

Online dating probably will get a boost from pandemic, sociologist says

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Online dating's popularity probably will get a boost from the coronavirus pandemic, says an assistant professor of sociology at The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH).

"Given the necessity for social distancing created by the coronavirus, it is likely that going forward this method of meeting and getting to know someone will increase even more," says Dr. Jennifer Sims, who examines dating as a [social activity](#) in a section of her Sociology of Sexuality classes.

"The percentage of people who date someone they meet through traditional avenues like friends or church was already decreasing before the [pandemic](#)," she says. "Over the last few decades, meeting online has steadily increased. Given the necessity for social distancing created by the coronavirus, it is likely that going forward this method of meeting and getting to know someone will increase even more."

A post-pandemic shift to increased [online dating](#) likely will be disproportionately driven by people who previously met others in a traditional setting like church, or in contemporary in-person contexts like the college hook-up scene, Dr. Sims says. But for many, online dating is already preferred.

"When we think of the likely future changes to dating trends—more meeting online versus in person, more home or virtual dates versus going out, being very aware of one's surroundings when one does go out—all of that is life as usual for many people in marginalized groups such as LGBTQ Americans, racial minorities and people with disabilities," Dr. Sims says.

"As the pandemic is revealing about many other aspects of social life, the previous style of dating that appears to have been lost or that seems like it will be changed by coronavirus was never enjoyed by all."

What it means to go out on a date might also shift as society responds to COVID-19.

"As stay home orders are lifted, those who can afford it may cautiously venture out to the newly reopened venues," says Dr. Sims. "But with so many Americans currently unemployed and so many still anxious about coronavirus, it is more likely that couples and singles will opt for at home or virtual date nights for a while."

Overall, the only type of dating that has been curtailed by the pandemic is the college hook-up scene, she says.

"With dorms closed and frat parties canceled, this form of dating has in fact shut down," Dr. Sims says. "Sociological research on primarily white institutions of higher education has found that short-term sexual liaisons with friends or acquaintances has become the defining feature of heterosexual relationships on these college campuses."

Other types of dating, though, have likely continued and the changes in dating trends that were already occurring before the pandemic probably is still evolving.

"Regarding couples for example, here in Alabama, Gov. Ivey's Safer at Home order allowed people to visit 'relatives,'" Dr. Sims says.

"So, for couples who live near enough to each other, entertainment and other public venues being closed means that dating during the coronavirus pandemic may look like ordering take out and watching Netflix at home versus going out on the iconic dinner and a movie at the theatre date."

ut not everyone can afford—or wants—to go out, so dating conventions like "Netflix and Chill" were already gaining popularity, Dr. Sims says.

"The pandemic has likely simply increased the prevalence of trends that were already occurring."

Couples who live far apart were already making use of video platforms like FaceTime and Zoom to stay connected.

"The trend of virtual dates using this technology, like the trend of teleconferences and online classes, will likely continue and increase," she says.

Dr. Louise O'Keefe, Ph.D., director of the UAH Faculty and Staff Clinic, offers these public health recommendations for daters:

- COVID status should definitely be disclosed. Precautions should be taken such as social distancing, good handwashing (wash for at least 20 seconds) and protective clothing such as gloves and masks at least until one gets to know the other person better.
- Trust is important in any relationship. Explain why it is important to you to comply with safety measures that are being recommended. If the other person's attitude or philosophy is not something you agree with and you feel hesitancy to comply with what you know is safe you might want to re-think the relationship.
- If you met online, consider waiting 15 days before meeting in person. When you do meet, still consider safety measures such as masks and gloves. Either of you could be asymptomatic yet contagious and not know it. Either of you could have gotten tested yesterday and be positive today and not be aware of it.

Provided by University of Alabama in Huntsville

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