abusive	Has health issues such as STDs
Is currently dating multiple partners	Smells bad
Is untrustworthy	Has poor hygiene
Is already in an relationship/ married	Is already in an relationship/ married
Has health issues such as STDs	Has anger issues or is abusive
Has alcohol or drug problem	Is bad in bed
Is inattentive/uncaring	Is unattractive
Has anger issues or is abusive	Is currently dating multiple partners
Has poor hygiene	Does not take care of themselves

Most commonly endorsed from student-generated list of 49 dealbreakers[1]

Source: Adapted from Jonason et al. (2015), Table 1

Of course small samples of college students don't represent most singles. So in a third study, the researchers surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,744 single American adults. These participants were given a list of 17 traits and were asked to check off the ones they felt were dealbreakers, choosing as many as they wanted. The table below shows the percentage of participants who chose each of the 17 traits, broken down by gender. Participants chose an average of six dealbreakers, with women choosing ever so slightly more than men.

Dealbreakers in Committed Relationships

Dealbreakers	Overall %	% Men*	% Women*
Disheveled or unclean appearance	67	63	71
Lazy	66	60	72
Too needy	63	57	69
Lacks a sense of humor	54	50	58
Lived > 3 hours away from me	49	51	58
Bad sex	47	44	50
Lacks self-confidence	40	33	47
Too much TV/video games	33	25	41
Low sex drive	33	39	27
Stubborn	33	32	34
Talks too much	23	26	20
Too quiet	14	11	17
Blunt	14	11	17
Does not want kids	14	13	15
Had kids	13	14	12
Too athletic	9	7	10
Not athletic	6	7	6

Gender differences significant for all, but "Stubborn" and "Not Athletic"

Source: Adapted from Jonason et al. (2015), Table 2

How do dealbreakers affect our dating choices?

The researchers also wanted to understand how these dealbreakers affect our dating decisions. So they conducted three experimental studies, varying the dealbreaking information that participants received about potential mates.

In one experiment, 132 adults evaluated four profiles of potential mates who were attractive and successful. They were asked to rate how likely they would be to consider a purely sexual relationship, a short-term relationship, a committed long-term relationship, or a friendship with each of these four people. After the participants made their ratings, they learned that each of the potential mates possessed a specific potential dealbreaker (an unhealthy lifestyle; undesirable personality traits; interested in a casual sexual

relationship, when you're only interested in a serious relationship; or was interested in a serious romantic relationship when you were only interested in a casual sex relationship). Then they re-evaluated their interest, *after* learning about the dealbreakers.

The results showed that non-dating-related dealbreakers (unhealthy lifestyle, undesirable personality traits) made people less inclined to have any type of relationship with the person, including friendship. But the dealbreakers that involved discrepancies between their own and the potential mate's dating intentions only negatively impacted romantic interest. And although you might expect men to be more willing than women to date someone who was interested in casual sex when they wanted more, the researchers did not observe this gender difference. However, men were generally more willing than women to engage in both short and long term relationships with each of the potential mates. Finally, women had a more negative reaction than men to learning that the person had negative personality traits.

In their last two experiments, the researchers examined the relative effect of dealbreakers and dealmakers. *Are dealbreakers more important than dealmakers* in determining romantic interest?

In one study, 193 adults were asked to imagine they had just met someone new, and were asked rate how learning new pieces of information about that person would affect their likelihood of accepting or rejecting that person as a short or long-term relationship partner. Five pieces of information were potential dealbreakers (poor hygiene, short tempered, has an STD, promiscuous, and drinks excessively), and five were dealmakers (physically attractive, kind, has a good career, has a good sense of humor, intelligent).

The results showed that the dealbreakers had a bigger effect than dealmakers on participants' interest in a potential mate. However, this wasn't true for everyone. Those who saw themselves as undesirable short-term mates rated dealmakers as more important than dealbreakers when considering the person as a short-term mate.

In a final experiment, the researchers varied the relative number of dealbreakers and dealmakers that participants learned about a potential mate (dealmaker:deal breaker ratios of 0:5, 1:5, 2:4, 3:3, 4:2, 5:1, or 5:0). Two-hundred and seventy-one adults were asked to consider a situation in which their potential partner "has: x DEALMAKERS and y DEALBREAKERS". They were asked to rate how likely they would be to consider that person as a friend, a short-term partner, or a long-term partner. Like the previous study, this experiment also found that dealbreakers had a bigger effect on relationship intentions than did dealmakers, and this tendency was greater for women than for men.

The researchers interpreted their findings as being consistent with evolutionary theory which posits that women are more discriminating than men in their mating choices. This was supported by women's slightly greater tendency to deem various traits dealbreakers and their tendency to be especially affected by the presence of dealbreakers in a potential mate. However, statistically, these gender differences were significant, but fairly small, suggesting that men and women don't differ very much in terms of their dealbreakers or how important those dealbreakers are in their dating decisions.

This research also shows that when it comes to evaluating potential mates, we don't "accentuate the positive", as the old song goes, but rather, we put more weight on the important negative traits they possess.

The big unanswered question in this research is how this operates in people's *actual* mate choices. What we say we want in a mate doesn't always line up with what we really choose. Research on speed-dating has shown little correspondence between the traits people *claim* they are looking for in a mate and the traits possessed by the people who interest them at the actual speed-dating event.[2] In addition, research has shown that people are often willing to agree to date a with a flawed suitor if they believe that person is real, rather than hypothetical.[3] Would these dealbreakers really break the deal in a real life dating context,

or are we more willing to comprise than we'd admit?

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