Perfecting it as a pair: The do’s and don’ts of the Couples Match

DEC 19, 2019

Brendan Murphy
Senior News Writer

On its own, matching with a residency program is a complex process. Adding a relationship to the fold, particularly if both parties are looking to enter residency, adds further complications.

For couples in that situation who hope to work and live near each other during residency, the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) offers a process called the Couples Match. Jonathon Judkins, MD, and Katie Sacotte, MD, went through the Couples Match together during the 2019 application cycle. From their experience, they offer this advice.

Do: Communicate your individual needs

Matching together will ultimately mean that a couple submits a combined rank-order list to the NRMP. Well in advance of that, each partner should list their deal-breakers and wants.

“Definitely think about what is important to you and your partner before starting the interview process,” Dr. Sacotte said. “It is easy to get caught up in the prestige of programs or to get very attached to programs your partner doesn’t end up liking. If you know your priorities beforehand, including your relationship, it will be easier to compromise in the end.”

Don’t: Limit your options

Because both of you are going to find pros and cons at each program—and the cons might prove deal-breakers for one of you at certain programs—you’ll need to apply to more residency programs than you would on your own.
“We applied very broadly and, when possible, applied to multiple programs in the same city,” Dr. Sacotte said. “That way you have multiple combinations of being in the same city. We also focused on the West Coast because we are active and being near nature was important to us.”

When it comes time for residency program interviews, “if one partner gets an interview at a program but the other is still waiting, both partners can email the programs and state they are couples matching. It helped us get a few interviews together,” Dr. Sacotte added.

**Do: Seek outside advice**

Both Dr. Sacotte and Dr. Judkins credit their advisors at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine for helping them take the right approach when looking for programs together.

“Our advisers were great at telling us at how many more interviews we need to aim for,” Dr. Judkins said. “The common misconception is that you need to do that because it will be harder to match at the same place. While there’s some truth to that, the main reason we found [it helped to go on more interviews] was there were a lot more programs where one of us liked it and the other didn’t.”

**Don’t: Stress too much**

That’s probably easier said than done. Still, if you’re attempting to match with your partner, you can feel pretty good about past trends. In the 2019 application cycle, 1,076 couples submitted combined rank-order list as part of the Couples Match, matching at a 95% clip. “If I could do it again, I would have less stress about it,” Dr. Sacotte said. "We were going to end up at a place we were happy, and being together was more important to us than anything else.”

In the end, Drs. Sacotte and Judkins matched at residency programs at Oregon Health & Science University. Dr. Judkins is a first-year internal medicine resident. Dr. Sacotte is training in the pediatrics program.

“We definitely both made compromises when we made our rank lists,” Dr. Judkins said. “We did a very good job realizing what was important to the other person, and we’re both pretty satisfied with how it turned out in the end.”