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## Couples on the couch

When problems in the bedroom involve drapes, throw pillows, and shag rugs, couples call on therapist/interior designer **Rachelle Goodfriend**.

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Attractiveness. Intelligence. Sense of humor. Decorating style? The compatibility criteria on matchmaking websites don't include the design preferences of potential partners, but Rachelle Goodfriend thinks they should. A licensed marriage and family therapist for 25 years, as well as an interior designer for the past eight, Goodfriend uses her training and experience to mediate when he likes minimalism, she likes French country, and never the twain shall meet. Using a collaborative approach, along with a questionnaire she developed for HGTV's *Get It Together*, Goodfriend encourages communication between partners from the start.

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**Does it really matter if you and your partner have vastly different tastes?** First of all, it matters to know each other's style, and then, just as importantly, how to communicate about it. You need to know your similarities and differences.

**Can style disagreements really lead to big-time marital problems?** There is a high divorce rate among couples who have done major remodels. In fact, I'm trying to find the exact figure for the book I'm working on: *Design Together, Stay Together: Build Your Relationship While Remodeling Your Home*.

**Seems like a lot of problems erupt during projects that are especially long, have glitches, or go way over budget.** People often don't know what they're getting into. They jump into projects with unspoken expectations and without knowing each other's preferences. Money is one of the hotspots. At the beginning of the project, people will say they don't have a budget, and I get really insistent. You must have a budget to start with, and update it along the way as things change.

**What type of couple is a red flag?** Often one partner will say, "I don't care." I really pay attention to those silent ones. In the end, they will most likely feel that they weren't listened to. I want to hear from both.

**What happens if one person wants to control what the space looks like, but doesn't want to do the work to decorate it?** Does that give the other person the right to make decisions? There has to be communication about this from the start. If one person wants control, does that mean the final say? Or do they just want to approve what the other person has chosen? People want control when they feel like they don't have any. They often say they don't care, but people are more confident when they feel they have a say.

**How do you encourage design illiterates to express themselves?** I ask them to describe a place where they felt good, like a hotel or restaurant. Then I ask why elements from that place made them feel good.

**How can a couple blend their styles and temperaments?** Let's say the wife really likes traditional, and the husband has a more modern aesthetic. They can get a leather couch that has a traditional feel and put some pillows on it that are contemporary—or maybe add a coffee table that's sleek. Basically, you combine their styles, and the result is more eclectic. Or, alternatively, one room can be traditional and one contemporary.

**But wouldn't two styles in one house be jarring?** No, as long as you're consistent with other decorating elements. Keep the same shades of paint throughout the house, or the same trim and molding colors. How do you negotiate an *Odd Couple* relationship, like Oscar Madison and Felix Ungar's? Balance clutter with storage. Let's say Oscar comes home every night and puts his briefcase and jacket on the dining room table. Felix can hang hooks in a nearby room or entranceway, so Oscar gets into the habit of hanging his things there. Or have Oscar toss his things into a basket, so at least the mess is organized and partially hidden.

**What are some of the juiciest conflicts people have?** They often involve couples who are moving in together after living separately for a long time. One pair of newlyweds had a major rift over decorating their living room. She wanted it to overflow with wedding and family photos, he wanted a huge flat-screen and fewer private photos. Working together, we displayed a few personal photos, stored the rest in beautiful albums, and enclosed the TV in an armoire.

**Worst-case scenario?** One couple got divorced, though he had mentally checked out long before the redesign of his home began. His being difficult was a symptom of his unhappiness. He kept saying no, yet couldn't define his taste.

**Why do you think people have so much emotion tied to decorating?** Decorating is a form of self-expression and a way of exposing yourself. Often people don't trust themselves with their own creativity. That's why decorating offers relationships such an opportunity to grow. You can learn so much about one another.

**I notice you don't use the word *compromise*.** When I think of compromise, I think that someone is not really being listened to or respected. I'm interested in an agreement that makes both partners happy.

**Couldn't couples just take turns, making changes every five years to suit one or the other's tastes?** You *both* must love the home. You want to feel refreshed and empowered when you're there, and you can't put that on hold for five years.

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