

Online dating: New technology transforms age-old, sometimes frustrating search for dates or mates

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After breaking up with her boyfriend of seven years, Ashley Giles of Fargo, N.D., was not anxious to start dating again. Her best friend urged her to "get back out there, stop moping around," and filled out an online dating site profile for her.

"I was really leery about it at first," Giles said.

The profile drew 100 responses within a day or two, she said. "It was overwhelming."

She deleted all, without reading them. But the idea of seeking out someone special online stuck, and later she checked out PlentyofFish.com.

The profile of Lucas Snyder, also of Fargo, caught her eye, she said. She sent him a message, which led to more messages and eventually a dinner date.

"We hit it off, there were no awkward silences," she said. "Our first date lasted five hours."

The couple has been dating for 10 months. Each has two children, ranging in age from 3 to 6.

"Online dating was pretty easy for me," Giles said. "I've found the right person. It only took one try."

Giles, 24, attributes her relationship success to having a clear picture of the type of guy she was looking for.

"I knew what I wanted. I had very specific qualities that I wanted," she said, "someone with a good job and goals."

He had to be older than she, "but not too old."

As the mother of two smaller children, she wanted someone "who had kids or wanted kids," she said. "That was a big one. Another single parent knows exactly what I'm going through."

She didn't want to waste time and effort on someone who is unlikely to understand her priorities, she said.

"With kids, I can't go out all the time; it's sometimes hard to find a babysitter. I may have to say, 'I can't meet you, my child is sick.'"

Knowing yourself and being honest in online communication are important aspects of connecting with potential dates, said Dr. Sarah Edwards, assistant professor of counseling psychology at the University of North Dakota.

"People should think through how they are going to present themselves online," she said. "What do you want from this?"

When preparing a profile, "all of us want to look good," but people should realize their "little white lies" will probably surface later.

It isn't surprising that online dating has caught on, especially among

young people who have finished their schooling, Edwards said.

"It makes sense to me that we would go to online dating. The Internet is a good part of our life," she said.

After college, online dating fills a need as "a place to meet like-minded people." Online dating sites offer a certain anonymity, Edwards said, which may cause people to feel emotionally safer.

"You're not going to a bar; you're not asking someone for a phone number."

Some dating sites allow you to reveal your answers to specific questions step by step to another person, she said. "People perceive this approach as less risky, emotionally."

Research shows that people aged 26 to 40 use online dating sites the most, she said. Young adults are trying to launch or build their careers and may feel less comfortable hanging out in bars.

For those who are new to an area and haven't yet established social circles, online dating "has been great." It's "a very useful tool to break outside of your social bubble," said Dan Dewald, 29, of Fargo. It's "a good medium to meet people I otherwise would not meet."

Dewald is heavily involved in his job, he said. Most of his friends are married, divorced or single parents, "so I see less people - or different people - who are looking for partners."

He is not allowed to date someone at his workplace, he said. "Nor would I want to."

North Dakota has fewer places to meet new people, he said. "I'm not a

bar fly."

Since last summer, Dewald has had several dates with women he met through online dating sites, he said. Not all have turned out as he hoped.

On Valentine's Day, he agreed to meet a woman at the Minneapolis airport with whom he shared a passion for world travel. He said he spent the better part of eight hours trying to arrange to fly standby and eventually gave up and drove.

"Twenty-five minutes before we were to meet, I got a text from her saying she had a friend in town and didn't want to meet," he said. "I was right outside Minneapolis."

But the experience didn't sour him on online dating, he said.

"That was one event that didn't work out, but with others, potentially, it will."

Online dating is good for one's confidence, he said, and has reduced his fear of rejection.

"You're meeting new people; it's taking you out of your comfort zone," he said. "You're learning about yourself when you talk to a stranger."

Meeting online changes how people communicate initially and diminishes the awkwardness people may feel when they meet in person, Giles said.

"With traditional dating, it's harder to start a conversation with someone," she said. "Online, you can think about what you want to say. You don't have to respond right away."

Online dating sites that ask participants to answer hundreds of questions on a survey elevate people's hopes, Edwards said. "It's almost like 'mail-ordering.' People feel, 'This is going to be a great relationship because we match on all these questions.'"

But people may interpret questions differently, she said. "For example, my definition of 'honesty' may be different from another person's. I may think it's OK to tell a white lie; another may not."

Although you may be considered compatible with someone, "there may still be things that bug you or annoy you about the person, and that you only learn through more contact," she said.

Dewald maintains that sites that promise you'll meet the love of your life are setting people up for disappointment.

"I don't think that match percentage thing makes it work," he said. "I don't want to find someone with mirror interests, but rather, do our personalities mesh in a way that leads to a relationship that works?"

Because there's no long-term data related to online dating, it's too early to know whether such promises are valid, Edwards said. But research has shown that "people who share core values do enjoy more satisfying and lasting marriages."

The stigma that once shrouded online dating seems to have disappeared, Edwards said.

"It used to be (thought) that only people who are desperate or can't find (a partner) through another means used such sites.

"In the last seven to 10 years, online dating has become socially acceptable; many people do it. It's much more commonplace."

She recommends that people "treat it as a fun thing. It may help you find a partner for life, or it might not."

Those who use Internet [dating sites](#) should take steps to safeguard their interactions, just like they would with any other online activity, said Dr. Sarah Edwards, assistant professor of counseling psychology at the University of North Dakota.

Although hesitant to recommend a criminal background check, Edwards did advise checking on Facebook and doing a Google search for information on someone whom they're considering dating "to make sure they are who they say they are," she said.

Kristi Ventzke, a licensed marriage and family therapist with The Village Family Service Center in Grand Forks, said, "When you do go on to that face-to-face meeting, tell others where you are going" and who you're meeting.

Edwards recommends that people meet each other in a public place, like a restaurant, she said.

"Don't go home with that person on the first date."

It is best not to bring the person back to your place on the first date, according to Match.com. If your date pressures you, end the date and leave at once.

OTHER SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

From Match.com:

Drive yourself to and from the first meeting. Just in case things don't work out, you need to be in control of your own ride - even if you take a

taxi.

Stay sober and keep a clear mind. Avoid doing anything that would impair your judgment and cause you to make a decision you could regret.

Keep your drink with you at all times, so it can't be tampered with.

Keep personal items with you at all times to avoid the risk of having it stolen.

Other warnings from the Better Business Bureaus of Minnesota and North Dakota:

Protect your finances. Ignore any request to send money, especially overseas or by wire transfer, even if the person claims to be in an emergency. Wiring money is like sending cash: The sender has no protections against loss and it's nearly impossible to reverse the transaction or trace the money.

Never give financial information (such as your Social Security number, [credit card number](#) or bank information) to people you don't know or haven't met in person.

Guard your personal and online access information. Be careful about sharing other personal information, such as your full name, [phone number](#), email and address. Remain anonymous until you feel ready. Leave any personal contact information out of your profile or username.

Use extra caution when accessing your account from a public or shared computer so that others are not able to view or record your password or other personal information. If you share your computer with others, disable the auto sign-in feature to your account and clear all saved

passwords.

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