



Dating for Online Beginners: Tips for Staying Safe

EXTENSION

October 2020

Kristopher M. Struckmeyer
Adult Development and Aging Specialist

Matt W. Brosi
Associate Professor, Marriage and Family Therapy

Long before smartphones, people found romantic partners in numerous ways. Whether being set up by friends, meeting in the produce aisle, going to social events, through personal ads posted in newspapers or even through videocassette dating services, the way we met people and started dating was very hands on and personal. Then, with wider spread use of the internet, online dating sites became popular. Now, as technology has improved, so have the ways to meet people for those dating for the first time or for those dating again. There really are apps for that.

Why Online Dating?

Dating is not easy. Finding someone to date, understanding changing social norms regarding who asks or who pays and expectations as to where the relationship could go are all very complicated. People are busier than ever and busy schedules can make it hard to go out to a single's event or a bar/club. It continues to be (somewhat) intimidating to walk up to someone and express an interest. Also, social distancing and mask protocols during a pandemic have altered the way individuals can interact in public. Whatever the reason, including physical distancing and masks during a pandemic, online dating offers users access to potential partners that they would otherwise be unlikely to meet. This is especially important for people who live in rural areas that do not offer many opportunities for people to meet. Many dating sites and apps have been created for people looking for partners that fit certain criteria, such as age, religious beliefs or sexual orientation. Online dating sites and apps allow you to screen individuals so you need only to contend with those who meet your preferred criteria.

Online dating saves the time of going out to meet people, while also providing you the privacy of viewing profiles. Profiles are short summaries of individuals on the apps that provide brief information about themselves (discussed below). While on a dating site or app, you are able to browse through profiles without having to talk with anyone at all. Other sites and apps let you try to match with people you are interested in – if you both say you are interested, the site or app lets you know. By doing this, the system provides a less threatening environment for initiating contact (you already know they are interested in you) or being rejected (if they change their mind, only you know).

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets
are also available on our website at:
extension.okstate.edu

How Do I Choose a Site or App?

So, you have decided to try online dating. How do you choose the right site or app for you? First and foremost, decide what you want in a partner. Are you wanting a casual relationship – someone to go to the movies with, grab coffee, etc., or are you wanting a long-term relationship?

If you are looking for a serious relationship, you may be better off using dating sites. For examples, you may try using Google to search for “dating sites.” Dating sites typically rely on you answering some questions to get a good idea of your personality, likes and dislikes. Once you have that completed, you are shown people who are similar. Some sites use mathematical algorithms to match people, while others use more advanced personality assessments. On the other hand, dating apps typically show you individuals who are near you, allowing you to choose those who may interest you, but with fewer screening guidelines. Some apps have you swipe left or right on profiles to indicate interest that is then immediately communicated to the other person. If you both indicated interest, the app lets you know. Other apps let you scroll through users to let you choose your own matches. These systems are less sophisticated and typically better for casual relationships – as it may be based on the user's profile (picture and basic information) and not personality similarity. That isn't to say one can't find a long-term relationship this way, but that typically isn't the target audience of the app. Try Google for examples of “dating apps.”

Do your research. Online sites and apps have different requirements. Some require payment to see who you match with, while others allow limited browsing. Be sure you know what is expected before you sign up!

Setting up Your Profile

One of the first things you will do on the dating site/app is set up your profile. You do not want to approach your profile with disinterest - this is your first impression to potential matches. Each site or app may ask different questions, but generally you will describe yourself (height, weight, hair color, etc.) and your interests (sports, reading, etc.). After that, you may be asked to write about yourself in order to showcase your personality. Here are some do's and don't's for creating a good profile:

- Do put some humor into your profile – this is a great way to showcase your personality and interests. Plus people love to laugh.
- Do fill out as much of your profile as you feel comfortable – people want to know who they are potentially meeting. Give enough information so they have an idea if you might be a good match.
- Do put in your profile what you are looking for – this helps people screen out those who are looking for something different.
- Don't put any identifying information in your profile – this includes your address, phone number, social security number, place of employment, etc. This is all information that should be kept private.

Now, let's talk about your profile picture. While you are more likely to get responses if you have a picture, this really comes down to how comfortable you are posting a picture. This is especially important if you are on an app and may not want some people to know. If you choose to post a picture here are some things to keep in mind:

- Be sure to mind the site/app's photo guidelines – do not post anything revealing.
- Post a photo with only you in it.
- Make sure the photo you post is accurate to how you currently look.

Talking to Matches

Now you have found someone that interests you, so reach out to them. Your first message does not need to be anything elaborate – but something along the lines of “Hello, how are you?” or “Hey, I saw your profile and it seems like we have common interests.” Once you have messaged them, then it's a matter of waiting for a response. The person may respond that they are not interested, may ignore your message or they may respond with interest. If the person is not interested, do not keep messaging them. Sometimes people just do not connect, so do not be upset if they are not interested. Focus on the person who is interested in you.

The amount of time between the first message and the first in-person date varies from person to person. It is good to take your time and really get to know someone before you ever meet in person.

Part of online dating is setting your boundaries – what kind of relationship you want, how much information you are willing to share and what kinds of messages you will tolerate. It is not uncommon for people on online dating sites and apps to receive explicit pictures. If this is something you are uncomfortable with, be sure to let your match know early. In the case that they do not respect your wishes, do not be afraid to block the user from seeing your profile or report them to the site.

Staying Safe

Online dating is a great tool for helping people connect. However, this can put people at risk for scammers or sexual offenders. While app-related assaults are rare, it is still important to protect yourself. Here are some tips for staying safe:

1. Do not plan a date with someone you do not know. Be sure you spend time getting to know them.

2. Talk to your date on the phone before you meet – this will help you make sure you are meeting who you think you are meeting.
3. When you plan a date, choose a neutral public setting and arrive separately. It is rare to encounter a dangerous person through the sites/apps, but you still don't want the person knowing where you live.
4. Let someone know the details of your date: who you are going out with, the time of the date, when you plan to return and where you are meeting.
5. Do not send money to a person you just met online.
6. Apps run off your location, so they can show you matches based on how close you are to each other. Do not share your location with anyone you do not trust and turn off the feature that shows your distance between people.
7. Meeting someone for the first time may not go as planned – they may be boring, annoying or just someone you are not attracted to. Plan short first dates so you are not stuck in an awkward situation.
8. Trust your gut. If you think something is wrong, then leave! Be sure to have an exit plan in place. Tell your date that you can do a quick date, but that you have an early morning or need to meet friends later. This allows you to have a reason to leave a bad date early.

Things to Keep in Mind

Before rushing out to set up your profile, there are a couple of things to keep in mind:

1. People 'misrepresent' themselves: We all want people to like us, so we may exaggerate here and there in our dating profiles. One study found women are more likely to lie about their looks, while men lie about having a better job than they do. These lies may not seem harmful, but they can give people the wrong impression, causing feelings of betrayal when you finally meet.
2. “You must be looking for sex:” Online dating apps were created to help people meet potential partners they might not otherwise have a chance to meet. Unfortunately, some members of these dating apps assume because you are on the app, you must be looking for sex. Be aware you may receive rude or disgusting messages, sexual requests or explicit photos. All of these apps provide the ability for you to block individual users from seeing your profile. So, if someone is being creepy, you can go into the app and block them from seeing your profile and messaging you. Do not get discouraged though. Not everyone on the website/app is creepy – there are genuine people looking to make a connection with someone. It just may take a little time to find them.
3. “There are more fish in the sea.” Apps show you all your potential matches much like a menu at a restaurant. It is much easier to send a meal back if we do not like it when we know there are other meals on the menu. This is the same with online dating. We can become more judgmental and pickier when we know if this date does not go well—we can just find another, more perfect date. We all have checklists when it comes to potential partners – they must be a certain height, funny, intelligent, have a great job and the list goes on. We scan profiles looking for these characteristics and immediately dismiss people who do not meet our requirements and think the next

profile may be “The One.” So how do we fix this? You do not need to lower your standards or go on a date with everyone who messages you, but keep an open mind. We think we know what we want, but may be surprised about who turns out to be “right” for us.

References

- Anderson, R. (2016, September). The ugly truth about online dating: Are we sacrificing love for convenience? *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-mating-game/201609/the-ugly-truth-about-online-dating>
- Anderson, M., Vogels, E. A., & Turner, E. (2020, February). The virtues and downsides of online dating. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/06/the-virtues-and-downsides-of-online-dating/>
- Finkel, E. J., Eastwick, P. W., Karney, B. R., Reis, H. T., & Sprecher, S. (2012). Online dating: A critical analysis from the perspective of psychological science. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 13, 3-66. doi:10.1177/1529100612436522
- Hazell, K. (2012, June). Online dating encourages ‘shopping mentality’, warn experts. *The Huffington Post UK*. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/02/06/online-dating-encourages-_n_1256750.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xiLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAACgm7PH2XzEsZ2fiUkv2cQiiwMAIxnjnJKLCUToyQIPiWgcAPMejJ9O1a9FfpoeQWI7HCqqXpKpMpUtn_ID2okUeG4avhVc8mlgJ59dVSgWUqOaqz-EsyCV6XxEKruDbPJv3WsD2ors1Dv28xXCJIAbunSX-AxquhBQGWPd21nfYD
- Grabianowski, E. (2005, February). How online dating works. *HowStuffWorks.com*. <https://people.howstuffworks.com/online-dating3.htm>
- Werber, C. (2017, March). Nobody knows how dangerous online dating really is – and dating sites won’t talk about it. *Quartz*. <https://qz.com/890320/nobody-know-how-dangerous-online-dating-really-is-and-dating-sites-wont-talk-about-it/>

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

WE ARE OKLAHOMA

The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
 - It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
 - Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
 - It provides practical, problem-oriented education
- for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
 - It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
 - More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
 - It dispenses no funds to the public.
 - It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
 - Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
 - The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
 - Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

Oklahoma State University, as an equal opportunity employer, complies with all applicable federal and state laws regarding non-discrimination and affirmative action. Oklahoma State University is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for all individuals and does not discriminate based on race, religion, age, sex, color, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability, or veteran status with regard to employment, educational programs and activities, and/or admissions. For more information, visit <https://eeo.okstate.edu>.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President for Agricultural Programs and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy. 10/2020 GH.