

PSYCHOTHERAPY UPDATE

Volume 20, No. 1

EDWARD A. DREYFUS, Ph.D.

Clinical Psychology - Life Coaching

"helping people maximize their potential & achieve their goals"

1421 SANTA MONICA BOULEVARD

SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA 90404

(310) 208-5700

MAKING THE MOST OF ONLINE DATING*

Welcome to the wonderful world of cyberspace. This is the place for anonymity, for practice, and for fun. And can even be the place for meeting your special someone. Of course, you must first learn how to navigate through this new universe, for as much fun as it can be, it can also be fraught with danger. Let me explain.

Within recent years, the Internet has spawned an entirely new medium for connecting with people. It is called "instant messaging." Instant messaging allows people to "talk" to one another via computer in real time, rather than suffer the delay of sending e-mails back and forth. Instant messaging led to the development of "chat rooms," where groups of people with common interests meet at the same time and communicate through the instant message system. Pretty cool. And best of all, it is free! Various Internet providers (e.g., AOL, Yahoo, MSN, etc.) have set up chat rooms listed by topic. The chat rooms are available 24/7, and you can find practically any topic you wish, from conversations about football to discussions of the latest movies. Any topic you can think of is being discussed somewhere on the Internet. If you are an insomniac, or are simply lonely and it is three o'clock in the morning, someone, somewhere, is also awake and available to have a chat.

Anonymity. What makes the Internet chat rooms particularly appealing to many people is anonymity. People use "screen names" rather than their real names. In cyberspace, people can chat freely and anonymously with each other, providing folks with a measure of security. Shy people are able to speak their mind without fear of being seen. People who stutter are able to freely talk without feeling self-conscious about their speech.

This anonymity can give you an opportunity to practice having light conversation. You can learn to schmooze. You can try on any attitude, style, persona you wish. One day you can be assertive and forthright, and on another day you can be subtle, seductive or flirtatious. In this anonymous venue, you can practice being anyone you wish to be. It offers a chance to practice without being seen; and no need to feel embarrassed. You can change screen names as often as you wish, and you can change chat rooms with the click of a mouse.

In this anonymous venue, you can practice being anyone you wish to be.

Of course, this very same anonymity operates in reverse. Namely, you never know to whom you are really speaking. The person on the other side, who comes across as a charming young woman might, in reality, be a dirty old man. (An Internet expression is "On the net, no one knows you're a dog.") So, you must always keep in mind that in cyberspace, not everything is as it appears. So be cautious about believing what you read. Make the Internet work for you as you practice your style and your delivery. You will receive feedback from others in the form of their reaction to you. I suggest you approach the world of chat rooms with an air of fun and adventure, while still being vigilant.

Over time, you will be able to discern who is real and who is not. You will develop sophistication about how people speak without the distractions of how they look. This sophistication and sensitivity will carry forward into your everyday interactions. You will gradually learn to hear people differently. You may become more comfortable with light

*Excerpted, in part, from my new book, *Someone Right for You: 21st Century Strategies for Finding Your Special Someone*, Xlibris, 2003.

banter and general conversation. You can learn a lot about yourself and how people perceive you through what you have to say. Once you have developed a degree of comfort with the medium, you can move into the world of Internet dating.

Internet dating. It didn't take long for savvy folks on the Internet to realize the romance potential of people meeting on-line. Internet dating was the logical next step. Now there are many Internet dating services where, for a small fee, people can join and meet others looking to find people. Sometimes they offer trial memberships. Some sites permit you to search the site before signing up, but you cannot post anything until you have joined. You may search the site where people have posted their pictures and description of themselves and their interests (called profiles), and what they are looking for in a date. Once you become a member, using your screen name, you may express interest in instant messaging anyone who appears interesting to you. The person receiving notification of your interest can choose to either accept or decline your invitation to chat. Likewise, you will receive invitations you may choose to either accept or decline.

People often try out different self-descriptions and use different screen names. And because of the anonymity, one never knows whether the picture that was posted was a picture of themselves today or ten years ago, or even whether they are using someone else's picture. That is the risk. I know someone who, after some e-mailing and chatting, decided to arrange to meet their Internet date at a coffee shop. After waiting for thirty minutes and not seeing his date, he used his cell phone to contact her. The woman at the table next to him answered the phone. She had been there all along, but neither of them recognized the other from their photographs!

Despite the potential downside of people not being who they purport to be, the upside potential is much greater and worth the risk. But caution is necessary. There are some Internet dating services that do a better job of screening their clients than others. And some are more reputable than others. Sometimes the cost of these services keeps a lot of weirdos from participating. So before you jump in, do some homework. Visit the sites, surf the Internet, ask around for opinions and experiences. Ask people for some of their techniques: find out what works and what doesn't.

If you approach the Internet dating scene with an open mind, a joyful spirit, and without expectation or desperation, you can have a lot of fun and meet a lot of people. Just as I have said with respect to chat rooms and instant messaging, you will have an opportunity to hone your communication skills and develop confidence in your ability to communicate with others. You will become more adept at screening out people who are simply not for you.

I have met a significant number of people who have met through the Internet and are having wonderful relationships. Many have found their spouse through these on-line dating services. As the number of people who have met in cyberspace continues to grow, we are learning more and more about what works and what doesn't. One of the most important things to remember is that you first have to decide what it is you are looking for in a potential mate. You must decide whether you want a permanent mate, a soul mate, a date or a companion.

The following pointers have been gleaned from successful Internet daters:

- The advice that I always recommend is put in what you want to get out of it. For instance if you are looking for a serious relationship then you must take the time to express that in your profile. And avoid the standard one liners, such as, "I love to take walks on the beach". This type of comment is in so many profiles that it really does not show sensitivity. If you do love walks on the beach say so, but tell the reader why. "I love to take walks on the beach because I find the sound of the ocean to be so relaxing and peaceful". That is going to give the reader a much better understanding of who you are.
- Use a recent picture. The picture you choose will tell a lot about you. Think about the message your picture delivers. Ask friends to comment on your picture. According to people who run the on-line dating services, men will respond to pictures where the woman eyes are looking right at them, or those that show a woman's physique. Women tend to respond more to pictures where a man is smiling.
- Carefully look at the picture someone else has posted. What does their picture say about them? Did they take care in how they dressed? Where was the picture taken? Was it a clear picture? If not, what are they hiding about themselves?
- Ask your friends to look at your profile and critique it. Listen to what they have to say. What you put out on the Internet will in large measure determine what types of responses you will receive.
- Be patient! Don't simply jump into wanting to arrange a face-to-face meeting because you are either more comfortable in personal contact or because you are impatient. Take your time in getting to know someone.
- Ask questions. Practice listening. Instead of trying to sell yourself, learn a lot about the other person. Don't get too excited about the number of people who are contacting you. A large number may mean that your profile is too generic or there is something that you are

putting out that makes you appear indiscriminate. A very small number of responses may mean that you are overly discriminating. This also has a lot to do with the type of service it is. Those with monthly fees mean women receive many more responses from men, because they send out as many contacts as they can during that month.. Men should also be aware that on many services like that women may receive so many responses that they don't even read them all. If you are going to contact someone wait a short time, 3-5 days, and contact them again if they never responded. Also, try to comment on something you found interesting in their profile within the first 2 sentences. You need to grab their attention with something other than "I liked your picture." An example would be, "I noticed you are a single parent, I am too. Isn't it amazing seeing things through your child's eyes?"

- Develop a relationship. This point cannot be stressed enough. All successful Internet daters have found they can save a lot of time and grief by spending the time up front getting to know someone before getting together in person.
- Use e-mail to supplement your instant messaging, if you find there is mutual interest.
- Once things progress to the point that you would like get to know the person a little better, use the telephone.
- A word of caution about the telephone: do not give your telephone number out prematurely. You want to avoid harassing calls from thwarted suitors. Protecting your privacy is your responsibility.
- You may want to set up a separate e-mail address for your cyber-dating experience. There are many free e-mail service around.
- Another caution: Cyber-dating can be addictive. Once you get into it, you can spend a lot of time checking your e-mail, chatting with people, revising your profile, talking on the phone, and so on. It can be a very exciting world, especially since you are having all of this fun in the privacy of your own home, having a glass of wine, while sitting around in your PJs. You may find yourself wanting to check your mail while at work. The Internet has a way of insinuating itself into the fabric of your life. So be careful. Set aside a specific time for Internet dating and, as always, stay vigilant.

Once you have established a "virtual" relationship with your potential date, then it is time for you to arrange for an actual, in-person date. Prematurely arranging to meet puts you back in the position of spending time with someone you hardly know, perhaps focusing too much on how you both look. The more you get to know one

another without the physical "chemistry" and other traditional concerns getting in the way, the more likely you are to enjoy each other's company when you do finally meet in person. Following this process will help you hone your conversational skills, reduce disappointments, save time, and prevent "Internet dating burnout."

Many people have experienced considerable disappointment with Internet dating because they did not take full advantage of the process. They prematurely arranged meetings, using the Internet merely as a way to facilitate that encounter. After a disappointing first meeting, they say to themselves, "For this I took a shower?!" Don't waste your time going for the first meeting unless you are reasonably certain there is a high probability of at least liking the person you have gotten to know via instant messaging, e-mail, and telephone. Curb your desperation; curb your impatience. Take your time before jumping into a "real date."

You must distinguish between several categories of potential mate: *roommate*, *playmate*, *friend*, and *permanent mate*. Each of these has its own set of characteristics with some degree of overlap. Many people have not distinguished between them and therefore may be stating that they want a permanent mate where in reality they are seeking a playmate. A permanent mate is some combination of roommate, friend, and playmate. Therefore, it might be wise for you to make up three lists of characteristics, one for each of these three types of mate. Once you have developed these lists, merge them. Some characteristics may be eliminated. Intelligence may, for example, be more important in a mate than in a playmate; neatness is more important in a roommate than in a friend.

During your virtual date make use of your rating lists and ask questions that are related to what it is you are looking for in a mate. Spend enough time getting to know the person so that you are reasonably comfortable that this person meets your criteria for the type of meeting you are seeking, whether you are seeking a playmate, friend, or permanent mate. Only when you are comfortable that the person appears to meet your criteria, should you consider a "real date."

You can use virtual dating as a way to do a more thorough screening of your potential date to increase the probability of this person being appropriate for you. The first meeting should be a coffee date, meeting at your local Starbucks for a cup of coffee. If things go well --- you're reasonably attracted to one another and found each other to be the same as the person with whom you have been virtual dating --- you can either arrange to extend the coffee date, or arrange for a second date.

We have all been taught that chemistry between two people is essential for a relationship. I believe that this belief often gets us in trouble in romantic relationships. Chemistry often

clouds our judgment. Chemistry is a metaphor for that charge that occurs between two people, that magical connection that often has a sexual undertone in romantic relationships. Chemistry changes over time and may even fade. And when it does we are left with the personal relationship that we have established. With Internet dating you can control the chemistry factor or least limit it to that chemistry that occurs through words *without* the element of physical chemistry -- beyond the initial picture posted in the profile. Too often physical attraction will cause you to discount your list of what is important to you. Likewise, the absence of physical chemistry or immediate physical attraction can result in your prematurely dismissing someone who might just be right for you. Remember, real intimacy takes time to develop. And as you become more intimate, your perception of the other person changes. Think about your friends who appear more attractive to you over time.

Keep in mind that the intent here is to help you increase the probability of success in finding someone right for you. In order to accomplish this end, you must have a pretty good idea of what you want in a relationship. The Internet gives you an opportunity to do a lot of pre-screening. You can get to know someone fairly well before meeting, especially if you follow the guidelines I have offered. Before you meet someone face to face, you can become friends; and friendship is always a good beginning for a relationship. This way, when you do meet in person, even if there is no "chemistry," the meeting still has a greater potential for being enjoyable when compared to that potential sinking feeling when a blind date is a disappointment. At the very least, you might find a new friend.

Experiment, have fun and good luck!

JUST RELEASED REVISED EDITIONS

KEEPING YOUR SANITY

(IN AN INSANE WORLD)

Revised Edition

by

Edward A. Dreyfus, Ph.D.

Xlibris, 2003

(available at www.Amazon.com or www.Xlibris.com)

SOMEONE RIGHT FOR YOU:

21ST CENTURY STRATEGIES FOR FINDING YOUR SPECIAL SOMEONE

Revised Edition

by

Edward A. Dreyfus, Ph.D.

Xlibris, 2003

(available at www.Amazon.com or www.Xlibris.com)

Dr. Edward A. Dreyfus is a Clinical Psychologist, Marriage Family Child Therapist, Sex Therapist, and Life Coach. He received his Doctor of Philosophy in Clinical Psychology from the University of Kansas. His credentials include: Fellow of the American Psychological Association, Diplomate in Professional Psychotherapy from the International Academy of Behavioral Medicine, Counseling, and Psychotherapy; Diplomate and Clinical Supervisor of the American Board of Sexology; Fellow of the International Council of Sex Education and Parenthood of the American University; Certified Sex Therapist of the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, & Therapists; Clinical Fellow, American Academy of Clinical Sexologists. He is listed in the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology, the National Registry of Certified Group Psychotherapists, and Who's Who in America.

Dr. Dreyfus has been providing psychological services in the Los Angeles-Santa Monica area for over 35 years offering individual psychotherapy, sex therapy, couples counseling, career counseling and life coaching.

The Psychotherapy Update is published as a service to patients, friends, and colleagues. If you wish to have a complimentary subscription sent to someone you know, please send me his or her name and address.

Some back issues of the Psychotherapy Update are still available on request.

Voice: (310) 208-5700; Fax: (310) 459-2947; E-mail: ead@docdreyfus.com; Internet: www.docdreyfus.com

Edward A. Dreyfus, Ph.D.

1421 Santa Monica Boulevard
Santa Monica, CA 90404

PRSRST STD
US Postage Paid
Santa Monica, CA
Permit Number 284