

# Dating apps messing with your mental health

Story by Caren Chesler

Jenny O'Hara initially signed on to a dating app to bump up her confidence. Fresh out of a 20-year marriage, the Neptune Township, New Jersey, resident didn't believe a man would ever find her attractive again. A friend suggested she try dating online, so she created a profile on Facebook.

"I was looking for people to tell me: 'You're okay. Even though you just got divorced, you're still marketable,'" she said, adding that she did get attention from men online. "And that made me feel better — not for a long time, but it made me feel better for a little bit of time."

But when some men asked her for racy photos, she retreated. "You would never say something like that to somebody if you were sitting at a bar with them," she said.

O'Hara is among the some 95.6 million people 18 and over who have used dating websites or apps, [according to the research firm SSRS](#). And she's not alone in seeing her mood shift downward the longer she was online.

"My experience with patients who are on dating apps is it leads to fatigue, that people just get exhausted," said Paul Hokemeyer, a licensed marriage and family therapist based in Telluride, Colorado. "It takes up a lot of energy. It takes up a lot of time. It takes up a lot of emotions. And there's a huge potential for rejection."

## Addictive behavior

In 2022, 3 in 10 U.S. adults said they had used a dating site or app, with some 9 percent reporting having used one in the past year, according to [surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center](#).

According to SSRS, Tinder is the nation's most popular dating app. (Pew reports that some 14 percent of all U.S. adults say they've used it.) While Tinder was also the most popular among those 18 to 49, Match was the preferred app among those ages 50 and older, SSRS found.

But popularity doesn't equate with only positive experiences, and some experts say online dating can generate mental health hazards.

For one, users can become addicted to apps and to the dopamine rush they get when someone they're interested in responds to them, Hokemeyer said. Objectification also happens, as people are focused more on veneer than substance, he added.

"They're reduced to transactions, and for patients who suffer from mental health disorders, which is basically everyone I see, the deeper their level of depression, the deeper their level of anxiety, the deeper their level of engagement with these apps seem to be," he said.

There's also a kind of doomscrolling that goes on with dating apps, not unlike the way people scroll news headlines on their phone, wading through bad news.

"People are constantly looking for validation and a dopamine and serotonin rush that doesn't happen, and if it does happen, it's fleeting and makes them want to go back for more," he said. "It doesn't enhance their well-being, like being present in their lives, looking for elevation from within, connecting to human beings in real time."

## Pros and cons

Online dating can make people feel unattractive or unworthy, particularly when apps involve swiping or expressing mutual attraction to contact someone, said Racine Henry, a licensed marriage and family therapist who sees clients virtually in New York, New Jersey and North Carolina. The apps can be particularly negative for young people, who do not yet have the emotional development to put such rejection in context, she said.

“Apps like that can really make people feel ugly and unwanted,” Henry said. “I do feel that self-esteem, self-confidence, even self-identity, need to be at healthy levels prior to engaging on those apps and that people should not put too much stock into what a person who’s assessing you from a few pictures and a few lines on a screen may think or feel about you.”

That said, there are upsides to these apps. They can benefit people who are introverted, have certain phobias, or perhaps have experienced dating or sexual traumas that have made them reluctant to meet people in real-life settings, such as bars, she said.

“Apps are a good way for them to meet people in a safe environment and take their time with getting to know them and be able to control more of this person’s access to them,” Henry said.

The key is finding someone with common goals. If two people start talking and one is looking for love while the other simply wants a sexual interaction, not only might that result in a negative experience for both of them, but it could also affect one party’s safety. Each person should clearly articulate what they’re looking for, she said.

It’s all about expectations, said Nicole Karwashan, a licensed marriage and family therapist in White Plains, New York, who met her now-fiancé online.

“When somebody goes on to a dating app with this expectation of seeking external validation or finding the love of their life, I absolutely think it could perpetuate symptoms of depression,” she said.

Karwashan said she hasn’t seen dating apps cause depression, but she has seen dating app usage set off her clients’ eating disorders, as they try to curate their profiles so they look or present in a certain way.

“It’s definitely gotten pretty bad with some of my clients,” she said. “That’s when we say: ‘Okay, what’s the intention? Why are we giving this app and these random people this much power?’”

The problem, as with all social media, is the compulsive nature of them, she said. Karwashan has clients whose app usage is so chronic that notifications on their phones will go off during their sessions, and they'll say, "That's one of my Tinder matches," or, "That's some guy I met on Bumble."

"I actually encourage breaks from social media, just to avoid that kind of addictive tendency that it can bring," she said.

Hokemeyer said he works with his patients to get them off dating apps because he wants them to better tolerate short-term discomfort in a relationship to obtain long-term gain, and to learn resiliency — and dating apps, because of their transactional nature, don't allow for that in the way real-time relationships do.

## ‘Burned Haystack’

After O'Hara lost faith in her initial experience, she changed her profile and began following something called the "Burned Haystack" dating method, which was conceived by [Jennie Young](#), a writer and associate dean at the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay.

The haystack theory is that people are more likely to find partners if they specify what they want in their profiles and refrain from dating — and perhaps go so far as to block — anyone who doesn't fit the criteria. Young launched a Facebook group, the Burned Haystack Dating Method, and it has more than 198,000 members.

O'Hara said she wanted someone who was a Democrat, had a job, liked cultural events in New York City and didn't live with their ex-wife, an issue that arose a surprising number of times. Her wish list was so specific, no one responded for days at a time.

But that's part of the process, she said. Finding the right person takes time. In her case, it took about a month. O'Hara and her boyfriend have now been dating for a year and a half.

“I was asking for what I want instead of just being like, ‘I’ll be happy with what comes my way,’” she said.

Even O’Hara, who’s happily in a relationship, said she occasionally misses the “Missing you” texts she would get from men she met online. But she said she realizes now that wasn’t healthy for her or for them. That is, the men online were not just on there to make her feel better about herself, nor was she on there to satisfy their needs.

“I think that’s one of the interesting things about these dating apps,” she said. “People go on them just looking at these pictures and profiles, not realizing that there are real people on the other side.”

## 5 things to keep in mind

- Limit time on dating apps — only check apps or sites once a day.
- Decide what’s important to you in a partner and ask for it.
- Seek someone with common goals (e.g., make sure you’re both looking for the same thing, like a relationship leading to marriage, not just sex).
- Don’t seek validation through a dating app.
- If you’re prone to depression, be aware of how online dating is affecting your mental state.