

Log On for a Cyber Date!

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Whatever happened to REAL roses, romantic candlelight dinners, footsie under the table, and nose nuzzling? These days folks don't date, don't speak, and may not even see each other in person before deciding they are madly in love!

Welcome to the world of Internet matchmaking, online dating and cyber romance. Over the last decade, Internet-based dating has gained in popularity as a medium to meet romantic partners. What's behind the phenomenal growth of online love affairs?



Only Desperate People Do It!?

Who uses the Internet as a tool for matchmaking? People of all ages, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds, although the general belief is that people with their own computer and ready accessibility to the Web have higher-than-average income and education. Busy single professionals acknowledge having few opportunities to meet other available bachelors and bachelorettes outside the nightclub "meat market" environment and choose online dating as a viable alternative.

A reader asks: "What are your thoughts on meeting someone you've been chatting with online? I'm a mature, intelligent woman in my 30s who is single and looking for new ways to meet single men. There are some guys I KNOW I would never meet or give my phone number to, but what about the ones that seem like decent men?"

Just about everyone seems decent on the other side of a keyboard! I believe the Internet, if used effectively, can be a great tool for screening out the freaks, weirdoes, neurotics and game players, and screening in people that live in your general vicinity that you might never otherwise meet.

A believer in online love writes: "I found my soul mate online and am the happiest that I've ever been. I also have two friends that met online and they've found their true loves also. If you truly want joy and happiness, I suggest that from the beginning you be honest and open. That's how I started and now I know that if I had not been as honest with myself and him, we would not have each other." Honesty is certainly the best policy if a serious relationship is on your agenda, but one should never believe that everyone you "meet" online is being as honest as you are.

The Down Side of Internet Introductions

One of the chief concerns about the Internet and romance is its integral anonymity and impersonality. A woman in New York City placing an ad on an Internet personals site for singles in her area must be prepared to inundated with generic responses such as "Your ad is great and your picture is beautiful. I live in Montana and raise sheep. I am 36 years old, fit, single and very horny. I have been looking for a woman just like you. I'll love you right. How about meeting for a drink? I'll pay all expenses. Write back if interested."

In these instances, the parties have totally different goals for their ads. Some posters are more interested in quantity (how many ads they can respond to and how many men or women they can chat or talk to). They have little to no interest in formulating sincere, quality responses because they are not seeking a sincere, quality involvement.

It's important not to let your hunger to meet someone rush you into anything just because it looks good on screen.. In the example given above, I'd think Mr. Montana used a mass mailer, or at least a cut and paste text file stored on his computer; but there are many women that would naively believe this man is sincerely interested in only them. For no reason other than because he said so.

Let The Games Begin!

The door on Internet dating is wide open for deception and both physical and emotional distance. How easy it is to deceive someone about ourselves when we are safely tucked away hundreds or even thousands of miles away? It's a snap to hide our true selves behind the computer keyboard, as we project ourselves to be whatever others want us to be.

"I've been talking to this guy online for two months; we finally decided to meet. The weekend was beautiful. And now he says he wants to end what we have. I don't understand, he treated me like a queen! He always sent me poems, tapes of songs, and cards. And we did everything on my 3-day visit. Is he just another Internet Lover?"

See, there you are on the receiving end of the projection, infatuated or "in love" with someone that you've never seen, touched, kissed, argued with, and never heard say a word! You may believe you have a relationship when all you really have is a well-scripted seduction in HTML form.

You're Really a *WHAT?*

Another difficulty with the Internet is that people feel free to play with different personas. Perhaps the shy guy who rarely dates plays out his fantasies of being a debonair ladies' man; the timid woman who never uses profanity and rarely speaks up for herself becomes an aggressive smart-mouth online. A female may pretend to be a male, a 45 year old male may pretend to be 15, straights may pretend to be gay, and married people may pretend to be single.



"I originally met this guy online, but we've met two times for coffee. This relationship has never really gotten started because he's very mysterious. All I know is his first name, and his cell phone number. He refuses to tell me any more until I kiss him. As time goes by I find myself falling in love with him. He will tell me he is married, then when I get upset he laughs and says he was just kidding. My mind says to let him go, but my heart says no."

Others may not take their online flirtations offline, but that doesn't mean their online play has no effect on the lives of those around them, and may sometimes be detrimental to their partnership or marriage.

"My wife has spent at least an hour every evening yakking it up in chat rooms with a bunch of complete strangers. Lately she has been 'discussing issues' with one guy in particular. She accuses me of being unreasonably jealous and insecure; I think she doesn't need to be spending so much time 'discussing' with this guy!"

Taking This Online Thing Off-Line

Assuming that your online pal is truly single and not a lunatic, are there "Miss Manners" etiquette rules for taking a friendly online relationship off-line into the real world? Not that I know of, but let's cover a few final issues you can use as general guidelines.

If the curiosity is killing you and you just HAVE to meet your online pal in person, go on and suggest the two of you meet. But I suggest that you prepare yourself for possible rejection. Shy or heartbroken individuals may create Internet relationships because they aren't comfortable with face-to-face intimacy, and are on your dating site strictly for the entertainment value. Some actually PREFER the anonymity and fantasy of their computer-generated relationships to the real life responsibilities of dating, commitment and accountability.

Take the same safety precautions and use the same good common sense you would when meeting people off-line, exactly as you would in any other unfamiliar situation. Make arrangements to rendezvous briefly to check each other out face to face. Nothing beats looking someone in the eye as they speak. Talking on the phone is another hurdle which must be cleared. I'd say that if you've chatted online for a few weeks and feel comfortable with the honesty and level of knowledge you've gained about an individual, then broach the subject of meeting to your online pal and see what he or she says.

Are there murderous psychopaths roaming the Information Superhighway? I admit that there are some VERY strange people with computer access. We've all heard stories of murderous abductions, sex addicts, child molesters and

watched the pervs get caught on Dateline NBC! However, these behaviors are not exclusive to people on the Internet, so don't think you can avoid them all if you stay off line. There are kooks at the corner store, at your job, one floor down in your apartment building, at every nightclub and restaurant in the world! Anytime you meet someone new you must exercise caution, think, and do all you can to protect yourself from harm.

Logging Off

The Internet is a tool, but not a magic wand. Key to success in both online and off-line relationships is the courage to be yourself and the willingness for both parties to honestly communicate who and what they are. The high-speed communications of the 'Net provide the means for a relationship to go from first E-mail, mad love and heart-wrenching disappointment in a matter of weeks.

But hey, isn't it better to have logged on and lost, than never to have logged on at all?

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