

These days we spend a lot of time online, whether that is for practical things like shopping and banking, or socialising with friends and meeting new people. This information sheet introduces what you need to know about online dating.

Why do people date online?

You may find face-to-face interaction difficult or have sensory issues that mean you struggle with meeting people in real life environments. If you are talking to people online, you can choose when and where you access the internet. This means that you can make sure you are comfortable and relaxed and are not distracted by sensory issues or high stress levels. Communicating online also means that you have time to think and process what someone has said and how you want to reply. Using the internet is a good way to practice social skills that you can then use when interacting in person.

Advantages

- Meeting through a message board or game, like World of Warcraft, means you already know you have a shared interest to talk about.
- Online dating gives you the opportunity to meet a lot of people in one go.
- It's a good way to meet different sorts of people to the ones you already know.
- You can communicate in an environment where you are comfortable.

Disadvantages

- Dating online can take up a lot of time.
- You can't be sure the person you are talking to is who they say they are.
- Some people use online dating for attention or do not take it seriously.

Know what you want

If you believe that a dating site is the way to go, you need to decide what you are looking for in a partner. Try not to generalise. There is no right way for a man or a woman to be and many people do not match up with traditional views of their gender. Just as the saying goes 'when you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism', you cannot make assumptions or generalisations about all women or all men based on your experiences with people so far, or from what you have been told. Everyone is an individual and you should treat them that way.

Choose a platform

Which site is right?

There are lots of different dating websites that cater for all sorts of interests and relationship types. Some websites use systems to match you to people who have things in common with you. Some websites are strongly focused on finding long-term relationships and the people on there will be looking for lasting love, whereas other sites will have users that are looking for short-term relationships or purely sexual relationships. You can research different sites and find reviews other people have written about each site. This will help you to find the right one for you.

To pay or not to pay?

A lot of dating websites charge a subscription fee. While this may put you off at first, it's worth considering that the people who are willing to pay may be more serious about finding love. So, if you're looking for a long-term relationship, paying a subscription fee may help you to meet the right people. Subscriptions may also put off people who want to make fake profiles or make profiles to see how much attention they can get, without actually being interested in a relationship. Websites like Tinder are so popular now that some people join just for fun. You need to think about these things when considering whether or not to use a pay site.

Autism-specific sites

There are specific dating websites for people with autism and this is a good way to meet other people on the spectrum. However, remember that these sites are not necessarily safer than others and are open to the same types of abuse. You will also be limited to meeting exclusively autistic people, which reduces your options to some extent. It may be worth using these sites at the same time as others, so you can meet lots of different people.

Building a profile

The photo

Your photo is usually the first thing people will see, so choose a good one! Check your choice by asking for some help from someone you trust. Generally, a friend who is a similar age to you – preferably of the same gender as the partner you want to attract – will be the best person to ask about this. They will have a better idea of what is attractive than someone older or of a different gender, but you should always ask whoever you trust the most.

Describing yourself

One of the most important things to consider in online dating is how you present yourself. You are building a profile to attract potential partners. It may be tempting to use a particularly flattering photo and list your interests based on what you think others want. But remember, you will only be able to talk to and meet people who are attracted to this profile. It is far better to list your real interests so you can ensure that, when you meet someone, you will have something in common.

A spotlight on you!

Your profile should be accurate but you can focus on the positive. You don't have to talk about things that you see as bad things about yourself or your past experience with dating – this can be off-putting. Instead, talk about your interests and hobbies and the things that make you great. If you are struggling, try asking your friends or relatives for some ideas. You can also ask someone else to read through your profile to check it for you.

What are you looking for?

Most sites ask you to describe what you are looking for in a partner. This does not mean writing a list of 'demands' that a future partner has to agree to. Instead, just think about the things that you really need from a partner. For example, if you are strictly religious then you may want to find a partner with the same views. It is fine to have expectations for a person you want to spend time with but you should be open-minded about the types of people you can get to know. Dating sites are a great way to meet people generally so see it as a way to meet friends, some of whom may be people you may become interested in romantically.

Messaging

Finding the right tone

It can be hard to find the right tone for messages sent through a dating site. Confidence and high self-esteem are attractive. You want to appear interested but not over the top or intimidating. Do not message anyone more than twice without a reply but do not take a lack of reply personally. The person may be busy or they may have stopped using the site. Just because someone is on a dating website or has said that they are looking for a relationship, does not mean that they have to speak to every person who is interested. You will not click on every profile or speak to every other person on the site, so do not expect others to do this either.

Make it personal

Always personalise your messages for each person you contact. If you send out the same message to everyone, it will show that you haven't really read their profile. Instead, find specific parts of that person's profile to talk about or ask them about. Try to avoid talking about their physical appearance though, as this may make you look shallow. Asking them about a shared interest is a good place to start. You should also keep your messages 'light' and conversational, start with a friendly hello message and stick to topics like shared interests and hobbies. Treat this as a way to make a new friend, rather than becoming romantic straight away. This will make it less likely that you seem too keen or over the top.

What to expect from a date

If you have been messaging someone for a while, you may want to arrange a face-to-face meeting. Going on a date with someone does not guarantee that you will start a relationship with that person. Dates are a good way to get to know the person and see if you would like to see them again. Most people usually go on several dates together before they decide if they want to be a couple. If the person chooses not to go on a second date with you, it is not personal or a failure on your part or theirs – you simply need to keep meeting people until you find someone who you 'click' with.

The dangers and risks

Dating websites ask you to be vulnerable and explain some detail about your life. This means that all dating websites have some risk to them and there is no site that is 100% safe. The key to online dating is to know the risks and ensure that you understand how to recognise and prevent danger.

Criminals sometimes make fake profiles on dating websites so that they can talk to strangers and try to make them give out personal information or send them money. If someone asks you for something that makes you uncomfortable, report them to the site and do not speak to them again. Plenty of people have been made victims of this before and you should not be embarrassed to get help.

Some people use dating websites to meet people and find out more about them. They can then use this information to hurt that person. Do not arrange to meet anyone on your own or without telling someone you trust where you are going. Ideally, meet someone in a public place with other people around, and either bring a friend or ask them to go somewhere nearby, so you can leave and meet them if you want to.

Conclusions

As computers and the internet become more important in our lives, online dating becomes more and more common. It can be a fantastic way to meet new people and practice social interaction. The key is to seek out new people who you get along with, rather than becoming too fixed on finding a romantic partner. Ultimately, online dating doesn't need to be any more dangerous or scary than regular dating. Remember, you do not know someone if you have never met them in real life. And even people you have met in real life are not friends until they have earned your trust. Always speak to a trusted friend or relative if you are unsure about someone you have met online.

Useful resources

Internet safety and autism - Information sheet produced by Autism West Midlands and available at www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/helpadvice/downloads

Autism, sex and relationship - Information sheet produced by Autism West Midlands and available at www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/helpadvice/downloads