



Cyber Dating

Will You Find Romance Online?

By Jane Barteau

Loneliness is part of the human condition. We all “want somebody to love,” to quote Jefferson Airplane. And for lots of people friendship doesn’t cut it. They want a mate. But where to find one if bars and parties just aren’t your thing? Well if you’re like 38 percent of what the Pew Research Center calls “single and looking Americans,” you’ve posted a profile online or have used a dating app.

Like it or not, digital romance is here to stay. The stigma that was once attached to it has passed. Fifty-nine percent of Americans have decided that online dating is a good way to meet people. One quarter of online daters have entered into a marriage or long-term relationship with someone they met on online. You probably know some of them. I myself have been seeing for more than a year a

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man I met on OKCupid. And I know of a handful of other people who are either married or committed to someone they first met in cyberspace.

Among my friends (names have been changed), writer Sally met her new wife, Barb, a web designer, on Match.com. Graphic designer Dan met his partner, Joni, a therapist, on OkCupid, and now they are planning to have children together. And my favorite example, Bridget, met her now husband in an online game of poetry tag.

Google “stories of couples who met online” and you’ll find many more such examples.

So if you’re looking for a mate, maybe it’s not such a bad idea to try the online world of romance. But as my mom always told me, you’ve gotta take the bad with the good. And, trust me, there’s plenty of bad.

For a preview, read Salon.com blogger Victoria Carlson’s August 2011 post “OKCupid, I’m Done” in which the Los Angeles writer and single mom



details some colossally wretched dates, like the unemployed man who lived with his mother and used unspeakably derogatory language to describe women, or the guy who admitted he occasionally beat his dog, or the one who chain-smoked and went on and on about how much he couldn’t stand his ex-wife. Her experiences fall in line with a Marin County woman I spoke with, I’ll call her Helen, who had endured many a man behaving inappropriately.

Men have their horror stories, too. A Sonoma County man (I’ll name him Ben) who’s been online dating on and off since 2004 shared several tales with me. There was the time that a woman he’d spent the day hiking with and then took out for a drink told him bluntly, not five seconds after he paid what had become her \$120 bar bill, “I want you to know that at no time during this day have I ever thought there was

any chemistry between us.” And he never saw her again. Or the woman who sent him an excessively vitriolic communication simply because, after a few brief friendly e-mail exchanges, he’d politely declined her request to go out on a date.

“There’s no etiquette. People act in ways they would never act in the real world.”—Ben

“There’s no etiquette. People act in ways they would never act in the real world. And it can be very hurtful, especially for newbies,” he says.

While these kinds of stories abound, there are plenty of online dating experiences that aren’t awful, just perplexing. I put those in what I call my “Say What?” file. For example, the No Show-ers, such as the woman with whom Ben spent several months engaged in an extensive e-mail



exchange, but who never wanted to meet for an actual date.

However frustrating, Ben's experience is not unusual. Lots of people who meet online never actually meet each other face-to-face. They are like the digital dating version of armchair anthropologists: They thoroughly enjoy learning all about the natives, but from a safe distance. (And given the experiences of Victoria, Helen, and Ben, we can understand why.) The numbers of people who do get up the courage to meet someone is growing, though. According to the Pew Research Center, 66 percent of online daters meet up with someone at least once.

But meeting up with someone is just half the battle. You also have to be interested enough in each other to continue connecting, which

brings me to the second, and more upsetting, addition to the "Say What?" file: the Vanishers. Anyone who has online dated for more than a month has been through one of their Disappearing Acts.

It looks something like this: You meet a fantastic person. You both seem to be totally into each other; you love talking and spending time together; the chemistry is palpable. You go on one, two, even three or four dates. And then, bam, Mr. or Ms. Right never calls again. He or she doesn't respond to texts or calls or e-mails. Your new person is just flat out gone.

Anne Lamott, Bay Area author of the popular parenting memoir *Operating Instructions: A Diary of My Son's First Year* (Anchor, 2005), describes this phenomenon in her humorous 2013 Salon.com essay

"My Year on Match.com." Her first Vanisher was a man she describes as a "creative venture capitalist" who was familiar with her writing. They had great conversations and a few really nice dates, with texts and e-mails in between.

And then he fell off the face of the Earth.

"If I wanted to go for five days without hearing from a man with whom I had chemistry and three almost perfect dates, I would repeat junior high," the 58-year-old Lamott quipped.

And it kept on happening. "This pattern repeated," she wrote, "a flurry of dates, followed by radio silence on the man's part."

Helen said that she'd experienced the Disappearing Act on multiple occasions,

Maybe what makes you click with another person is ineffable, a mystery.

too. So has my single-mother friend in Denver, and Ben, and, yes, me. I had several wonderful dates with a psychologist I seriously liked who just simply went away.

What's going on with the Vanishers?

A 2012 *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* report, which analyzed 400 studies on online dating, points to a reasonable cause: an over-abundance of choices.

While you might not necessarily assume that the guy you met at the grocery store is seeing several other women, you can bet that the guy you met online is. He may have gone out on a date with you, but the pictures



from 100 other profiles are floating through his head. Indeed, my psychologist friend finally mentioned there was someone else he was interested in.

Ukiah therapist Lesley Osman, MFT, said that she thought, with so many profiles to choose from, people “may very well have an ‘on to the next one’ mentality.” And she would be right. It’s a mindset that leads to what Bay Area sex and relationship coach Celeste Hirschman, M.A., calls “disposable dating.” If you don’t get instantly what you want from someone, there’s another choice on the next screen. It’s “very dehumanizing,” Hirschman and her colleague Dr. Danielle Harel wrote in a March 2014 Huffington Post article, which suggests ways to online date with kindness.

According to the *Psychological Science* study, the plethora of online dating choices isn’t even that good for us. It may seem fun at first, but it can be overwhelming. And, what’s more, those two-dimensional profiles (in which people often lie about age, weight, and height) can lead to the objectification of potential romantic partners. We don’t see the other person as a human being, but as an option—and one we’re not happy with at that.

Eli J. Finkel, Ph.D., now a professor of social psychology at Northwestern University and the study’s lead author, explained to the *Washington Post* the problem of having too many choices.

“You end up a bit less satisfied with the thing you choose...,” he said. “And you’re less likely to commit to that

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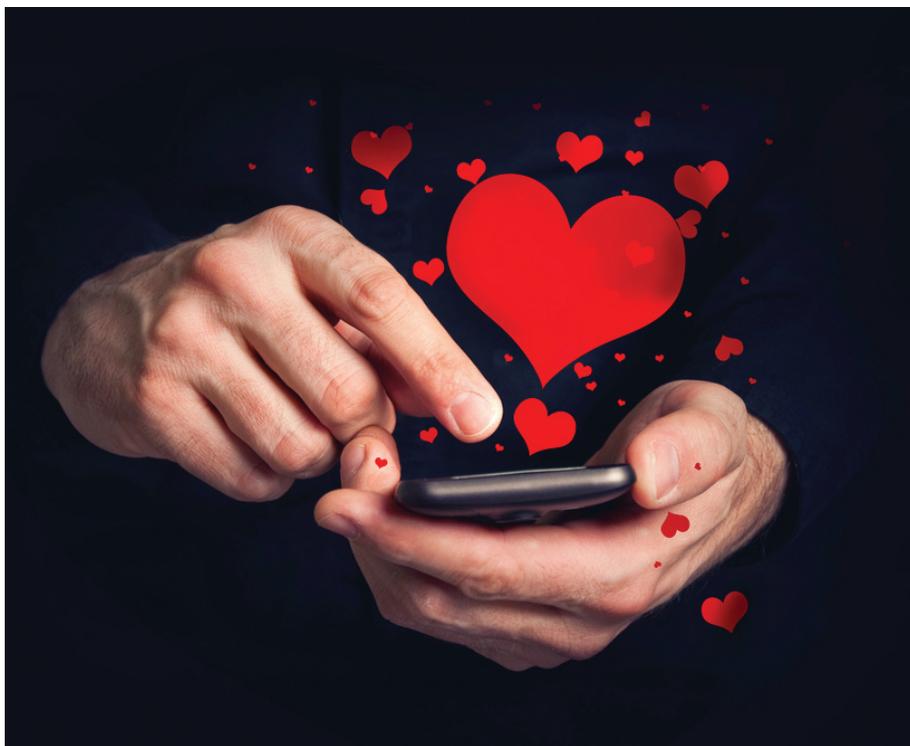
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What about those scientific algorithms that online dating sites such as Chemistry.com and eHarmony promise will connect you with your ideal partner? The *Psychological Science* study found that they don't really work either. They match people based on similar or complementary traits, neither of which were found to determine long-term relationship success.

Still, online dating services pull you in with the idea that they can hook you up with your soul mate (or at least a boyfriend or girlfriend). But maybe what it comes down to is that what makes you click with another person is ineffable, a mystery. And who says finding a soul mate is all

option. It's like, 'Eh, there's something better out there,' or 'I'm overloaded.'"

So having a lot of choices isn't very helpful. Neither are profiles, Finkel said, because often what we think we want, and what we end up being attracted to, can be very different.

Hirschman's experience, as both someone who has online dated and who works with clients who use online dating sites, reflects this. She says that meeting up with a person based on information in a profile doesn't have a lot to do with real chemistry. People end up going after what they "think they want with their heads rather than what they want with their hearts and bodies," she says. The result may be having a drink with someone who looks great on paper but in person doesn't do a thing for you.

Digital Dating Savvy for Single Parents

Online dating for the single parent is a little more complex than for the childless. There are many questions: Do you mention that you have kids in your profile? Do you talk about them on a first date? Will anybody even be interested in you? (Yes they will! More on that later.)

Most of the experts think you should mention that you have children ("You teach your kids not to lie, right?," they say), but mention them only briefly. Then use your profile to talk about yourself. Same goes for the date itself. Don't pull out the wallet of adorable baby photos just yet—give your full attention to the one-on-one connection with your date.

Of course, as a relationship progresses there will be issues to address. Your girlfriend or boyfriend may not agree with your parenting style, or may not get along with your co-parent or ex. She or he might not understand that the role of mom or dad is already taken. The list goes on.

Despite these kinds of complexities, the stats show that single parents are successful in the dating world. A recent Match.com study found that 67 percent of men and 59 percent of women would date a single parent. And more than half of single parents prefer dating other single parents. All in all, those are some pretty good odds.

Even better, think about this: A Kinsey Institute study found that single parents of kids under the age of five have just as much sex as singles without children.

So whether or not you see yourself as "dateable," the data say that you are.

it's cracked up to be anyway? It seems that it's better to think of your partner as a best friend than as a soul mate. Research shows that people who see their partners as someone they are destined to be with, as in soul mates, are more dissatisfied with their relationship during times of inevitable conflict than people who see their partners as someone with whom they

Think about what you want—and then be open to what pops up in your inbox.

are on a journey of growth and learning. It's the people who value the friendship aspect of their relationship who end up feeling in love and committed, and having great sex, in the long run.

So if you are single, and you do decide to try online dating, think about what you want—and then be open to what pops up in your inbox. Be aware that you won't always be relating to the nicest of people, so be sure your thick skin is firmly in place. When you meet someone you like, maybe give him or her a chance before flying off to the next opportunity. And if you find yourself still looking after way too long, ask yourself if your relationship ideal is getting in the way of you being with someone who can really be your friend, as well as your lover. If you are patient, discriminating, and willing to be pleasantly surprised you may just find somebody to love. ☺

Jane Barteau is the pseudonym of a Sonoma County freelance writer.

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Help! My Teenager Fell In Love Online

Family Life Talks to an Expert

Gone are the days of kids passing notes in class. Now teens send texts and e-mails across school corridors—and continents. Your child's first crush could be someone who lives in England, a person she or he has never met, except on Facebook or some other social media venue. Of course, it's important to talk to your child's friend or romantic interest, and his or her parents, to establish that these people actually exist and that they aren't predators. But after you've done this, then what? How can you

help your child navigate his or her online relationships? To find out, we asked psychologist Winifred Lloyds Lender, Ph.D., author of *A Practical Guide to Parenting in the Digital Age: How to Nurture Safe, Balanced, and Connected Children and Teens* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

FL: Some children can feel that they have actually fallen in love through texts, Skype calls, and other forms of digital interaction. How should a parent respond to this?

WLL: Parents should take online teen romances seriously. Teens can develop very strong feelings for those they have relationships with online. They can feel that online relationships are more meaningful to them than any face-to-face relationships. Part of this may be due to the fact that they feel less anxious or threatened, and more accepted, by virtual relationships. Parents should not assume these relationships are not real, and they can provide structure around them.

FL: To what extent should parents support online relationships? Allow phone and Skype calls? Buy tickets to see a friend or romantic interest?

WLL: Parents should strive to create balance for their teens. A balance of real and virtual relationships is important. Limits can be set around the amount of time, and time of day, virtual communication can occur and this can be contingent on maintaining face-to-face relationships and contacts with friends. Parents need to do their



due diligence around any planned visit of a virtual romantic partner and determine carefully what limits and structure they will set for such a visit. In addition, parents need to have information about the virtual friend and should consider learning more about the friend and contacting their parents.

FL: If a real-time visit happens between two teens who meet online, what kind of guidance can parents give their kids about how to approach it?

WLL: Parents need to know their teen and work with them to explore their teen's expectations or fantasies about meeting a virtual friend in real life. They should also talk to teens about the structure and limits of such an encounter and what supervision parents will provide. Role-playing an exit strategy—a way for a teen to remove him or herself from an uncomfortable meeting—is important.

FL: What kinds of expectations do you find teens have of their online interests?

WLL: Some teens believe that online interests will understand them better than their real friends as they can be more open with virtual friends without risking embarrassment they might feel with real world friends. Teens who are socially isolated might feel a quicker and more intense connection to a virtual friend.

FL: What kind of advice can you give to parents who are worried their kids will keep their online romances secret?

WLL: Open communication with teens is key. Parents need to cultivate their relationship with their teens and show interest in all parts of their lives in a supportive way that shows unconditional love. Parents should tell teens that they shouldn't be afraid to tell them anything and that they want to be helpful and supportive.

FL: Should you have a sex talk with a teen before they meet an online interest?

WLL: It is important that parents educate their teens about sex before any contact with potential romantic partners, real or virtual. Even though there has been no physical contact, virtual friends can quickly become romantic partners. Parents need to talk with their teens about this and ensure that they are knowledgeable and safe.

FL: What role does sexting play in teen dating?

WLL: Sexting—the sending of sexually provocative texts, photos, or videos—has become popular among teens and young adults. Recent studies report that 28–54 percent of teens engage in sexting. Drexel University found that 54 percent of teens reported sexting prior to age 18, with some starting as early as 13; and a study at Temple University reported that 25 percent of respondents sexted.

Most often sexting occurs within the context of a romantic relationship. Teens sext often due to peer pressure, and the desire to appear “mature” and to please their romantic partners. While only 8 percent of the respondents in the Drexel study reported experiencing negative consequences as a result of sexting, the consequences of sexting can be severe and life-long. Although sexts are typically meant for a romantic partner, they can be shared with others via forwarding the photo or message, or taking a screen shot of the image and then sending it to others. Twenty-six of the respondents in the Drexel study reported sharing with others sexts that they had received. Anecdotal reports of sexts being shared with an entire school or on social media abound and have led to suicide attempts. Most teens are not aware that sexting between minors is illegal as it can be considered the sending or receiving of child pornography. Educating teens about the illegality of sexting and consequences such as jail time and being registered as a sex offender have been shown to impact teens sexting behavior. 



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