

Dating services: love at first email or treacherous trend?

The highs and lows of real-life dating are worth it in the end



NINA
VARSAVA

point

What's love worth to you? I like to think that it's unquantifiable, and am inclined instead to answer in romantic terms: love is priceless. But if love is invaluable, then why are so many people too busy or shy—or lazy—to find it? Many people claim that they suffer loveless lives because their other obligations get in the way. But if love is priceless, then you'd think it would be a priority.

Thanks to the modern dating industry, people have the luxury of going about their own busy lives without the added stress of finding love for themselves. More and more people, for example, are signing up with services like LifeMates, which, according to its website, is "the largest and leading relationship company in Canada."

In a *National Post* article entitled "Open the wallet to open the heart," an unidentified Calgary man explains that he signed on with LifeMates because he's "socially handicapped by [his] work schedule." The 46-year-old paid \$2000 for six different dates, and can rest assured that the women he'll be dating will have done the same. As he puts it, "If someone is investing that kind of money, it shows they're stable and committed to finding someone."

Perhaps people like Calgary Man are stable in the sense that they have disposable income, and they are committed—monetarily—to finding someone. But given his handicapping work schedule, even if he finds a potential match, it's unlikely that he's really going to have the time and energy to establish and maintain a relationship. After all, LifeMates only organizes the first date.

The people who use dating services seem to

think that unsuccessful dates and relationships of their own devising are a waste of time, but I for one think that bad romantic experiences make the good ones that much better, as unsuccessful dates and disastrous relationships are indispensable learning opportunities. The same goes for asking someone out: it can be terrifying, and rejection sucks. But if you're clever and creative, then with practice you can conjure up all kinds of subtle and low-risk ways to score a date.

Dating services may appeal to the shy and insecure, since they provide relatively minimal risk. For example, speed-dating services such as Edmonton Date Night, where direct rejection is almost unheard of, are probably the least risky of all. According to EDN's website, you arrive at a venue and receive a package with "a datecard, [a] note sheet, rules, and an 'icebreaker' set of questions." You then have six minutes to spend with each person of the opposite sex (though different categories exist for age and sex, it seems that homosexuals aren't included). Finally, you write down on your card who you'd like to see again, hand it in at the front desk, and get paired up accordingly. This way, your picks will never even know you chose them—unless, of course, they chose you too.

This junior high lunch-hour approach is inherently flawed. For one thing, first impressions can be terribly misleading, and you can hardly judge someone in six minutes—not beyond appearances, anyway. Also, with speed-dating, you're in a contrived, artificial situation; it's much easier to realistically assess a potential partner in a real-life scenario, like in a classroom or at work.

For people that have been around the dating block a few times and think they have a fairly good idea of the kind of person they're looking for, maybe some dating service is the way to go. But for young, relatively inexperienced singles, the all-inclusive real world is the ultimate dating playground.



TIM
PEPPIN

counterpoint

Ah, Nina, you contradictory little ragamuffin: dating services aren't a substitute for real-life encounters or real love: they're a supplement.

Several factors have combined to make finding love very difficult these days, such as an exceptionally long work-week that frequently spills over into personal time or jobs that are so specialized that much of a person's life has to be devoted to its pursuit in order to achieve the breadth of knowledge, respect and self-satisfaction they desire.

Finding love does take time, Nina, but you just pulled a fast one on your readers. To make your point you used the examples of Calgary Man—who is self-professedly so busy that a "night on the town" more likely involves jerking off out a downtown hotel's open window than fine dining and sultry encounters—and people who use speed-dating services. These are people who, from what I've seen, are usually either older (ie experienced), like Calgary Man (ie have little time) or are horribly maladjusted (and have huge forearms). These are not typical university students. So while I agree that a little bit of time, risk and rejection are important in everyone's development, I don't think it follows to condemn dating services.

But let's sashay back a step or two and see what harm could come from a university student actually using a dating service—a student whom, for the sake of argument, we'll call "Nina." Now, young, lusting Nina is a touch shy, but she wants to meet boys nevertheless. She's had some bad encounters in the past: there was that handsome

devil in high school who, when she asked him to the prom, told her she smelled like turnip, an event which rather diminished her self esteem; there was the trusted, long-time boyfriend who cheated on her most weekends; and there was that delightfully eccentric boy who, though a marvellous dresser and possessed of impeccable literary and artistic tastes, thought that the names of their future children made for good conversation on their second date.

So Nina turns to LifeMates. She's not averse to meeting people in the normal way, but she figures why not broaden the search and screen the possibilities at the same time? What's more, she can peruse the goods from the comfort of her own room. She knows a few things that she's not looking for (and never will be): somebody who's needy, arrogant or unintelligent. Given the number of people using dating services, she's likely to find somebody who seems to meet these selection criteria. The important thing to remember, though, is that once she's found one, she still has to go on a date.

The purpose of dating services isn't to circumvent the normal process of dating, flirting or finding someone you love, it's just to stack the odds in your favour. Dating services are a far cry from arranged marriages. You still have to meet in the real world, and people—even people who seem remarkably similar—are weird enough that lots of things can still go wrong. There will be bad dates, there will be disastrous relationships and there will be rejection, but—and this is what makes the services worthwhile—the odds of having these negative experiences occur will be lower.

So, all you younguns out there, take risks; ask each other out; date the "wrong" people—just don't restrict yourself to the ones you happen to physically bump into. Figure out what you need from a partner, but don't be too specific. After all, if you reject someone who walks funny, tells bad stories and often smells vaguely of Kibble, you might miss a chance to fall in love.

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