

digital love

Looking for true love, or at least someone cute to watch Netflix with? There's no better place to find that person than on the Web. Here are some tips to help you online-date like a champ

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IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT, and you're home alone *again*. Meanwhile, one of your best friends just announced that she's hooking up with a foxy dude she met on the Internet. Oof. Most of us can understand the urge to have a little human companionship, or at least something warm in bed next to us that doesn't have four paws and a tail. So if you're sick of the bar scene and haven't had any luck meeting somebody special in your Boozy Bingo group, maybe it's time to bite the bullet and look for love online. But if that concept gives you agita, fear not: I've tried online dating myself. A lot. I'm also a real doctor and a relationship expert (who goes by the name Dr. Love). With all the knowledge I've acquired, I'm going to give you tips on creating—or boosting—your profile and finally finding love on the World Wide Interwebs.

I work long hours and live in the country, which is literally a no-man's-land for a single lady. So after lots of nail biting, I decided to look for love online. What I learned is that the process isn't as simple as just creating a profile. At first, I was anxious, because I imagined the dating pool being infested with sharks: frauds who pretended to be taller, cooler, and better endowed than they really were; serial daters; or marrieds hunting for a piece on the side. But at the same time, I had to face it—there are tons of pros to online dating. The pool of applicants is greater than just your friends and colleagues (whom you've probably already picked over), and rejection from afar is easier to tolerate than getting negged in person. Plus, developing emotional chemistry before meeting up can eliminate instant dismissal based on looks, which often happens when you're

cruising face-to-face at a bar. And of course, it's convenient, allowing you to sit in the comfort of your living room and schmooze with potential suitors, without having to suit up. Clearly, the odds were ever in my favor.

Since I'm the kind of person who never does anything halfway, I jumped in with both feet and joined every dating site I could find. But you might want to be a bit more selective. In order to choose the right site, think about how you'd choose a gyno: word of mouth. Ask a close friend who's already Internet-dated about the site she used—it's likely that what worked for her will work for you. It's also best to choose a site that aligns with what you're about, and there are tons of options to choose from. If you want to cast the widest possible net, check out the biggies, like Match.com or OkCupid.com. Apps like Tinder and



Swoon let only people you've already "liked" contact you, which adds an extra layer of privacy. If you want to be more targeted in your searches, you're in luck—there are niche sites that focus on nearly every group and interest under the sun, whether you're Jewish, into farmers, or you want to meet a fellow geek. If you're really skittish, choose a site like True.com, which does background checks to verify the details in members' profiles.

Once you've picked your site, it's time to create your profile. Many people squirm at the prospect of writing about themselves, so to make things easier, imagine you're writing a journal entry or chatting with a close friend. If you've got writer's block, scope out

example, saying, "Ever since my dog died, I've spent my Sundays volunteering at an animal shelter" will reveal a lot about your lifestyle and the kind of person you want to find. Also, keep in mind that you're trying to spark someone's emotions and make him or her identify with you: pepper your profile with jokes and silly personal tidbits, like your love of awkward infomercials. If your profile makes somebody laugh, you'll be "tagged" in his/her mind.

It goes without saying that your profile should be free of spelling errors and grammar insanity. (Ask an eagle-eyed friend to look it over for mistakes.) A messy profile may send a bad message about your intelligence,

which could rule out some smarty-pants partners. Also, choose your username wisely; a name like "MetalheadLizLemon" will reflect your personality and distinguish you from the pack. And consider what you're looking for—the screen name

"wetnwild" is likely to attract lots of booty calls, but fewer people whom you'd want to bring home to Mom. Use the same eagle eye when checking potential partners' names: it wasn't all that surprising when I discovered that a guy named "Whips and Kisses" was way into BDSM.

Of course, no profile is complete without pics. Make sure to include photos from the past year or so, or ask a friend to take candid shots of you, alone, in a few different locations and outfits. Ideally, there shouldn't be any visible-toilet bathroom selfies or photos from half a mile away. It's good to include a full-body shot so potential partners can check out your physique. Again, there's no need to alter the truth here—there's a lid for every pot, so don't be insecure about what you've got going on below the neck. Also, include photos that paint a picture of your life: if you're a nature lover, show shots of you in your vegetable garden, and if you're a music freak, post images of you at an EDM concert.

But be careful about using aggressive tit pics or bikini shots, unless you're using the site primarily to get some tail. If you post a sex-bomb photo with a Grand Canyon of cleavage, don't be surprised if you attract only folks looking to hook up.

After you've finished describing yourself, it's time to say what you're looking for in a partner, and it's totally OK to be specific. Are you looking for a goofball who loves horror films and knitting? Say so. Explaining what you want (what you really, really want) will help you attract people who are from your same planet. In my case, I initially wrote a near-dissertation on what I wanted in a man. I peppered my profile with a laundry list of adjectives describing my ideal partner (educated, successful, warm, emotionally intelligent...let's just say I developed carpal tunnel typing out the list). When a guy told me that he worried he'd never satisfy my long list of requirements, I made the description a little less elaborate. But I stuck to certain points—I'm looking for a guy who can speak at least *one* language fluently (aside from English).

Now comes the fun part: it's time to comb through the site for future makeout partners. Remind yourself when you're perusing profiles that it's good to keep an open mind and not rule out someone who isn't, at first glance, your physical type. Plenty of studies prove that romantic chemistry doesn't start with only wanting to jump someone's bones—it can ignite from an emotional connection. So unless someone's photo has you all-out vomiting, try not to turn that person down for superficial reasons. Keep the same thing in mind when you look at his or her vital stats. Though you might not have imagined falling in love with a firefighter, a computer programmer, or even a Republican, stranger things have happened.

When you see someone you like, be bold—go ahead and send a quick message. (Or, if you're the shy type, you can send a "wink," or whatever the site's equivalent of non-verbal communication is.) When you write, try to avoid sending a canned response—reference something in his or her profile (you both love tacos!), and toss in a compliment: "I think it's really cool that you're so involved in that afterschool program." Of course, it's possible

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other people's profiles to see what it seems like they're doing right and wrong. If necessary, ask a friend to jot down some notes about your best qualities and what she thinks you need in a partner—sometimes a buddy will have just the right perspective for the job. The general key is to speak from the heart and be open. Above all, be honest; there's no point in pretending to be somebody you're not. While it may be tempting to bend the truth, lies will bite you in the butt when you eventually meet up. When composing your profile, make sure to list your interests and passions, because no matter how obscure (18th-century architecture, Pee-wee Herman memorabilia), there's probably someone out there who shares 'em.

The idea is to give a snapshot of your personality, tastes, and interests without oversharing. So you probably don't want to talk about your recurring IBS, but you *do* want to offer pertinent details that will help the reader get what you're into. For

that after you “poke” or “like” or communicate with someone, you’ll get turned down or ignored. But try not to head into a shame spiral. There are so, so many fish in this sea, and you may have to swim around for a while. (Another little-known fact is that all dating sites feature some pictures and profiles of superhot folks who don’t exist—they’re used as hooks to lure people to sign up. So if you “wink” at someone and don’t get a “wink” back, console yourself with the fact that you may be flirting with a nonexistent person.) If someone contacts you and you’re just not feeling it, respect that person’s humanity and avoid any personal digs. Rather than saying, “I hate guys with mustaches,” choose a more neutral sentence like, “Thanks for your interest, but this doesn’t feel like a good fit to me.”

When “interviewing,” beware of falling into the trap of prolonged email exchanges and never-ending phone calls. If you’re new to the dating scene, or you’ve been burned and are recovering from a messy breakup, you probably won’t feel comfortable rushing an in-person meeting. But too many anonymous, faceless conversations play a trick on your mind, allowing you to develop an intimacy without really knowing the other person. In other words, that guy or lady becomes a blank screen you can project your fantasies onto—enabling that person to become anyone you want. Keep that going too long, and you may fall in love with a phantom. I was getting psyched about one “quiet, romantic” man I’d been chatting with online, and it wasn’t until a few phone calls in that he informed me he was into golden showers and was looking for “a willing recipient” (i.e., a willing *receptacle*). The point is, I’d have probably found out sooner that he was looking for a “peon” if I’d cut right to the chase. So have one phone call, and if it goes well, promptly choose a public place for your first meeting.

For your initial get-together, meet for coffee or a drink instead of an entire meal. This way, if you don’t click, you can ditch out quickly. (I learned this the hard way when I got stuck with a nonstop-talking narcissist who assaulted my ears over a lengthy candlelit dinner.) Of course, if things go well, you can always shift gears and hang out lon-

ger. If you’re nervous about awkward pauses, try meeting somewhere with built-in stimuli, like a flea market or a pool hall—that way, there’s less pressure on you to come up with witty banter. And remember what Chris Rock says: “When you meet somebody for the first time, you’re not meeting them. You’re meeting their representative!” As you engage in the process, keep an open mind, but also keep one eyebrow raised. Watch, look, and listen to what your date is really saying; specifically, watch for inconsistencies. Are you hearing things that contradict what you read in the profile? Are you seeing evidence of relationship “fatal flaws,” like addiction issues or chronic joblessness? Also, listen carefully to the person’s relationship track record. Most important, hear what he/she says about why past romances failed. If the person puts all the blame on the ex, you know he/she won’t be taking responsibility for anything in your relationship.

It may sound paranoid or farfetched, but there *are* scammers, *Catfish*-ers, and fakes out there. In fact, statistics show that romance scams comprise a \$50 million annual industry. To avoid them, it’s smart to be wary of people who say they live hundreds of miles away. Living at a distance provides a built-in excuse not to meet up—when in fact they never intend to meet you at all. Not meeting speedily gives you time to form an emotional attachment, which is what they want. Think about it: a person who’s serious about forming a relationship won’t be actively pursuing someone who lives two states away. Also, beware of anyone who refuses to get on the phone. Many scammers will stick to written exchanges because this gives them time to craft their letters. Others might lie about their location or their nationality. One guy told me he was American, but I noticed that his profile was peppered with spelling errors. (He listed himself as a “real-state” developer.) Another guy said he was a movie producer and listed his favorite film as “*To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

Some scammers prefer to use the dating site’s chat-room feature; they’ll refuse to use the video because they don’t want you to see that they aren’t the person in their profile photo. Speaking of photos, I noticed that frauds often post only one pic—that might

be a clue that you’re seeing a stock photo. In general, a real person will have multiple shots of him or herself. I flushed out one fake just by asking him to send me additional photos. He declined, then tried to say that the photo he posted wasn’t his own, because he didn’t want his friends and family to know he was online-dating. Yeah, right. And because I was on so many sites, I also started to spot canned written profiles that were being used on more than one site. It wasn’t the same man with a profile on more than one site—I mean that the same written profile would appear on different sites, linked to different screen names and photographs.

If you run into a fake, a scammer, or a liar, you may be tempted to give up. But don’t despair: you *can* find love online. Above all, remember that being single isn’t a curse, so you don’t need to settle for mistreatment, drama, or pain as an antidote to the terror of being alone. In the end, your confidence and independence—combined with your willingness to remain single rather than settle—will convey just how awesome and special you are. And in the end, that’s really the secret to attracting Ms. or Mr. Right. **B**

THE REAL DEAL:

- **OnlineDatingMagazine.com reports that 20 percent of Americans have gone out on a date with someone they met on the Web.**
- **According to a 2013 study, 35 percent of all new marriages began via online dating.**
- **One survey found that Americans are spending nearly \$1 billion annually on online-dating services.**
- **A study conducted by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Cornell University found that 80 percent of online daters lie about their age, height, and weight.**