

# 8 things we've learnt from ONLINE DATING...

## 1 Challenge your choices

Most online dating sites ask for criteria for selecting which faces appear on our screens – including ethnicity, income, age range, body type and profession. Just filling out the form is an exercise in self-knowledge. You're up close with your assumptions, which is a powerful tool for change. Is it OK if your date left education before you did, or comes from another country? Why is it not OK?

Internet dating is a chance to shed bias, and also to play the field. Most online daters won't be emailing just one potential suitor. 'I discovered one man I'd been seeing was also chatting online to a woman who worked in my office,' says Jude, 37. 'At first I was outraged, but she didn't seem to mind at all. I've since realised that, unlike "real-world" dating, it's perfectly acceptable to see a few men at once online. In fact, one of my friends recently married her "back-up".'

## 2 Create your universe

Putting yourself online means you put yourself on the line. You're no longer waiting for a serendipitous encounter straight out of a romantic comedy. You write your ad, answer ads and choose who to approach, so you can no longer blame fate for mistakes or missed opportunities.

Don't abdicate responsibility by allowing your website to choose for you. 'Some sites select matches for you through pseudo-scientific tests and algorithms,' says psychologist Robert Epstein. 'But these could actually be leading you away from your dream mate.'

Sitting back and waiting to be approached is equally counter-productive. 'I began by only dating the men who approached me,' says Sharon, 34, 'but most of them turned out to be self-obsessed or arrogant. Then I started browsing, and sent out dozens of emails. I saw them as messages sent out to the universe, and approached so many men that I didn't feel rejection if some of them didn't reply. But several nice men did, and I'm now in a relationship with a shy man who admits he'd have never approached me.' The spiritual maxim that you create your own universe has never been truer.

Internet dating is fast losing its social stigma, but click on to a dating site and you're lost in a world of oddly impersonal intimacy. The digital dating scene can offer us vivid lessons in relationship psychology, says Temma Ehrenfelt



## 3 Embrace randomness

'When I first started, I would spend whole hours analysing the significance of tiny phrases in emails,' says Hannah, 36, an experienced Internet dater. 'I realise now that I stopped quite a few promising relationships in their tracks – I was determined to reject people before they had the chance to reject me.'

Our modern yen to see significance in details such as a username or email sign-off generates needless anxiety. Randomness can be hard to accept – we want to make the data tidy and significant – but in the online arena, where random data is often all you have to go on, you have to learn to go with the flow.

## 4 Don't expect closure

The Internet is a good forum in which to practice Zen-like detachment. Men come. And go. Without reason or warning. No one likes rejection – but don't keep emailing him, obsessing or tracking him online if he doesn't answer. Of course, restraint is harder than you might think. Why? Because he doesn't answer. When you've had a flurry of emails from someone and then it finishes abruptly, you languish in an uncomfortable digital limbo. But sending off angry emails demanding explanations is simply a way of asserting control you don't have, and seeking an impossible resolution. 'Don't learn bad habits,' urges psychotherapist Mitchell Robin. 'The happy relationship you want will be based on trust, so it's a mistake to practise suspicious or demanding behaviour. Practise acceptance instead.'

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### 5 Stay centred

Internet dating can breed paranoia. You're outside your social comfort zone, and people aren't as polite when they can't see your reaction. If you feel ugly after each lacklustre date or email rejection, yet gorgeous after a flattering dinner, you're suffering what psychologists call 'contingent self-esteem'. 'Many people are fair-weather friends to themselves,' observes Mitchell Robin. 'The challenge is to like yourself when things go poorly.' My warm, self-assured friend Jill is nearly six feet tall and was overweight when she hit Yahoo personals. She filled out her personal details with honesty and humour, and had more dates than she could handle. In the end, confidence may be the most powerful aphrodisiac.

### 6 Don't procrastinate

Cyber procrastinators can email for weeks before meeting. 'The hope is you'll have a better idea about a person because you can ask questions and Google them,' says Robin. But there is a danger of falling for the idealised image in your head. For some, such as Lucy, 33, the thrill of a passionate correspondence with a man was enough. 'I fell in love with his poetic emails, but when we met there was absolutely no chemistry between us,' she says. 'It's as if I knew that when we met it would all be over – which is why I kept putting it off. In the meantime I was missing out on dates with more compatible people.' You're not looking for a pen pal. No matter how warm or intelligent his online persona seems, only an in-person meeting can allow you to assess chemistry, says Epstein. Stay focused, and initiate a meeting.

### 7 Be ethical

Advertising yourself online sometimes exposes facts we'd rather hide. 'Studies show young women shave off 5lb or so, and up to 20lb when they're in their forties. Men tend to add an inch to their height and thousands to their income,' says Robert Epstein. But lies, even little ones, blur your mirror, chip away at your self-respect and stop you staying centred. If he wants a family, is it acceptable to let him think you're 38, when you're actually 43? Meanwhile posting a photo of you three years ago will only create disappointment. 'I've been on four-day juice fasts before dates in the past, to try to get back to my "profile weight",' admits Jenny, 33. 'I found I was creating my ideal self – who's more successful and taller and slimmer than I am. Now I'm upfront from the beginning, it's much less stressful.'

### 8 Practise 'good hope'

Internet dating is a means to an end, but it's also a learning process and, viewed in the right way, can be a highly rewarding experience in itself. Try not to see each date in terms of success or failure – instead open yourself up to meeting new people and having interesting encounters. I met Wayne Ayers, clinical psychologist and Buddhist on an Internet date. He wanted to be friends, I wanted more. I could have chalked it up as a lesson in rejection; instead we became friends, and he's now an important person in my life. As Wayne taught me: "Bad hope" is when I am hoping I can make the situation better. "Good hope" is when I believe whatever situation I encounter is one that can teach me.' For me, that sentiment remains the best motto there is for navigating the world of online romance.