

Dating as pandemic restrictions ease



By Marisa Markowitz, LMSW, CASAC-T and Daniel Pollack, MSW, Esq.

During the pandemic, live dating was a chore. Safety restrictions created an undesirable situation where online dating was the only way to meet people.

And yet, there was a silver lining: the opportunity for some to understand a potential partner in more uncensored and authentic ways.

Online dating became the bookshelf in the background that showed a variety of detective novels and the keyboard in the corner, waiting to be played. There was something special about seeing someone's inner world, up close and personal. The screen became the window to the soul.

There are data points showing advantages to online dating, broadly speaking. Studies show that virtual dating allows for more quality time, providing less distractions, and of course, being conveniently cheaper than going out.

Research also indicates that getting to know a person on a more emotional level, without the possibility of physical presence, leads to happier, more fulfilling

relationships. The pandemic might have provided a unique opportunity to cultivate these richer connections.

And online dating led to countless other unique activities. Instead of going to a club, why not play instruments from home and make a song together? Rather than eating out, how about finding a recipe and cooking a meal? Or simply hosting a happy hour from home?

The bottom line: dating could be remade into something unique and fun. Zoom, FaceTime, and other virtual platforms allowed for these types of interactions. It allowed youth to make the most out of an unpleasant present.

Fast forward to 2021, where “dating” looks like it always has: drinks and dinner. Is it conceivable to truly know a person with all their quirks, idiosyncrasies, and intentions right away on a first date? Absolutely not.

And dating this year will look quite different. Given the turbulence of this past year, questions about political leanings, the importance of getting vaccinated, and quarantine habits are bound to come up. In fact, there might be a whole list of screening questions that will auto-populate when sizing up a potential mate.

After all, 2020 was unlike any other. Studies indicate that young adults experienced significant mental health issues during the pandemic. To constantly have to be vigilant about sheltering in place, maintaining six feet distance, and sanitizing hands is to be robbed of the joys of a care-free life.

It might feel better, or safer, to go back to something more comfortable, like grabbing a drink. This leisurely activity might be a welcome change from talking about the past.

For those who want to return to dating or just feel like mingling, here are some helpful tips:

- Create a moral inventory of the type of person you want to meet. If being vaccinated is a priority, keep it in mind. Consider all the characteristics that are

important to you. If you see warning signs, run! There will always be other, more like-minded people.

- If you use a dating app, and there's an option to write down "vaccinated," choose to do so. According to the CDC, those who are fully vaccinated can be indoors without wearing masks. And it would be great to see the person behind the mask!
- Communicate openly about feelings. In fact, being vulnerable is a strong predictor for establishing deeper connections. Youth who want to develop relationships would be better off being open and honest with each other. This applies to post-pandemic feelings.
- Respect each other's opinions. 2020 was hard, and there were so many mixed emotions. If a potential mate says something alarming, don't take it personally. It merely provides insight into that person's value system of experience.
- Pick up on body language. Fifty-six percent of all communication is through body language. So, just like all dating, try to understand what the person is saying without actually saying it.
- As always, try to get to know the person beforehand. Have a video chat to provide context for how the person will potentially behave during the date. This does not mean going back to virtual dating. Rather, it means using some of the tools from the previous year ("Is this person engaging? "Is this person willing to get creative and be goofy with me if that's what I'm looking for?") It's taking some of the tricks from last year and testing them out before meeting a person for the first time.

Of course, these ideas may seem intuitive and obvious. Nonetheless, it's important to remember that last year's dating was non-existent to some, and for others non-traditional.

There were different ways to set up lighthouses as a beacon of hope during that year. Being adrift for so long was frustrating. Taking those online interactions into real life will ensure that these unique lessons will not be cast aside as a once in a

lifetime coping mechanism. To the contrary, these creative measures will enhance dating for the long run.

What's the message here? Never forget the ability to cultivate quality relationships through unorthodox means. Only time will tell if those relationships will survive, but it was worse putting in the effort.

Alexander Graham Bell said, "When one door closes, another door opens." Now that the pandemic is receding into the background, its physical and metaphorical doors are closing.

Opening a new door to a brighter chapter can feel intimidating. Maybe a fashion show won't be in the cards for a first date. And that's okay. Perhaps youth can keep both doors slightly ajar so that they can navigate their way back into love.



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