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Culture club

Cupid's arrow can cut through all sorts of social, racial and religious differences, not to mention gender. Do cultures always have to clash? Of course not. Time to celebrate diversity.



You don't have to be in a mixed-race marriage to experience a clash of cultures. Most couples carry baggage from different backgrounds that only appears long after the honeymoon has set.

ALL BLACK AND WHITE OR SHADES OF BROWN?

Interracial relationships are on the increase. Although they're both Christian, different attitudes and beliefs about birth control methods by Catholic Mary and Protestant Joe caused clashes not apparent in the heady early stages of their affair. We're not just talking about race or ethnicity, but your attitudes, behaviour, beliefs and faith, and the way you were brought up.

Here's an
idea for
you...

Cultural difficulties can be overcome if you create some rituals of your own, unique and individual to your relationship. Find ways to celebrate, commiserate and congratulate. Your own rituals might include lighting candles, dancing to your special songs or music, and eating at a special restaurant.

be overcome and couples who are able to use the resources of two rather than one culture have a better chance of solving problems.

MOSQUES AND MINISKIRTS

Karin, a German Catholic, and Arif, a British Muslim born in Burma who grew up in Pakistan, are in a mixed-race marriage that has flourished over three decades. They met in London as each was adjusting to a third culture: the eccentricities of British life. He shunned a traditional arranged marriage in favour of a beautiful blonde. They were married by an imam in a large mosque in central London. But the bride wore a minidress. Compromise was the hallmark of their early years together, celebrating a fairly Catholic Christmas but observing Islamic bereavement rituals. Karin found it hard at first, but focused on similarities between two seemingly disparate religions. She recognised common rituals and stories. Fairly quickly, they developed a third culture of their own – one where the extended family is important to both of them, but so is an extended wine list.

ROMEO AND JULIET

You're from different families, and families do things differently. Perhaps yours is one of the latter-day Romeo and Juliet romances, where couples fall in love despite the disapproval of families who cannot or will not get on. Being ostracised by two extended families has painful long-term consequences. But is conflict inevitable? We think that cultural hurdles can

Guyathri, a Sri Lankan Indian, and her Italian fiancé Fabio have an amazing relationship. We think their secret is that both avoid what anthropologists call ‘ethnocentrism’. This is basically the belief that our own culture is superior to someone else’s, or looking at other cultures through our own culture-tinted spectacles.

Going through a difficult patch? Take a look at IDEA 13, *Stormy weather*, for ways of weathering the worst of it.

Try another idea...

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Getting to know your partner’s culture can be a lifetime’s work. Fabio takes the trouble to pronounce Guyathri’s name correctly, while all her British friends just call her Kathy. Guyathri has learnt Italian, in part to understand Fabio’s culture better. She knows it is easy to make assumptions based on views we’re brought up with. Testing these concepts against your partner’s experience and knowledge can be eye opening. You probably know bits about your partner’s early life, but we suggest you dig a bit deeper. Ask how Jasmine, Johannes or Jeremiah was brought up; find out about his or her earliest memories of school, and any brothers and sisters. What happened when they were naughty? What was their parents’ relationship like? How much does she think you should be like that? Collect life stories – the more the better – and compare them with your own. What could you gain from your partner’s culture? What do you need from your own? Work out where you’re willing to compromise and where you’re resolute.

Of course you don’t need to agree on everything, but it’s important to at least agree on what happens at religious festivals and rituals. A shared new culture, unique to the two of you, can transcend differences that

‘It’s crazy to object to mixed-race relationships.

It enriches our life rather than detracts from it.’

ISHI HARBOTT, Tanzanian muslim and wife of Glenn, a white Briton

Defining idea...

could otherwise cause separation. Compromise and respect are vital, especially during key life events like the death of a parent or birth of child. What will you do if your Christian wife wants a christening? Working it out beforehand avoids ugly scenes with your in-laws, who'll (probably) take your partner's side.

How did it go?

Q We're in a mixed-race relationship. One of the kickbacks of living in a small town is that there are a number of racists who make our lives hell when we go out. We love our home and have other good reasons for wanting to stay, but sometimes I worry that all these problems are driving a wedge between us. How can we fight it?

A If you allow yourselves to be browbeaten by these racists, they will have won. If you can show that they are not defeating you, they might just leave you alone. Work out what you will do if you are being picked on and recruit whatever help you can. If it's any consolation, you may be making it easier for others in a similar position in the future. They may regard you as pioneers, a couple who, at a local level, broke down racial stereotypes.

Q I married young, and converted from Judaism to Islam to make my partner's family happy, but it hasn't worked. I still don't feel accepted by his extended family and mine hasn't forgiven me for leaving my Jewish faith. How can I untangle this mess?

A It's always a mistake to join your partner's religion in the belief that it will make things easier. We suggest that you and your partner talk about these difficulties and how they can be resolved. You might find this a difficult subject to broach, but if you avoid it, discontent will fester and you will probably feel increasingly resentful.