

Reviving Dating

by

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Uncommitted dating is a great opportunity to explore a variety of interesting people. If “dating” and “relationship” are distinguished, the freedom to fully examine preferences, values, and expectations can be realized.

The Habits of Hurriedness

We live in a fast paced world. When this fast pace and instant-results attitude is applied to romance and partnerships, people often find themselves hurt and disappointed. It is possible to change our habits of hurriedness. It is possible to date without getting hurt. If couples would slow down the pace in early romance, I believe they would make better long term choices. It all starts with revising the notion of “dating”.

Over and over again, in my practice as a psychologist, I see men and women approach relationships with a hurriedness. They jump immediately from meeting someone to being in a relationship, skipping the dating phase of relationships altogether. My client, Kathy, for example, recently met a man as she was moving into a new apartment. He helped her carry her boxes upstairs and in less than a week she had a new boyfriend and lover. Several weeks later Kathy was lamenting how she had partnered, once again, with an unemployed alcoholic. Jumping quickly into a relationship is not unusual, in fact it is seen as normal. However, normal – in the sense of common practice – does not equal healthy and sustainable. All too often people move much too quickly in romance, leaving them vulnerable to having their hearts torn apart by missing important information in the early stages of romantic exploration.

Dating vs. Being in a Relationship

There are several factors associated with healthy dating that distinguish it from “being in a relationship.” The dating phase is open and unlimited. You can date whomever they want and as many people as you want. You are not bound by loyalty or commitment in this phase. This openness is precisely what makes this phase so powerful and effective. There is no need to attend to the expectations of another nor to adjust or change to fit another’s needs or agenda. You have the freedom to be yourself and the opportunity to be fully seen. It doesn’t mean that you’re not on your best behavior but that this behavior isn’t encumbered by the demands and expectations of a more serious relationship. It is important to communicate when you are in the dating phase, and to clarify the ground rules of dating, so that others know what to expect.

Julie and Kyle are sophomores in college. They had been dating for several weeks when Julie discovered Kyle had invited another woman to a school social function. Julie was stung by this, since she had hoped to go to the same event with Kyle. Knowing she had no claim on Kyle’s time or decisions, Julie asked her friend Paul to the same event. When Kyle found this out he suggested they all go together. The four of them spent the evening talking, laughing and having a great time. Julie was able to spend time with Kyle and Kyle was able to see Julie as both flexible and confident.

In reviving the notion of dating, I encourage you to explore potential partners without jumping into any form of exclusive commitment. Dating is a time of curiosity and adventure. There is no pressure to choose or decide about anything. Dating encourages you to experiment and reflect, inviting you to inquire about your internal experience as you interact with a wide range of different people. This kind of exploration and play helps you look at what you like and don’t like, what you value, prefer, and can’t tolerate. Moving too quickly into romance limits your ability to explore and experiment. Moving rapidly also sets you up for increased heart-

ache if you decide to end the relationship. If it were understood that dating didn't come with any guarantees or expectations, other than honest curiosity, then disengaging might be less painful.

Dating does not Include Sex

The most important distinction, and possibly the most challenging aspect given our current culture, is that dating, as defined here, does not include sexual engagement. Keeping sex out of the picture keeps hearts untethered and free. Once sex is in play, it is human nature to desire assurance that your partner will stick around and act responsibly. Our biological programming necessitates this assurance. Some researchers explain this bonding as resulting from the effect sex has on the limbic system in the brain. Daniel Amen, MD, describes it this way:

Whenever a person is sexually involved with another person, neurochemical changes occur in both their brains that encourage limbic, emotional bonding. Yet, limbic bonding is the reason casual sex doesn't really work for most people on a whole mind and body level. Two people may decide to have sex "just for the fun of it," yet something is occurring on another level they might not have decided on at all: Sex is enhancing an emotional bond between them whether they want it or not.

This disposition for bonding, once sex is introduced, makes it essential that dating remain free from sexual activity, as unpopular as this notion might be, in order to avoid premature commitment. The overemphasis of sex in our culture may account for the tendency to skip over the dating phase.

In the context of nonsexual interaction, you can objectively explore your preferences in partnership. You can look at your life from a long-term perspective, instead of looking for an instant mate. Chris and Rachael met at a fundraiser for a cause they both supported. Chris was newly single after ending a three yearlong partnership. He was fearful of losing himself in another relationship and was determined to be more thoughtful in choosing his next partner. Rachael was ready for a serious relationship and became worried and upset when, after several dates with Chris, he wasn't showing interest in her sexually. In an attempt to challenge and move past her growing feelings of inadequacy, Rachael resolved to talk with Chris and ask about his feelings towards her. Through this conversation she discovered how Chris was being cautious and intentional in dating so he wouldn't repeat the mistakes of his past. She learned he was highly attracted to her and had strong hopes their relationship would deepen. When Rachael understood Chris was looking for sustainability rather than just fun in the moment, she was able to enjoy the process of dating, revealing more and more of herself to Chris as their relationship unfolded.

Dating Allows Objectivity

While you are dating, you can build skills of observation and dialogue. These skills will allow you to ask questions and identify the qualities you believe are necessary for a lasting partnership. You can feel your power to choose a satisfying connection for yourself rather than simply reacting to another or waiting to be chosen. When dating progresses slowly there is time to ask the breadth of questions necessary to make a wise and reasoned decision to progress or not. The deeper qualities, beyond initial physical attractiveness, can be rationally explored and critically examined without the excessive pull of a sexual relationship. Exploring issues of values, interests, and life goals takes a great deal of time, across a variety of interactions in a variety of settings, in order to get an accurate reading of the person you are dating.

Carl and Rebecca met at work. They began taking breaks together and eventually went out to lunch. Carl was struck by Rebecca's inquisitiveness and interest in him. She asked him about

his family both present and past. As they developed more connection outside of work Rebecca was curious to hear about his aspirations and dreams, his fears and his worries. As she learned about his conflictual relationship with his parents, she began to see parallels in the challenges he had with his coworkers. She noticed his quickness to anger and his harsh assessments of other's intentions. Watching and listening to Carl helped Rebecca decide to turn down his invitation to follow up a dinner and movie with a visit to his place. She learned enough in the process of dating him to know that deepening the relationship with sexual intimacy was not in her best interest. She was relieved several months later when she learned about a restraining order his ex-wife had placed on Carl. Rebecca was thankful she had listened to her own hesitations and denied Carl's request to deepen their involvement.

The Balance of Reason and Emotion

It is very helpful to remember that wisdom is acquired when we balance emotion with reason. Emotion alone, without rationality, can get you into some pretty unhealthy or unwise situations. Doing something just because it feels good may provide temporary pleasure but may come with long-term negative costs. Reason, without emotion, on the other hand, is dry and calculated. If you balance these two powerful forces of emotion and rationality you can have access to wisdom.

To keep a hold of critical thinking during the swell of romantic excitement, you will need objectivity, the ability to step back and assess the situation from afar. A trusted friend with whom to discuss the qualities of a budding romance can be a wonderful source of this objectivity. Reflective exercises, like keeping a journal or meditating can also help you hold an objective perspective.

The Questions

Because this objectivity is so precious and necessary, I developed a set of questions to help hold the forces of reason in place, during the pull of early romance. The tool, *The Questions*, (also in a card deck and book form as, *Things to Know Before You Say "Go"*), is an iPhone app offering 76 questions to ask, from the early dating phase through the deepening of partnership. The Questions provide grounding and intentional focus on the various issues important to consider in partnership. The act of asking relevant questions invites contemplation and self-evaluation, giving you the opportunity to slow down and think critically.

When reading through *The Questions* you might face the question, "Does this person show investment in their own work, career, or education?", or "How does this person get along with my friends?", or "Is this person sensitive and caring to the needs of others?" Any one of the 76 questions will give you a chance to slow down and consider important factors about the person you are dating. You get to determine the personal relevance of each question, based on your values and preferences, and the conclusion you draw is up to you to ponder. The more you take these questions to heart, the more value you receive from the process. But even a superficial reading of *The Questions* can open your eyes to the vast number of serious issues worth considering in the dating process.

Slowing down, in our fast paced society, can be quite a challenge. But if you can see the benefit of going slow enough to really observe what is in front of you, you can make wise and conscious decisions about where to best invest your heart. Equip yourself with tools for maintaining objectivity and rationality so that you can explore with full curiosity and openness and find fulfilling partnership.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Dating

- √ No commitment
- √ Okay to date as many people as desired.
- √ Not sexual
- √ Generally meeting in public places
- √ Lots of curiosity and listening, low expectations of particular outcome.
- √ "Just looking" attitude
- √ Exit can be made by thanking the person for time spent

Relationship

- √ Commitment, implied or stated
- √ Faithfulness to one partner is generally expected
- √ Sexual contact often begins
- √ Private places become preferred
- √ Expectations of the other's behavior start to be expressed
- √ Approval and/or criticism shared
- √ Exiting the relationship often causes heartache or heartbreak

About Elsbeth Martindale, Psy.D.

Dr. Martindale is a clinical psychologist in Portland, OR and author of *The Things to Know Before You Say "Go"* and *The Questions* iPhone app. She is the creator and collector of kinesthetic and visual tools for growth and change. She shares these tools at CourageToBloom.com and writes about them in her blog. Dr. Martindale has interests in the following areas: consciousness in relationship choice, women's empowerment, positive psychology, and psycho-educational tools.