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Do Japanese-Western relationships work?

By *Dr. Douglas Berger, M.D., Ph D.* | [ASK THE EXPERT](#)



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The majority of Japanese-Western couples do well, or as well as any Western-Western, or Japanese-Japanese couple may do. The needs of Japanese-Western couples in trouble are generally the same as for same-culture couples with a few having some exaggeration of inter-culture difficulties I will describe below.

Common problems in any relationship such as power struggles, role expectation dissatisfaction, passive-aggression, over-reactivity, infidelity, etc. are often the focus of therapy. Frequent and heated arguments are common problems no matter what the cultural background of the partners are. These couples usually do not argue fairly with each other and they spiral out of control. This often leads to a vicious cycle of fights, cold-war, make-up, and fight again. These couples do not realize there can be no winner to a spousal fight, only two losers, and they both stubbornly persist in taking a stand. It is usually necessary for both partners to begin to acknowledge their own contribution to the problem and stop blaming or criticizing their partner before the real work of the therapy can begin.

Japanese-Western couples may begin to hit a wall of conflict after marriage. Expectations that the husband will allocate all of the household and family responsibility to the wife, new roles as mother and father, changing attitudes toward love and intimacy that does not meet the paradigm of the country of origin, relations with the extended family, etc., can all lead to miscommunication, dissatisfaction, and conflict. A common complaint by the Western partner (usually the husband) is that the wife is too bossy and not affectionate, and a common complaint by the Japanese partner (usually the wife) is that husband is not organized enough and doesn't understand that she is too busy and tired for much affection.

The Japanese husband-Western wife paradigm is less common because the role-expectation for the wife to stay home in Japanese society is not easily acceptable to Western women. These relationships have their own complexities that can perhaps be taken up in a separate article. The key to the therapy is to elucidate the misunderstanding, to see what the personality styles of the partners are in promoting the misunderstanding, and then to foster adaptive relationship mechanisms. Changing expectations and being more accepting of variations in

style is key in cross-cultural relationships assuming one of the partners does not have a psychiatric illness like depression that needs treatment.

Dr. Berger and his staff at the Meguro Counseling Center in the Shibuya-Ebisu area provide mental health care for individuals, couples, and families, in both English and Japanese. www.megurocounseling.com

The discussions herein are meant as general information and advice only. Each person needs to make their own personal life decisions and to contact a mental health professional for consultation if deemed appropriate.

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