

Downturn dating: Hearts flutter as markets stutter

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Matt Bergstrom, left, and Emily Hilleren, center, play board games at the Holiday Club during a singles event, Nerds at Heart, in Chicago, Thursday, July 2, 2009. Attendance at the monthly gatherings, where mostly young professionals pay \$25 for a drink and a chance to spend the evening clustered around trivia and board games was more than double expectations in April and has stayed high since. (AP Photo/Stacie Freudenberg)

(AP) -- Credit the recession for "staycations" and bringing us more game-night parties at home. But also give it a shout for spurring more first dates.

Economic woes, it seems, unleash something practically primal in many of us who find ourselves without a partner: a hard-wired desire for companionship.

Some singles are now hunting for dates with the same fervor others are showing hunting for jobs. On matchmaking Web site eHarmony.com, membership is up 20 percent despite monthly fees of up to \$60, and activity has soared 50 percent since September at OkCupid.com.

It's not just the frequency of our dates that's changing - it's also the people we're choosing to spend time with.

"They're looking for something that's genuine in a world that isn't very secure," said Bathsheba Birman, co-founder of the Chicago dating event Nerds at Heart. "With headlines full of why you can't trust established institutions that you thought you could ... people are re-examining their own values."

Attendance at the monthly gatherings, where mostly young professionals pay \$25 for a drink and a chance to spend the evening clustered around trivia and board games - was more than double expectations in April and has stayed high since.

"Misery loves company, especially if the prospect of romance and or sex looms large," said Craig Kinsley, a neurologist at the University of Richmond. "Really, dating, rather than being considered as expensive, can be a thrilling and inexpensive distraction. Like getting drunk without the wallet-hit or hangover."

Kinsley said stomach-fluttering first dates also release [brain chemicals](#) that can temporarily erase worries, even about 401(k)s and layoffs and falling portfolios and upside-down mortgages.

Still, Sam Yagan, the founder and CEO at OkCupid.com, sees the changing dating climate as a matter of dollars and cents.

The way he figures it, a man can spend \$100 buying drinks at a bar

trying to pick up a stranger and leave with little more than a cold shoulder. But, when he's in a relationship, a Saturday evening can be as simple as Thai noodle takeout, Netflix and some fun under the covers. All in all, Yagan said, that's "more bang for your buck."

It's more than just the recession. Experts say changes in behavior can relate to other world events - with upticks when news is bad.

Last fall, comparing periods when the stock market fell more than 100 points and when it rose by the same amount, eHarmony found more members searched for matches when the financial news was grim. Activity also grew in the days after a tragedy like the Virginia Tech shooting, while it stayed the same during "good" global events, like the Olympics.

Unlike those one-day or weeklong events, the recession already has spanned more than 18 months, and its effects are expected to last just as long - and that likely will mean more discernible changes in human behavior.

"It ends up being a reminder that you need to look for the important things in life," said Gian Gonzaga, eHarmony's senior research scientist. "It isn't that surprising when you see people gravitating toward the most fundamental human relations."

But the trend isn't uniform.

Recessions can make some romances more challenging, experts say, especially for those who've already said "I do." The stress that comes with fear, financial problems and economic uncertainty can drive a wedge between partners.

And the most committed bachelors aren't developing a sudden hankering

to buy princess-cut engagement rings.

Instead, the shifts are subtle: a devoted singleton going on more first dates; casual daters seeking long-term relationships; partners who might not have been attractive a while back - someone younger or older, someone who lives in a "geographically undesirable" area - looking much better.

At the Chicago wine bar In Fine Spirits, the changing dating culture has lead to a roughly 30 percent increase in the number of parties of two, said general manager Brandon Wise.

"With such a tenuous climate right now, I think people are looking for stability in their partner," he said. "I think it's less haphazard dating and more pointed [dating](#)."

A gentler tone is taking over, daters and observers say, with substance gaining over style.

For Mili Thomas, a 28-year-old graduate student in New York, that means she now spends time with men who didn't show up on her radar screen before the recession. Among them: a Ph.D. who would have been nixed because he lives in New Jersey and an employee at a marketing firm who wouldn't have made the grade because he is two years her junior.

"I figured this was the best possible time to explore other options since people's lives have been turned topsy turvy," she said. "I think everyone is more open to bucking convention given that 'the usual' has gone out the window."

On the Net:

<http://www.eharmony.com>

<http://www.okcupid.com>

<http://www.nerdsatheart.com>

<http://www.infinespirits.com>

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