

## Can love conquer cultural differences?



**It's tough enough trying to iron out relationship problems when both partners come from the same cultural background. It can be even more complicated if they come from different backgrounds with very different values. In her regular Expatica column, Cultural Clues, Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich answers a question from a reader about facing up tensions in intercultural relationships.**

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*E wrote*

*I thought you might be able to help myself and others by answering a question about where people can get marriage counselling. I have been living in the Netherlands for four years (I am Canadian) with my Dutch partner. Due to so many cultural differences (I believe in marriage, he doesn't etc) we are having a really rough time. We need to get counselling to bridge these differences, but we need a counsellor that specialises in intercultural relationships.*

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Dear E and other readers

I am but an armchair counsellor, any suggestions brought up are made with the highest respect towards all. Let's not underestimate the impact of intercultural differences on a relationship. However, be careful not to make it the scapegoat either. Whenever things are not working out the way we envision, look at all sides of relationship management.

Did you and your partner know each others' positions including the one on marriage?  
Has this been communicated in an open and honest way?

While expectations may have changed over time and the respective partner has not, can we hold this partner accountable for remaining the person they were?

In the best case scenario couples grow together bringing new dimensions into each others lives. But any relationship based on love should include respect and understanding for each others differences, including all the peculiarities and the idiosyncrasies.

The tempting but false assumption that one can change the other often proves to be counter-productive. It puts unfair pressure on both partners - the imaginary preferred image blurs our vision for the true qualities of that individual.

Counselling as a therapy can be very helpful providing it is an accepted route by both partners. But be careful not to force the counselling solution upon your partner. Why not start by using it for finding your own centre, answering hard and tough questions that some of us not always want to face.

Access is a non-profit organisation with offices both in The Hague and Amsterdam; among their many services they also offer counselling support. They can be found at:  
[http://www.access-nl.org/About\\_us/about.htm](http://www.access-nl.org/About_us/about.htm)

Sometimes we get lost in a maze. Simple, disarming questions can direct us to what is important:

Do we love each other?

Are we happy and do we want to make each other happy?

Do we want to be together?

An old and abused but still valid guiding light? Love will conquer all.

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*Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich is managing partner of CONSULTus. Her website is [www.Consultus.net](http://www.Consultus.net). She reserves the right to decide which questions she considers relevant for her column. She will, however, not answer any questions dealing with tax or legal matters.*