

**Relationships, Solved**

# **Your Dating Guide**

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# **Solved**

with Mark Manson

# Introduction

You can tell a lot about a person by how they date.

Not by who they pick or how many options they have, but by what happens to them once they're interested. What they tolerate. What they explain away. What they start doing differently is the second they feel chemistry, distance, uncertainty, or a hint of rejection.

- Some people go on dates and feel like they're auditioning. They become more polished, more agreeable, more "low maintenance," and then go home feeling strangely empty.
- Others treat dating like a negotiation. They keep score. They wait to text back. They try to stay in control, even when they're genuinely excited.
- Some get attached to potential fast. One good conversation turns into a whole future in their head, and suddenly they're trying to protect something that hasn't even started yet.
- Others keep meeting people they "like enough," but never feel anything real. They can't tell if they're being mature or just disconnected.

And most people are carrying a private list of experiences they don't bring up out loud.

The slow fades. The mixed signals. The person who acted obsessed and then vanished. The dates that felt promising until they didn't. The situationship that kept stretching past its expiration date. The connection was intense but never stable.

## Introduction

Most people assume dating is confusing because people are inconsistent or immature, and sometimes that is true. But there's another layer that almost no one is taught.

A lot of modern dating rests on older instincts shaped for a very different world. Attraction is full of signaling. Attention can be a strategy. Effort often means more than words. The same behavior can mean completely different things depending on what someone is optimizing for.

When you do not understand that, everything starts to feel personal. Every delay feels like rejection. Every mixed signal feels like a puzzle you have to solve. Every connection becomes a test of your self-control.

This guide is here because you should not have to guess your way through something that shapes your choices, your confidence, and your future.

- We'll look at why dating feels so irrational in the first place, and what evolutionary pressures have to do with modern behavior.
- We'll talk about sexual selection, differences in risk and investment, and why certain traits and "courtship" behaviors show up in predictable ways.
- We'll break down how people signal interest, how time and effort function as real information, and why some patterns are hard to fake.

We'll also get practical. You'll learn why someone can have "perfect chemistry" on paper and still fail the first date, what trustworthiness looks like early on, why online dating changes expectations and effort, and how to read reciprocity without turning into a detective. You'll understand common forms of strategic interference, the situations where confusion is the point, and what to do when you feel yourself sliding into dynamics that never become stable.

## Introduction

The goal is not to make dating feel like a performance or a science project. The goal is to help you move through it with steadier judgment, fewer self-betrayals, and a better sense of what is actually happening in front of you.

Because dating can be light and still be serious.

Hopeful and still discerning.

Open without being unprotected.

And it gets easier to do that when you finally have a map that matches the world you are dating in.

This PDF is meant as a companion to the Solved podcast episode on Dating. But if you're looking for more practical ways to improve your relationships—not just understand them—you'll find that inside ***The Solved Membership***. It is my membership where we turn each Solved topic into real progress.

Inside the membership we offer additional resources like the *Dating, Solved Workbook: A 7-Day Reset for Modern Dating* and the *Dating, Solved Checklist* which will help you create your own personalized assessment for finding the right person. And we don't stop at talking about patterns or attachment styles. We help you experiment, reflect, and actually change the way you show up in dating and relationships with step-by-step tools, prompts, and insights to actively reshape your love life.

You'll also get access to a private community of people doing the same work you are: growing, learning, and creating relationships that actually last.

*“The Solved Membership gives extremely specific, tangible, and manageable action tools that aren’t too overwhelming or time consuming, and create an immediate sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy and help propel me forward.”* - Gaby

[You can learn more and join The Solved Membership here \(as well as how to get 4 months FREE\).](#)

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# Chapter 1: Why Is Dating So Complicated?

## Why Modern Dating Feels Irrational — But Isn't

You wait days for a text that never comes. You argue about exclusivity two weeks in. You meet someone with perfect chemistry, only to feel weirdly indifferent by the third date. Dating is full of contradictions — it feels chaotic, emotional, and confusing in ways that make no sense. And yet, what feels random has patterns.

What you're experiencing is older than civilization itself. The psychological systems that govern attraction and courtship today were shaped by evolutionary pressures long before texting, swiping, or romantic love ever existed. What we experience as anxiety, rejection, or mixed signals are modern expressions of mating behaviors that evolved to solve very different problems in very different environments.

Even Charles Darwin, the father of evolution, struggled with this. He was famously puzzled by courtship traits that seemed to work against survival rather than support it. Why would peacocks evolve such burdensome tails? Why do so many animals behave in ways that make them more vulnerable?

His eventual solution was sexual selection: the idea that some traits evolve not because they help us survive, but because they help us reproduce.<sup>1</sup> Once you understand dating through that lens, things start to click. Attraction stops looking like a dysfunctional mess and starts looking like an incredibly complex — and weirdly logical — system of signaling, competition, and choice.

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<sup>1</sup> Darwin, C. (1997). *The descent of man (Great Minds Series)*. Prometheus. (Original work published 1871)

## Sexual Selection: The Missing Logic of Romance

Unlike natural selection, which rewards traits that promote survival, sexual selection rewards traits that improve mating success.

It works in two main ways:<sup>2</sup>

- **Intrasexual selection:** competition between members of the same sex (e.g., male rivalry).
- **Intersexual selection:** mate choice by the opposite sex (e.g., female preference for traits).

These mechanisms shaped behaviors, preferences, and even our physiology. They explain why we care about confidence, why status is sexy, and why certain physical traits seem undoubtedly attractive. They also help explain why dating often feels performative: many of the things people do are signals meant to communicate mate value, not a full or honest picture of who they are.

## Parental Investment Theory: Why the Sexes Differ

To understand modern dating, it's not enough to know how sexual selection works — you also need to understand who invests *in what*. Trivers' Parental Investment Theory explains that the sex that invests more in offspring will be more selective, while the sex that invests less will compete for access.<sup>3</sup>

In humans, that asymmetry is profound:

- **Females** produce large, energetically costly eggs, undergo pregnancy, and often nurse children for years.

<sup>2</sup> Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. (1993). [Sexual strategies theory: An evolutionary perspective on human mating](#). *Psychological Review*, 100(2), 204-232.

<sup>3</sup> Trivers, R. (1972). [Parental investment and sexual selection](#). In B. Campbell (Ed.), *Sexual selection and the descent of man: 1871-1971* (pp. 136-179). Aldine.

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- **Males** produce small, energetically cheap sperm and can, in theory, father hundreds of children with minimal effort.

The result is a fundamental difference in reproductive strategy:

- Women evolved greater choosiness because a bad mate choice could mean years of wasted investment.
- Men evolved greater competition because reproductive access was scarce and high-stakes.

We see this across species. But the rule flips when the investment does. In species where males provide most of the parental investment, such as seahorses and some fish or birds, males can become choosier, and females may compete for mating opportunities.<sup>4,5</sup>

Humans, however, are way more complicated. Because we tend to co-parent and raise offspring cooperatively, both sexes evolved flexible strategies. Both men and women can switch between short-term and long-term mating tactics depending on context. This flexibility is what gives rise to much of the confusion and the endless friction in modern dating.<sup>6</sup>

## What Women Evolved to Seek

Women didn't evolve to seek "money" or "dominance" in the abstract. They evolved to seek traits that reliably signaled long-term value, safety, and genetic quality.

<sup>4</sup> Giroux, M. A., Ditlecadet, D., Martin, L. J., Lanctot, R. B., & Lecomte, N. (2016). [Sexing a sex-role-reversed species based on plumage: Potential challenges in the red phalarope](#). *PeerJ*, 4, Article e1989.

<sup>5</sup> Vincent, A., Ahnesjö, I., Berglund, A., & Rosenqvist, G. (1992). [Pipefishes and seahorses: Are they all sex role reversed?](#) *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 7(7), 237–241.

<sup>6</sup> Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. (1993). [Sexual Strategies Theory: An evolutionary perspective on human mating](#). *Psychological Review*, 100(2), 204–232.

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- **Resource acquisition and investment.** Historically, a partner's ability and willingness to secure and share resources could raise offspring survival. That is why ambition, competence, intelligence, and signs of stable status often matter in long-term mate choice.<sup>7</sup> Status is also not one thing. People can gain rank through coercive dominance or through prestige that comes from skill and earned respect, and those routes tend to carry different social and relational costs.<sup>8</sup> Social proof can add to this: visible interest from others can make a person seem more valuable, partly because it signals desirability and vetting by the group.<sup>9</sup>
- **Protection, formidability, and felt safety.** In more dangerous environments, women's attraction can shift toward men who seem more physically formidable, like being strong, tall, or having a deeper voice, because these traits can signal protection.<sup>10</sup> This idea is often described as the bodyguard hypothesis.<sup>11</sup> But there's a downside: traits linked to dominance can also come with a higher risk of intimidation or coercion.<sup>12</sup> When environments are safer and women have more freedom to choose, preferences tend to put more emphasis on warmth, reliability, and emotional safety. In long-term relationships, feeling understood and cared for

<sup>7</sup> Buss, D. M. (1989). [Sex differences in human mate preferences: Evolutionary hypotheses tested in 37 cultures](#). *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 12(1), 1–49.

<sup>8</sup> Cheng, J. T., Tracy, J. L., Foulsham, T., Kingstone, A., & Henrich, J. (2013). [Two ways to the top: Evidence that dominance and prestige are distinct yet viable avenues to social rank and influence](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104(1), 103–125.

<sup>9</sup> Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. (2019). [Mate preferences and their behavioral manifestations](#). *Annual Review of Psychology*, 70, 77–110.

<sup>10</sup> Garza, R., Pazhoohi, F., & Byrd-Craven, J. (2021). [Women's preferences for strong men under perceived harsh versus safe ecological conditions](#). *Evolutionary Psychology*, 19(3).

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, M., & Mesnick, S. L. (1997). [An empirical test of the bodyguard hypothesis](#). In P. A. Gowaty (Ed.), *Feminism and evolutionary biology* (pp. 505–511). Springer.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, M., Wolfe, K., & O'Neil, B. A. (2025). [The effects of cues to ambient darkness on women's willingness to engage with physically strong men](#). *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 66(2), 183–189.

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matters deeply for closeness, not as an optional bonus.<sup>13</sup>

- **Genetic fitness:** Some people think **body symmetry** can give a small hint about how well someone's body handled growing up. The basic idea is that if your body develops in a stable way, even when life is stressful (like sickness, not enough food, or other challenges), you may end up looking a bit more even on both sides.<sup>14</sup>

There's also an idea in evolutionary biology that some traits can act like honest "proof" of good health because they are not easy to maintain. In general, costly traits can be more believable signals, since people in worse condition might not be able to "pull them off" as easily.<sup>15</sup> One common theory suggests that testosterone can help create more masculine features, but it may also put some strain on the immune system. If that is true, then only men in good health could show strong masculinity without paying as much of a health cost.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, research reviews suggest this link is not always consistent, especially in humans.<sup>17</sup>

## What Men Evolved to Seek

Men's mating psychology is shaped by a different recurring problem: paternity uncertainty. Since women always know a baby is theirs, but men cannot always be 100% sure, therefore they tend to be more alert

<sup>13</sup> Reis, H. T., Clark, M. S., & Holmes, J. G. (2004). [Perceived partner responsiveness as an organizing construct in the study of intimacy and closeness](#). In D. J. Mashek & A. P. Aron (Eds.), *Handbook of closeness and intimacy* (pp. 201–225). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

<sup>14</sup> Gangestad, S. W., & Thornhill, R. (1997). [Human sexual selection and developmental stability](#). In J. A. Simpson & D. T. Kenrick (Eds.), *Evolutionary social psychology* (pp. 169–195). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

<sup>15</sup> Zahavi, A. (1975). [Mate selection—A selection for a handicap](#). *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 53(1), 205–214.

<sup>16</sup> Folstad, I., & Karter, A. J. (1992). [Parasites, bright males, and the immunocompetence handicap](#). *The American Naturalist*, 139(3), 603–622.

<sup>17</sup> Nowak, J., Pawłowski, B., Borkowska, B., Augustyniak, D., & Drulis-Kawa, Z. (2018). [No evidence for the immunocompetence handicap hypothesis in male humans](#). *Scientific Reports*, 8, Article 7392.

to anything that could signal sexual exclusivity problems or a threat to the relationship.<sup>18</sup>

- **Youth and fertility cues.** Men, on average, place greater importance on signs of fertility, including youth and overall physical attractiveness, and this pattern holds up across many cultures.<sup>19</sup> Research on “attractiveness universals” suggests that some of what people call “good looks” can simply reflect small cues of good health.
- **Body shape cues (WHR, plus weight).** Many studies find that men often rate women with a lower waist-to-hip ratio, commonly around 0.7, as more attractive, and this body shape has been linked to markers associated with fertility and health.<sup>20</sup> Later work adds an important detail: both waist-to-hip ratio and body weight matter, and in more realistic images, weight can sometimes predict attractiveness more strongly, so researchers treat these cues as working together rather than as a single “ideal” number.<sup>21</sup>
- **Sexual fidelity and jealousy (with nuance).** Men often show strong concern about sexual infidelity, which fits with the idea that paternity risk shaped male jealousy.<sup>22</sup> But the common stereotype that men only care about sex and women only care about emotions is too simple. Reviews suggest that sex differences in jealousy are smaller and depend more on context than people usually assume.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. (1993). [Sexual Strategies Theory: An evolutionary perspective on human mating](#). *Psychological Review*, 100(2), 204–232.

<sup>19</sup> Buss, D. M. (1989). [Sex differences in human mate preferences: Evolutionary hypotheses tested in 37 cultures](#). *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 12(1), 1–49.

<sup>20</sup> Singh, D. (2002). [Female mate value at a glance: Relationship of waist-to-hip ratio to health, fecundity and attractiveness](#). *Neuroendocrinology Letters*, 23(Suppl. 4), 81–91.

<sup>21</sup> Kościński, K. (2014). [Assessment of waist-to-hip ratio attractiveness in women: An anthropometric analysis of digital silhouettes](#). *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 43(5), 989–997.

<sup>22</sup> Buss, D. M., Larsen, R. J., Westen, D., & Semmelroth, J. (1992). [Sex differences in jealousy: Evolution, physiology, and psychology](#). *Psychological Science*, 3(4), 251–255.

<sup>23</sup> Harris, C. R. (2003). [A review of sex differences in sexual jealousy, including self-report data, psychophysiological responses, interpersonal violence, and morbid jealousy](#). *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 7(2), 102–128.

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Jealousy also has different parts, including suspicious thoughts, emotional reactions, and behaviors which can be shaped by biology, culture, personality, and the situation itself.<sup>24</sup>

- **Context-driven flexibility.** Men's preferences also shift depending on whether they are thinking short-term or long-term. In studies where people have to "budget" for what they want most, men tend to prioritize physical attractiveness first, ranking other traits lower.<sup>25</sup>
- **A final reality check.** What people say they want on paper doesn't always match who they're drawn to in real life. Once two people meet, things like chemistry, ease of conversation, and how someone makes you feel in the moment can quickly change what matters most.<sup>26</sup>

## Why Intelligence, Humor, and Morality Are Sexy

Some of the most desirable human traits, wit, artistic ability, abstract thinking, and even moral virtue, have no obvious survival payoff in daily life. But they make more sense as courtship displays shaped by sexual selection, where traits can spread because they attract mates, and where costly signals can stay honest because they are hard to fake at scale

Geoffrey Miller's Mating Mind hypothesis suggests that the human brain evolved partly as a sexual ornament.<sup>27</sup> Just as peacocks flaunt their

<sup>24</sup> Guerrero, L. K., & Andersen, P. A. (1996). [Jealousy experience and expression in romantic relationships](#). In P. A. Andersen & L. K. Guerrero (Eds.), *Handbook of communication and emotion: Research, theory, applications, and contexts* (pp. 155–188). Academic Press.

<sup>25</sup> Li, N. P., Bailey, J. M., Kenrick, D. T., & Linsenmeier, J. A. W. (2002). [The necessities and luxuries of mate preferences: Testing the tradeoffs](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82(6), 947–955.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas, A. G., Jonason, P. K., Blackburn, J. D., Kennair, L. E. O., Lowe, R., Malouff, J., Stewart-Williams, S., Sulikowski, D., & Li, N. P. (2020). [Mate preference priorities in the East and West: A cross-cultural test of the mate preference priority model](#). *Journal of Personality*, 88(3), 606–620.

<sup>27</sup> Miller, G. F. (2000). [The mating mind: How sexual choice shaped the evolution of human nature](#). Doubleday.

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tails, humans display intelligence, creativity, and emotional range to signal genetic quality.

- **Humor** demonstrates cognitive agility and emotional insight. To be funny, you need to model another person's mind, anticipate their expectations, and violate them in a surprising but pleasing way, all in real time.<sup>28</sup> Across studies, positive humor predicts attraction and relationship satisfaction, while aggressive humor predicts worse outcomes, and early preferences often show that women value humor production more while men value receptivity more.<sup>29,30</sup>
- **Intelligence** is often admired, but in real, first-impression settings, it is not always a strong immediate pull on its own, which fits the idea that some traits pay off more as long-term value than as an instant spark.<sup>31</sup>
- **Creativity** shows up in the same lane: it can be attractive as a display, but the effect is context-sensitive and tends to land best when it creates shared value rather than reading like a solo performance.<sup>32</sup>
- **Vocabulary** signals a well-organized nervous system. Remembering and retrieving thousands of arbitrary symbols on command is not easy.
- **Art and altruism** also work as expensive signals. They can imply surplus time, energy, and social skill, and they can broadcast

<sup>28</sup> Greengross, G., & Miller, G. F. (2011). [Humor ability reveals intelligence, predicts mating success, and is higher in males](#). *Intelligence*, 39(4), 188–192.

<sup>29</sup> Bressler, E. R., Martin, R. A., & Balshine, S. (2006). [Production and appreciation of humor as sexually selected traits](#). *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 27(2), 121–130.

<sup>30</sup> Tornquist, M., & Chiappe, D. (2015). [Effects of humor production, humor receptivity, and physical attractiveness on partner desirability](#). *Evolutionary Psychology*, 13(4), Article 1474704915608744.

<sup>31</sup> Driebe, J. C., Sidari, M. J., Dufner, M., von der Heiden, J. M., Bürkner, P. C., Penke, L., Zietsch, B. P., & Arslan, R. C. (2021). [Intelligence can be detected but is not found attractive in videos and live interactions](#). *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 42(6), 507–516.

<sup>32</sup> Novaes, F. C., & Natividade, J. C. (2023). [The sexual selection of creativity: A nomological approach](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 874261.

prestige, the kind of status that is earned through competence and prosocial value rather than intimidation.<sup>33</sup>

### Dating as Costly Signaling

The more effortful a signal is, the harder it is to fake, and the more believable it becomes. That's the core idea of **Costly Signaling Theory**: real commitment often shows up through actions that actually cost something, like time, energy, risk, or missed opportunities.<sup>34</sup>

In dating, people often read these “costs” as proof of sincerity. Time investment, emotional presence, and inconvenience can all function like evidence that someone is serious, because a person who is only half-interested usually won’t keep paying those costs for long. Watching a terrible movie just to be with you is a small but clear sacrifice. Even wasteful choices can carry meaning. A gift that is expensive but not practical, like a diamond ring, works precisely because it is not about utility. It signals “I’m willing to spend resources in a way that only makes sense if you matter to me.”<sup>35</sup>

### Understanding Sexual Conflict: Why It Goes Off the Rails

Dating can be more than confusing. It can feel emotionally rough. Part of that is because men and women often enter dating with overlapping interests, but also with goals that can pull in different directions.

In many evolutionary models, men tend to benefit more from gaining sexual access quickly, while women tend to benefit more from holding out for signs of commitment and investment before becoming sexually

<sup>33</sup> Henrich, J., & Gil-White, F. J. (2001). [The evolution of prestige: Freely conferred deference as a mechanism for enhancing the benefits of cultural transmission](#). *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 22(3), 165–196.

<sup>34</sup> Zahavi, A. (1975). [Mate selection—A selection for a handicap](#). *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 53(1), 205–214.

<sup>35</sup> Sozou, P. D., & Seymour, R. M. (2005). [Costly but worthless gifts facilitate courtship](#). *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 272(1575), 1877–1884.

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involved. When those priorities collide, people sometimes resort to manipulation or selective honesty to get what they want, leaving the other person feeling used, misled, or unsafe.

David Buss described this kind of conflict as **strategic interference**, where one person's mating strategy blocks or exploits the other's.<sup>36</sup> That helps explain why certain situations reliably trigger strong emotions. If someone promises commitment to get sex, or exaggerates interest to gain attention, resources, or validation, it can provoke anger, anxiety, and resentment. Those reactions make sense as protective responses because they push people to notice risk, respond to betrayal, and avoid repeating the same costly mistake.<sup>37</sup>

## What If Dating Confusion Is a Feature, Not a Flaw?

If dating feels messy, it's because it often is. A lot of the uncertainty is built into how people test each other. Ambiguity lets you show interest without overcommitting, flirt without promising anything, and step back without turning it into a crisis. Mixed signals can be frustrating, but they also give people room to experiment, adjust, and protect themselves.

We are running Stone Age software in a digital world. We evolved for village courtship, not global “swipe left or right” dynamics. The good part is that understanding this doesn't ruin dating. It makes it easier to read. It gives you more patience with yourself and others. It helps you take a step back and choose what you want, rather than reacting to every moment as if it proves something about your worth.

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<sup>36</sup> Buss, D. M. (1989). [Sex differences in human mate preferences: Evolutionary hypotheses tested in 37 cultures](#). *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 12(1), 1–49.

<sup>37</sup> Haselton, M. G., Buss, D. M., Oubaid, V., & Angleitner, A. (2005). [Sex, lies, and strategic interference: The psychology of deception between the sexes](#). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(1), 3–23.

## Why Is Dating So Complicated?

Because once you see dating not as a personality test, but as a series of competing evolutionary strategies, you can stop taking it personally. And that alone might make you more attractive.

### **Modern dating feels chaotic, but it's not broken — it's ancient.**

The confusion, mixed signals, and emotional rollercoasters we experience are rooted in psychological systems that were shaped by evolution long before apps or texting existed. Through frameworks like sexual selection and parental investment theory, we see that dating behaviors — from ghosting to status games — aren't random, but wired strategies for signaling value and navigating reproductive stakes.

Even the ambiguity we hate serves a purpose, giving people space to test interest without risking rejection. Understanding this science won't kill the romance, but it will give you clarity, empathy, and agency in a system that's more logical (and human) than it seems.

Inside ***The Solved Membership***, we take this even further. You'll get tools to help you date better by identifying the patterns holding you back, developing emotional clarity and confidence, and shifting your focus from external validation to aligned, values-based connection.

*“The Solved Membership is perfect for people who are curious and ready to accept uncomfortable truths about themselves, their loved ones, and their culture.”* – Dani

[Learn more about The Solved Membership and how you can join here.](#)

# Chapter 2: A Brief History of Courtship & Dating

## Why Modern Dating Anxiety Is Historically New

Today, choosing a romantic partner feels like a high-stakes psychological minefield. People agonize over whether they're choosing wrong, worry about missing "the one," and feel paralyzed by the sheer number of options available. This anxiety is easy to internalize as evidence of personal dysfunction or emotional incompetence. But the truth is far more nuanced.

Romantic choice, as we understand it today, is a historically recent invention. For most of human history, people didn't date, and they certainly didn't date in pursuit of personal fulfillment. Marriages were arranged, courtship was constrained, and love (if it happened at all), came after obligation. The modern model of dating, where individuals are expected to choose their own partners based on personal compatibility and emotional satisfaction, is barely a century old. And it's only in the last few decades that the burden of that choice has been placed fully on the individual.

In that light, modern dating stress is not irrational. It's the predictable outcome of a historically unprecedented level of freedom.

## Ancient Civilizations: Marriage as Alliance, Not Romance

In the ancient world, marriage was less a matter of love than of logistics. Whether in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, or China, marriage was primarily an economic, political, or kinship contract — a

way of transferring property, securing alliances, and consolidating family power.<sup>38</sup>

Romantic love existed, but it was culturally distinct from marriage and not required for it. The concept that a couple should choose each other based on feelings would have seemed naive or even dangerous.

In most cases:

- Families, not individuals, arranged the unions.
- Dowries and bride prices formalized the transfer of resources.
- Women's consent (and men's to a lesser degree) was optional or absent altogether.<sup>39</sup>

However, a few notable exceptions show us that greater autonomy was possible, even in ancient times.

Ancient Egypt stands out as remarkable. Egyptian women could own property, sign contracts without male permission, and most surprisingly, initiate divorce on equal terms with men.<sup>40</sup> Marriage contracts were negotiated directly between husband and wife, not through male relatives. If a woman wanted out of her marriage, she could leave and take her property with her. This level of legal equality wouldn't be seen again in Western societies for thousands of years.

In ancient India, the *swayamvara* ritual gave some high-born women limited say in marriage. The term literally means "self-choice," and in this ceremony, a bride would select a husband from assembled suitors. It sounds empowering, but the reality was more complicated. Only women from the warrior caste could participate, and often the bride's father set a test or competition. The woman then had to marry whoever

<sup>38</sup> Khatun, M., & Islam, M. (2023). [\*Ancient civilizations and marriage: Customs, traditions, and rituals\*](#). International Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities, 8(2).

<sup>39</sup> Anderson, S. (2007). [\*The economics of dowry and brideprice\*](#). *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 21(4), 151-174.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, J. (2022). [\*Marriage and divorce in ancient Egypt\*](#). Routledge.

won, regardless of her actual preference.<sup>41</sup> Famous examples from Hindu epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata show that swayamvara was often “self-choice” in name only. Still, it represented more agency than most women had at the time.

Also, many cultures allowed some courtship signaling at community gatherings. Village festivals, seasonal celebrations, and religious ceremonies gave young people supervised opportunities to meet and interact. However, these interactions happened under watchful eyes, within strict social boundaries, and rarely led to marriages that families hadn’t already approved.

These exceptions matter because they prove that extreme restrictions on women’s choice weren’t inevitable or universal. The fact that some ancient cultures granted women more autonomy shows that the oppressive systems that followed were social constructs, not natural law.

## Medieval Societies: Duty by Day, Romance by Imagination

As religion gained cultural dominance, marriage took on new meaning. Christianity elevated it to a sacrament,<sup>42</sup> while Islam formalized it as a contract with specific legal and ethical obligations. Yet in both cases, the system remained fundamentally hierarchical. Among the nobility, marriage was a tool of diplomacy, property consolidation, and succession.

However, commoners had more flexibility. Without estates to merge or kingdoms to preserve, lower-class individuals were more likely to marry for affection. But even here, economic considerations often played the deciding role. Approval from families, dowry negotiations, and community expectations still carried heavy weight. Many peasants

<sup>41</sup> Chatterjee, H. (1972). [\*The social background of the forms of marriage in ancient India\*](#). Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar.

<sup>42</sup> Dudziak, U. (Ed.). (2024). [\*The role of religion in marriage and family life\*](#). MDPI.

never officially married at all, simply because they couldn't afford the fees or permissions required by feudal lords.<sup>43</sup>

Yet something interesting happened in the realm of the imagination. Around the 12th century in Europe, a new cultural script emerged: courtly love. This wasn't a model for marriage, quite the opposite. It was a celebration of romantic longing outside the bounds of duty. Knights composed poetry, performed heroic deeds, and wore tokens from unattainable ladies. Tales like *Lancelot* and *Guinevere* didn't aim to inspire domestic fidelity. They elevated passion, often adulterous passion, to a kind of spiritual ideal.<sup>44</sup>

This created a profound cultural contradiction that persists to this day: marriage was about obligation; love was about escape.

### The Industrial Era: The Birth of Romantic Choice

By the 1700s, Enlightenment thinking began to shift attitudes. The idea that marriage should be based on affection and not just property or duty started to gain traction.

Urbanization and industrialization gave young adults greater independence from their families. For the first time, people had jobs, wages, and mobility. The extended family lost its grip, and a new phase emerged: courtship.

Courtship was still formal and heavily supervised. It involved family "calling," chaperoned visits, and letters exchanged under the watchful eye of parents. But it allowed space for individual feelings. Parents moved from decision-makers to gatekeepers. The Victorian ideal of marrying for love took hold, even as gender roles hardened. Men were

<sup>43</sup> Duby, G. (1983). [\*The knight, the lady, and the priest: The making of modern marriage in medieval France\*](#). University of Chicago Press.

<sup>44</sup> Lewis, C. S. (2013). [\*The allegory of love: A study in medieval tradition\*](#). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1936)

expected to operate in the public sphere; women, in the private. This “separate spheres” ideology limited women’s agency even as it romanticized their virtue.<sup>45</sup>

Technology, too, played a role. Railways expanded mobility. Postal systems enabled long-distance courtship. Newspapers introduced personal ads, which allowed individuals to market themselves romantically to strangers.<sup>46</sup> These were the earliest forms of mass matchmaking, the 19th-century equivalent of online dating.

By the late 1800s, a more radical shift occurred. The word “date” entered the cultural lexicon. For the first time, it became socially acceptable (though still controversial) for a man and a woman to go out in public together without a chaperone. At first, dating was associated with the working class and even viewed as scandalous. But it was a turning point: courtship was no longer confined to the home. Romance had entered the public square.

### **The Modern Era: Dating as Identity Expression**

By the 20th century, dating replaced courtship altogether. The model shifted from supervised evaluation to informal exploration. People met at school, work, and parties. The rise of youth culture, the loosening of parental authority, and the normalization of premarital sex all contributed to the shift.

Then came the sexual revolution. Birth control, no-fault divorce, and changing gender norms upended the old system entirely. For the first time in history, sex, marriage, and reproduction were no longer tied together. People began to cohabit without marrying, date without expectation of long-term commitment, and even openly reject

<sup>45</sup> Umstattd, T. (2015). [The 4000 year history of courtship](#).

<sup>46</sup> Classen, A. (2024). [The discourse of courtly love in medieval verse narratives](#). Encyclopedia, 4(4), 1904–1917.

monogamy. Dating became a vehicle for personal growth, identity exploration, and self-expression.

Technology continued to accelerate these changes. First came matchmaking services, then online dating websites.<sup>47</sup> But it was the rise of swipe-based apps that transformed everything. Algorithms replaced families as matchmakers. Filtering became algorithmic. Dates became first impressions. Connection became content.

At the same time, legitimacy expanded. Same-sex relationships gained legal recognition. Cohabitation became the norm. Long-term partnerships no longer require marriage at all. Today, the essential feature of dating is its optionality, and not just who you date, but whether you date at all.

### How History Explains Modern Dating Stress

All of this helps explain why modern dating feels so emotionally demanding. We live in a world of paradoxes:

- In the past, the problem was the **lack of choice**.
- Today, the problem is **too many choices**.

In previous eras, there were shared scripts, formal rituals, timelines, and expectations. Today, there are few widely agreed-upon norms. Each person is expected to negotiate the rules themselves, often with strangers who were raised in different social and ideological ecosystems.<sup>48</sup>

With increased autonomy comes increased responsibility. When a relationship fails, we don't blame our family, our village, or our

<sup>47</sup> Finkel, E. J., Eastwick, P. W., Karney, B. R., Reis, H. T., & Sprecher, S. (2012). [Online dating: A critical analysis from the perspective of psychological science](#). Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 13(1), 3–66.

<sup>48</sup> Powell, K. (2025). [Romance through the ages: Customs and history of love, marriage & dating](#). ThoughtCo.

circumstances. We blame ourselves. As a result, breakups feel existential. Ghosting, breadcrumbing, and slow fades don't just hurt; they feel like judgments of our character.<sup>49</sup>

What makes these experiences so painful is not only the loss itself, but the lack of ritual around it. In the past, rejection usually came with some form of acknowledgment. A conversation, a goodbye, a reason, or at least a shared understanding that something had ended. Today, there is often no clear moment to grieve, no language to push against, no boundary that confirms what has happened.

In the next chapter, we'll explore how this fractured ecosystem, born out of massive historical change, produces two parallel, and often opposing, systems of dating advice: one for men, and one for women. Each emerged to solve different evolutionary problems. Each creates new ones. And understanding them is the key to escaping the confusion.

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<sup>49</sup> Navarro, R., Larrañaga, E., Yubero, S., & Villora, B. (2020). [Psychological correlates of ghosting and breadcrumbing experiences: A preliminary study among adults](#). *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(3), Article 1116.

# Chapter 3: Men's and Women's Dating Advice Ecosystems

## Why Dating Advice Feels Hostile — and Everyone Feels Misunderstood

Spend five minutes in a men's dating forum, and you'll hear one thing over and over: women are impossible to read. Spend five minutes in a women's advice space, and the message flips: men are inconsistent, manipulative, or emotionally unavailable. Each side thinks the other is broken, selfish, or playing games.

But these are not just complaints. They are different systems of advice, strategy, and emotional framing that have evolved in parallel but incompatible ways. Most men and women are operating inside completely different psychological environments. And they're getting advice optimized for entirely different threats. That's why dating often feels adversarial. Each side is trained to solve a different problem, with tactics that the other side finds suspicious or off-putting.

Once you see the underlying structure, the hostility starts to make sense, and, more importantly, starts to look less personal.

### The Architecture of Divergence: Access vs. Safety

Men and women are not just given different advice. They are trained inside opposite constraints.

Men are taught how to be seen. Their early dating experiences are shaped by the constant possibility that no one will notice, respond to, or

find them desirable. For men, the danger is rejection and failure to initiate.<sup>50</sup>

Women, meanwhile, are trained to filter. Their early dating experiences are shaped by overexposure and receiving too much attention, most of it low-effort, ambiguous, or occasionally threatening.<sup>51</sup> For them, the danger is harm, disappointment, or wasted time.

These aren't arbitrary social trends. They're strategic adaptations. Evolutionary psychology calls this Error Management Theory: the idea that men and women evolved different cognitive biases to minimize the costliest mistake.<sup>52</sup> Men, on average, evolved to err on the side of over-perceiving interest. Women evolved to be skeptical of commitment signals. One side leans in. The other pulls back.

But when each side follows its own logic without understanding the other's, trust breaks down. One person's confidence could be read as aggression. One person's boundaries could be read as disinterest. The strategies don't just fail; they escalate the misunderstanding.

### Inside the Male Advice Ecosystem: The Architecture of Access

The advice men get is built around the fear of being invisible. It's not about safety or vetting, it's about action. Most men are told, explicitly or implicitly, that if they don't initiate, escalate, or lead, nothing will happen.

<sup>50</sup> Downey, G., & Feldman, S. I. (1996). [Implications of rejection sensitivity for intimate relationships](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(6), 1327–1343.

<sup>51</sup> Shuster, S., Bird, B. M., Buhler, T., Witzel, A., & Geniole, S. N. (2024). [Women's sensitivity to threat in online dating and the \(in\)effectiveness of standard safety warnings](#). *Computers in Human Behavior*, 157, Article 108234.

<sup>52</sup> Haselton, M. G., & Buss, D. M. (2000). [Error management theory: A new perspective on biases in cross-sex mind reading](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(1), 81–91.

This creates a playbook that rewards boldness, confidence, and momentum. And for some, it works, at least in the early stages. But it also breeds performance.

Men are told that relationships are something you earn through self-improvement. If you lift more, earn more, dress better, and become more confident, then eventually, you'll deserve affection. The assumption is that attraction is a reward for being impressive enough.

That logic is seductive, especially to men who already feel invisible. But it comes with baggage. It makes dating transactional. It encourages men to simulate interest rather than feeling it. It teaches them to treat connection like a problem to be solved, not an experience to be shared.<sup>53</sup>

This is where things start to go sideways. Pickup culture takes this logic to its extreme, reducing attraction to sequences, tactics, and behavioral hacks. Women become puzzles. Conversations become scripts. The goal is not to connect but to convert.

Even in more nuanced spaces, this mindset often persists. Many men don't learn to evaluate compatibility. They learn to optimize for response rate.<sup>54</sup> And when that fails, the blame doesn't always go inward, because it's easy to externalize. To decide that women only want the wrong kinds of men. That the game is rigged. That effort is pointless unless it leads to a win.

## Inside the Female Advice Ecosystem: The Architecture of Discernment

<sup>53</sup> Ging, D. (2019). [Alphas, betas, and incels: Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere](#). *Men and Masculinities*, 22(4), 638–657.

<sup>54</sup> Ward, L. M., Rosenscruggs, D., & Aguinaldo, E. R. (2025). [A scripted sexuality: Media, gendered sexual scripts, and their impact on our lives](#). *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 31(4).

Women's dating advice assumes the opposite problem: not that no one is interested, but that too many people are, and most for the wrong reasons. As a result, the emphasis is on boundaries.

Women are told to be vigilant. Don't ignore red flags. Don't overextend. Don't initiate. If a man wants you, he'll pursue you. If he doesn't, move on. The whole structure is designed to prevent emotional overinvestment in people who can't or won't meet you halfway.

There's a good reason for this. Many women are navigating constant attention in the form of messages, comments, likes, subtle manipulation, or outright deception. If they engage too easily, they're punished. If they push too hard, they're labeled. Filtering becomes essential. But when it becomes the only skill developed, it also becomes a trap.

In many female spaces, discernment starts to look like cynicism. Advice becomes pathologizing: he's "avoidant," "narcissistic," "emotionally unavailable." Anything that triggers discomfort is labeled as toxic. And while therapeutic language can be useful, it can also over-medicalize normal relationship friction.<sup>55</sup> Not every boundary is a trauma response. Not every guy who hesitates is emotionally broken.

Add to this "strategic non-initiation"—the widespread belief that if a woman initiates, she'll never know if the man actually wanted her, or she was just the easy option. This can produce learned passivity. Women wait. And wait. And when nothing happens, they often conclude that no decent people are out there or that all the good ones are taken.

This advice teaches protection, not connection. And just like in the male system, that leads to defensiveness that looks like coldness, or emotional rigor that hides fear. Both sides end up saying they want intimacy while actively avoiding the behaviors that would invite it.

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<sup>55</sup> Eramian, L., Mallory, P., & Herbert, M. (2024). [Friendship, intimacy, and the contradictions of therapy culture](#). *Cultural Sociology*, 18(4), 507–527.

## Feedback Loops That Break the Market

These two ecosystems actively work against each other.

- Men are told to be persistent.
- Women are told to distrust persistence.
- Men are told to lead decisively.
- Women are told to view that decisiveness with suspicion.

Each side is trying to solve its own problem, but the strategies cancel each other out.<sup>56</sup>

The result is a feedback loop that neither side knows how to escape. Men, discouraged by rejection, increase their volume by sending more messages, taking more shots. Women, exhausted by low-quality attention, increase their filters by screening harder, and responding less. Each response confirms the other's worst assumptions. She gets more guarded. He gets more aggressive. And the people trying to act with nuance—to respect boundaries, to go slow, to express interest without pressure—often get lost in the middle.

This is where resentment grows. The “nice guy” who thinks kindness should be rewarded becomes bitter when it isn’t.<sup>57</sup> The woman who sets boundaries gets called cold or manipulative. Each side is measuring success by rules that the other side didn’t agree to.

And no one is learning what they actually need. Men aren’t taught how to detect emotional readiness, sense mutual interest, or distinguish warmth from politeness. Women aren’t taught how to signal desire clearly, how to initiate safely, or how to navigate uncertainty without

<sup>56</sup> Wu, C. H., & Chiou, W. B. (2009). [The impact of matching expectations on dating preferences: If you don't know what to expect, you may settle](#). *Sex Roles*, 61(1–2), 81–91.

<sup>57</sup> Weinmann, B., & Waskul, D. D. (2025). ["I'm a good guy who deserves better, yet nobody wants to give me better": The accounts of nice guys](#). *Symbolic Interaction*. Advance online publication.

retreating.<sup>58</sup> Both are navigating a dating market full of people who are emotionally under-trained and hyper-defended.

### But What If...

What if dating advice isn't broken and it's just incomplete?

What if most of what we call dating dysfunction isn't about bad people, but mismatched strategies? What if most men and women are acting rationally under pressure, using tools built to solve opposite problems, and now those tools are clashing?

The solution isn't to find better tactics. It's to build a shared language. To stop teaching men and women to optimize against each other, and start teaching them to coordinate. To recognize when your strategy is making it harder for someone else to show up, and when theirs is making it harder for you.

Because dating isn't a game where one side wins. It's a negotiation between fears. And the people who succeed and who actually connect aren't the ones with the best scripts or the highest standards. They're the ones who learn how to speak both dialects. Those who can hear hesitation as hope; who can name interest without fear. Those who can lean in without losing themselves.

The future of dating isn't a gendered strategy. It's psychological literacy. And the people who learn it will not only date better, they'll become the people others feel safe showing up for.

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<sup>58</sup> Tokumaru, R. S. (2022). [Women initiating romantic interaction in modern dating: A review](#). *Journal of Social Psychology*, 162(4), 510–526.

**Dating isn't just a social skill — it's a system shaped by biology, psychology, and thousands of years of cultural evolution.**

It starts with ancient instincts wired for survival and reproduction, evolves through gendered strategies shaped by parental investment, and ends in modern confusion, where everyone's playing by different rules with no shared script. This mix of old instincts and new expectations is why dating feels so chaotic, but it's not your fault.

When you understand the evolutionary roots of attraction, courtship, and emotional conflict, dating stops feeling like a series of personal failures and starts making sense. The problem isn't you. It's the system you've inherited.

Inside ***The Solved Membership***, you'll learn how to navigate that system with clarity. You'll uncover your own patterns, understand the pressures shaping modern dating, and learn how to connect with real people, not just perform for them. This isn't about dating harder — it's about dating smarter, with strategies that align with your values and work in real life.

*“The Solved Membership is different from other self help products through clear explanation with small actionable steps to implement what you've learned.”* – Debbie

[Find out more about The Solved Membership here.](#)

## Chapter 4: The Pre-Dating Phase

Before chemistry, before conversation, before anyone knows if you’re smart, funny, kind, or interesting, something else happens. A snap judgment. A gut reaction. A silent yes, or more often, a silent no.

This happens so fast we don’t even notice it. Studies suggest that it takes less than a second for someone to form an impression of us based solely on appearance.<sup>59</sup> Before personality can matter, the brain wants to know: *Is this person even a possibility for me?*

This is the pre-dating phase. It’s where people are filtered in or out of romantic consideration before they even open their mouths. And despite how unfair that sounds, this stage isn’t about depth, or decency, or who someone really is. It’s about signaling. It’s about sending the kinds of cues that human beings, through millennia of evolutionary pressure, have learned to respond to, often unconsciously.

When people struggle here, they often misinterpret the problem. They think they’re unlovable or not “enough.” But that’s not the issue. The issue is signal failure. If this stage isn’t working for you, it doesn’t mean people wouldn’t like you if they got to know you. It means they’re not getting the chance to.

### What This Phase Is Actually Solving

At zero acquaintance, the moment when two people don’t know anything about each other, the brain isn’t asking deep questions about compatibility. It’s making rapid, risk-averse decisions using limited information. The goal isn’t to find a soulmate. It’s to avoid wasting time.

To do this, the mind defaults to two categories of signal:

<sup>59</sup> Willis, J., & Todorov, A. (2006). [First impressions: Making up your mind after a 100-ms exposure to a face](#). *Psychological Science*, 17(7), 592–598.

## The Pre-Dating Phase

1. **Condition cues** — signals of health, vitality, and genetic fitness.
2. **Investment cues** — signals of status, competence, and direction.

These are probabilistic judgments wired by evolutionary pressure. Throughout history, these cues were imperfect but useful predictors of someone's reproductive and relational viability.<sup>60,61</sup> While we may no longer be choosing mates exclusively for child-rearing or survival, our brains still use the same shortcuts.

This filtering process is not about morality. It's not a referendum on your value. When we meet someone new, our brains are simply asking: *Is this person in the zone of possibility?* And if the answer is no, they're often gone before the interaction even starts.

Understanding this doesn't fix rejection, but reframes it. It makes it impersonal, because at this stage, it is.

## Key Skills of the Pre-Dating Phase

### Appearance: The Art of Signal Clarity

When people hear “appearance,” they usually think about beauty — traits like bone structure, height, symmetry, or youth. But that’s not what this phase is really about. Most pre-dating attraction is less about genetic luck and more about signal clarity: how clearly you are broadcasting health, vitality, and social viability.

The main components of that clarity are:

- Grooming and hygiene
- Posture and physical energy

<sup>60</sup> Buss, D. M. (1989). [Sex differences in human mate preferences: Evolutionary hypotheses tested in 37 cultures](#). *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 12(1), 1–49.

<sup>61</sup> Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. (1993). [Sexual strategies theory: An evolutionary perspective on human mating](#). *Psychological Review*, 100(2), 204–232.

## The Pre-Dating Phase

- Clothing fit and contextual appropriateness
- Body composition and facial expressiveness

Meta-analyses show that people consistently rate symmetrical, average, and healthy-looking faces and bodies as more attractive, because they're easier for the brain to process under stress.<sup>62,63,64</sup>

Importantly, the impact of appearance drops sharply after interaction begins. Once people talk, move, and engage socially, personality starts to dominate attraction, and static appearance loses predictive power.<sup>65</sup> But you can't get to that point if the signals don't land.

Most people who struggle with appearance in dating aren't unattractive. But their signals might be muddled, inconsistent, or neglected. The cues they're sending don't match the context they're in. Or worse, they're not sending any cues at all.

And this is especially true in online dating. There, you only get the pre-dating phase. Photos are the entire filtering mechanism, and their effectiveness is determined less by conventional beauty and more by energy, authenticity, and attention to detail.

When people say “just be yourself,” what they often mean is: *be the version of yourself whose signals actually come through.*

## Confidence: The Signal of Emotional Regulation

<sup>62</sup> Langlois, J. H., & Roggman, L. A. (1990). [Attractive faces are only average](#). *Psychological Science*, 1(2), 115–121.

<sup>63</sup> Little, A. C., Jones, B. C., & DeBruine, L. M. (2011). [Facial attractiveness: Evolutionary based research](#). *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 366(1571), 1638–1659.

<sup>64</sup> Rhodes, G. (2006). [The evolutionary psychology of facial beauty](#). *Annual Review of Psychology*, 57, 199–226.

<sup>65</sup> Eastwick, P. W., & Finkel, E. J. (2008). [Sex differences in mate preferences revisited: Do people know what they initially desire in a romantic partner?](#) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94(2), 245–264.

## The Pre-Dating Phase

Confidence in the pre-dating phase doesn't mean bravado or dominance. It means self-regulation under uncertainty. The ability to be emotionally grounded in the face of ambiguity, to move through social space without signaling desperation or threat.<sup>66</sup>

People interpret calmness as a proxy for safety. Someone who appears steady, relaxed, and curious is easier to trust. In contrast, someone who seems emotionally volatile, overly eager, or tightly wound signals potential risk, even if that impression is unfair.

Studies have shown that people who merely appear confident are often perceived as more competent and desirable, regardless of their actual skill level.<sup>67</sup> That's because confidence acts as a stand-in for something deeper: predictability. The assumption is that people who aren't overwhelmed by anxiety are more socially functional and emotionally safe.

Of course, this can backfire. Overconfidence — especially when paired with coldness — is often read as arrogance or threat, especially in egalitarian cultures.<sup>68</sup> The sweet spot is calm assertiveness. The ability to take initiative without dominance. To be relaxed without being passive. To be expressive without being reactive.

And crucially, confidence is not about how you feel. It's about what you signal. In practice, that means moving first. Making the plan. Holding eye contact. And, most of all, being okay with silence.

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<sup>66</sup> Whitchurch, E. R., Wilson, T. D., & Gilbert, D. T. (2011). "[He loves me, he loves me not...](#)" Uncertainty can increase romantic attraction. *Psychological Science*, 22, 172–175.

<sup>67</sup> Anderson, C., & Kilduff, G. J. (2009). [Why do dominant personalities attain influence in face-to-face groups? The competence-signaling effects of trait dominance](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(2), 491–503.

<sup>68</sup> Cheng, J. T., Tracy, J. L., & Henrich, J. (2013). [Two ways to the top: Evidence that dominance and prestige are distinct yet viable avenues to social rank and influence](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104(1), 103–125.

## The Pre-Dating Phase

In early attraction, your ability to regulate uncertainty is one of the most powerful signals you can send.

### **Status: The Shortcut to Stability**

Status is one of the most misinterpreted features of attraction. It's often framed in moral terms, as if caring about someone's job, ambition, or income makes you superficial. But status, in the evolutionary sense, isn't about wealth.

When people don't know you yet, they use status cues like job title, education, ambition, lifestyle, and social proof to estimate competence, direction, and long-term stability. It's not about being flashy. It's about suggesting that your life is going somewhere and that other people respect you enough to come along.

Cross-cultural research shows that status matters more for women choosing men than vice versa, especially in long-term contexts. That's because, historically, a man's ability to provide played a big role in whether children survived.<sup>69</sup> But even today, regardless of gender, status still functions as a shorthand for a viable signal that someone can show up, provide structure, and navigate complexity.

That said, status is context-sensitive. In live interaction, its influence drops dramatically. Once people begin talking, warmth, humor, and responsiveness quickly outweigh credentials. But in the pre-dating phase (especially online) status is a shortcut for trust.

That's why someone's job title in a dating app bio can mean more than it should. Not because the job itself matters, but because it functions as a proxy for stability. People want proof of direction.

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<sup>69</sup> Buss, D. M. (1989). [Sex differences in human mate preferences: Evolutionary hypotheses tested in 37 cultures](#). *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 12(1), 1–49.

## Common Mistakes People Make in the Pre-Dating Phase

The biggest mistake people make at this stage is trying to skip it. They try to bypass surface-level filtering by emphasizing personality — being thoughtful, deep, or emotionally intelligent before anyone's even paying attention. They write long, introspective bios. They overshare in DMs. They try to connect at level four when the other person is still deciding if they're even a level one option.

It doesn't work. Not because those traits aren't valuable, but because they aren't legible until someone has already chosen to engage. People don't see your empathy, intellect, or depth until they've already filtered you *in*. You can't lead with complexity when the brain is still operating in shorthand.

The second mistake is moralizing attraction. Treating rejection as evidence of moral failure — theirs or yours. Neither “They’re shallow” or “I’m not attractive enough” is useful. Rejection at this stage is rarely personal. It reflects context, stress levels, visual cues, and attention bandwidth far more than character.

And finally, many people treat early rejection as global feedback, as if not being chosen by someone means they’re universally undesirable. In reality, early rejection reflects thousands of invisible factors, most of which have nothing to do with who you are.

That’s the paradox of this phase: you have the least control over it, but you’re most likely to take it personally.

If you’re struggling in the pre-dating phase, it doesn’t mean you’re unlovable. It doesn’t mean you need to change who you are. This stage of dating isn’t about passing a test. It’s about getting through the filter. So that the things that actually make you valuable — your depth, your honesty, your emotional intelligence — get a chance to be seen.

Modern dating can feel like a high-stakes test of your worth, but that's not because something's wrong with you. It's because the early stages of attraction operate on fast, unconscious filters designed to assess viability, not depth. When your signals don't land, it's easy to take rejection personally or assume you're unlovable. But the truth is simpler: people just didn't get the chance to see who you really are.

**The key isn't to overhaul your personality or try harder to be impressive. It's to refine how you show up — so the traits that make you a great partner can actually be noticed.** That starts with clarity: the way you carry yourself, signal emotional stability, and communicate direction in your life. When you learn to send stronger, more coherent signals, you give people something to connect with...something to say yes to.

This is what we focus on inside ***The Solved Membership***. You'll learn how to navigate the pre-dating phase with more confidence and less self-doubt so you're not stuck analyzing rejection, but building momentum. You don't need to become someone else. You just need the tools to make sure you come through.

[Join \*The Solved Membership\* today.](#)

# Chapter 5: Meeting People and Getting Dates

After someone becomes visible — after they've cleared the pre-dating filter of "Would a stranger even consider me?" — most people expect things to get easier. But for many, dating actually gets harder. Not because they're unattractive or uninteresting, but because they're running into a new bottleneck: exposure.

You cannot date people you never meet. And you cannot build connections with people who pass through your life only once. Yet most modern lives are structured in ways that make organic connections rare, brief, or prohibitively awkward. As a result, people experience dating not as a failure of charm or compatibility, but as a failure of proximity. The problem isn't that you're not desirable. It's that you're not being encountered enough.

This stage of dating — between visibility and actual connection — is shaped by the systems you're in. If the pre-dating phase is about signal clarity, this one is about access. And the people who struggle here aren't doing it wrong. They're just trying to build relationships without the infrastructure.

## Dating Outcomes Are Constrained by Exposure

It's tempting to treat dating as a purely personal endeavor. But most of the outcomes people experience are dictated not by personal traits, but by opportunity structure; the where, when, and how of who you come into contact with.

Sociologists have shown that most romantic success is governed by exposure frequency.<sup>70</sup> The more often you encounter someone, the more likely a connection is to form — even in the absence of initial chemistry. That's why office romances, school crushes, and friendships that turn romantic are so common. Familiarity lends comfort. Comfort creates room for attraction to grow.

But modern life has become exposure-poor. Most people spend the majority of their time in isolated bubbles, commuting alone, and working behind screens. Even dating apps, which promise unlimited access, tend to reinforce this isolation. They give you *volume*, not *exposure*, to a flood of strangers you'll never meet, filtered through an interface designed to monetize indecision.<sup>71</sup>

This is why so many people feel stuck. They aren't bad at dating. They just don't have a pipeline.

### What This Phase Is Psychologically Solving

At this stage, the mind is not asking, *Do I find this person hot?* That's already been answered. It's now solving a different set of problems:

- *How do I transition from awareness to action?*
- *How do I move from passive connection (liking, matching, seeing) to active engagement (conversation, scheduling, momentum)?*
- *How do I reduce the friction between noticing someone and forming something?*

<sup>70</sup> Zajonc, R. B. (1968). [Attitudinal effects of mere exposure](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 9(2, Pt. 2), 1-27.

<sup>71</sup> Binder, A., Stevic, A., Matthes, J., & Thomas, M. F. (2024). [Dating algorithms? Investigating the reciprocal relationships between partner choice FOMO, decision fatigue, excessive swiping, and trust in algorithms on dating apps](#). *New Media & Society*. Advance online publication.

This is where dating breaks down for most people. Not because of disinterest, but because friction wins. Life gets busy. Texts go unanswered. There is mutual interest, but the conditions never align.

And those logistics can be brutal. Studies of online messaging and dating suggest that even small frictions — slower replies, low-effort first messages, and greater geographic distance — are associated with lower reply rates and less progression from chat to meeting.<sup>72,73</sup> People don't reject each other for deep reasons. They drift apart over micro-mismatches in time, location, or availability.

## Key Skills in Meeting People and Getting Dates

### Digital Dating Skills: The Interface Isn't the Problem — the Approach Is

There's a persistent narrative that online dating is inferior. That it's fake, soulless, or inherently broken. In contrast, offline connection is romanticized as more natural, more meaningful, and more human.

But this is a false dichotomy. Psychologically, there's no meaningful difference between meeting someone on an app and meeting them in a coffee shop. What matters is the context around the interaction, not the medium.

Both systems have tradeoffs.

Apps offer scale. They compress time and distance. They let you see more people faster, and apply filters that protect your time. But they also create distortion.<sup>74</sup> They turn people into products. They reward

<sup>72</sup> Bruch, E., & Newman, M. E. J. (2018). [Aspirational pursuit of mates in online dating markets](#). *Science Advances*, 4(8).

<sup>73</sup> Bruch, E., & Newman, M. E. J. (2019). [Structure of Online Dating Markets in U.S. Cities](#). *Sociological Science*, 6, 180–198.

<sup>74</sup> D'Angelo, J. D., & Toma, C. L. (2017). [There are plenty of fish in the sea: Perceived abundance in online dating](#). *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 34(4), 510–531.

attention-grabbing over authenticity. They make it easy to dismiss nuance and keep swiping, even after you find someone good.

Offline dating offers warmth. You get richer cues such as voice, movement, social energy, and body language. But offline exposure is increasingly rare and less efficient. You can't "swipe away" the twenty people at a party. You might only speak to one. And you'll need far more patience to wait for the right opportunity to arise organically.

Neither system is superior. They just optimize for different things. Apps amplify your existing patterns. If you're thriving socially, apps increase your reach. If you're isolated or unclear, they tend to compound the problem. And offline dating? It's just under-resourced.

The goal isn't to choose one. It is about understanding what each system is solving for you and then building a strategy around it.

Most frustration with online dating comes from misunderstanding what the interface is designed to do. People treat apps like personality tests or compatibility engines. They aren't. They're filters. And your profile isn't a biography, it's a signal relay.

Photos dominate. Bios are rarely read unless there's visual interest. Messaging is not for bonding. It's for transition. The goal is to move from the app to a richer medium like voice, video, or in-person as quickly as comfort allows.

But many users fall into the trap of over-messaging. They treat chat as courtship. They fall into "textual pen-pal" limbo — spending weeks trading messages that go nowhere. This doesn't build a connection. It builds idealization, fatigue, and confusion.

The people who succeed in digital dating understand this: texting is a bridge, not a destination.

## Flirting: The Function Isn't Seduction — It's Ambiguity Reduction

Flirting gets misunderstood. People think it's about seduction — about being sexy or clever. But at its core, flirting is about reducing ambiguity. It lets both parties signal interest without committing to anything irreversible. It's a low-stakes dance of mutual checking-in:

- “Is this welcome?”
- “Is this reciprocated?”
- “Do we want to keep going?”

And it's mostly nonverbal. Eye contact. Smiles. Physical proximity. Timing. The difference between friendliness and flirtation is often less about the words and more about how long someone holds your gaze after a joke.

Flirting, done well, invites escalation. But done poorly — especially when rushed or context-blind — it increases awkwardness. And in many modern settings, where social cues are already fragile, and people are afraid of misreading intent, bad flirting doesn't just stall momentum — it creates discomfort.<sup>75</sup>

The goal isn't to impress. It's to open a space for connection to emerge.

## Reading People: The Difference Between Hope and Signal

This is the phase where most people burn themselves out from misreading ambiguity as possibility. They confuse politeness with attraction. They project interest where none exists. They chase what they think is there — instead of what actually is.

People don't usually say no. They just don't say yes. They delay. They disappear. They stop replying. Or they keep the conversation going but

<sup>75</sup> Henningsen, D. D. (2004). [Flirting with meaning: An examination of miscommunication in flirting interactions](#). *Sex Roles*, 50(7-8), 481-489.

never move it forward. These are not mixed signals. They are gentle exits.

And yet, many daters persist because they were trained to believe that interest should be earned. That the right joke, the right message, the right move could unlock someone's heart. They chase behavior that isn't reciprocated because they're afraid that giving up means giving in.

But attraction is usually quieter than people expect. And disinterest is usually louder.

Learning to distinguish between reciprocity and potential chemistry is the most important skill at this stage. Because it saves your energy for the people who are already trying to meet you halfway.

### Common Failure Modes in This Phase

There are a few predictable breakdowns that happen over and over again.

1. First is the endless messaging trap. People delay meetings because they want to feel certain — to pre-screen, to build connection, to avoid risk. But the longer you delay, the less likely it is to happen. Chemistry fades. Interest cools. Texting becomes a substitute for actual movement.
2. Second is waiting to be chosen. Especially in app environments, many people — particularly women — default to passivity. They swipe, match, and wait. The logic is often safety-driven, but the outcome is stagnation. The matches pile up. The conversations die. Nothing happens.
3. Third is perceiving rejection as personal. Most people disappear not because you did something wrong, but because they weren't

ready, or they were juggling too many options, or they didn't feel the chemistry. It doesn't mean you weren't good enough. It means the connection wasn't real — or it wasn't ripe.

Dating at this stage is mostly a filtering process, not a referendum on your worth.

If you're stuck in this phase, the issue probably isn't confidence or character. It's infrastructure. You don't have enough exposure, or your system isn't translating interest into momentum.

The solution here is to build better pipelines — more frequent, low-stakes exposures that reduce ambiguity and increase frictionless action. Because momentum isn't built on intention. It's built through proximity.

And if you can solve that, the rest gets easier.

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# Chapter 6: Going on Dates

## Key Question: “Do We Want to Keep Seeing Each Other?”

By the time two people are sitting across from each other, the game has changed.

The earlier phases of attraction, matching, and messaging were about filtering and visibility. They were built on limited information and evolutionary heuristics: looks, status, vibes, signals. But dates are different. On a date, you’re not being evaluated in the abstract. You’re being experienced.

At this point, most people are no longer asking, “*Is this person attractive?*” They’re asking, “*How does it feel to be around them?*”

This shift from filtering to experiencing marks the beginning of real relational data. You move from guessing to sensing. From idealizing to interacting. And here, chemistry is co-created.

But that doesn’t mean it’s easy. If anything, this is the stage where a lot of promising connections quietly fall apart, because dating isn’t about showcasing who you are. It’s about how you make other people feel when they’re around you.

### What This Phase Is Psychologically Solving

On a date, the brain stops asking abstract questions about mate value. Instead, it becomes preoccupied with immediacy:

- *Do I feel safe?*
- *Do I feel energized?*
- *Do I feel understood?*
- *Do I want to keep going?*

These questions are answered by the dyadic processes of moment-to-moment exchanges that determine how two nervous systems regulate together.

Research shows that so-called “chemistry” doesn’t correlate well with surface behaviors like smiling or joking. Instead, it maps more closely to interpersonal synchrony, like subtle mirroring, emotional resonance, and ease of coordination.<sup>76</sup> In other words, attraction in this phase is less about traits and more about timing, tone, and responsiveness.

And that’s why so many people feel frustrated at this stage. Someone can look perfect on paper, say all the right things, and still leave you feeling flat. Conversely, someone unexpected can make you feel present, grounded, or electrified for reasons you can’t articulate. This is what makes dating difficult, but also what makes it so interesting.

## Key Skills for Going on Dates and Maintaining Connection

### Emotional Regulation: The Hidden Skill That Dates Are Actually Testing

Dating is, by definition, uncertain. You don’t know how the other person feels. You don’t know if you’re doing well. You don’t know what happens next. And that ambiguity creates anxiety — which, if unmanaged, becomes the biggest killer of connection.

The people who struggle most on dates are rarely unattractive or socially inept. They’re dysregulated. They spin out in their own heads. They rehearse. They monitor. They try to perform calmness instead of feeling it. And the more they do this, the less present they become, which is exactly what makes them hard to connect with.

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<sup>76</sup> Prochazkova, E., Sjak-Shie, E., Behrens, F., Lindh, D., & Kret, M. E. (2022). [Physiological synchrony is associated with attraction in a blind date setting](#). *Nature Human Behaviour*, 6(2), 269–278.

Emotional regulation is not about hiding your emotions. It's about staying in your body, listening, and tracking the interaction without disappearing into self-consciousness.

People who regulate well are perceived as warmer, safer, and more emotionally intelligent.<sup>77,78</sup> Not because they say the right things, but because they're easier to be around. Their steadiness invites disclosure. Their calmness allows for play. And that makes them not just more attractive but more *rewarding* to spend time with.

This is why many anxious daters over-rely on scripts or pre-planned topics. They're trying to avoid the discomfort of uncertainty when, in fact, tolerating uncertainty is the skill that dates are actually testing.

### Trustworthiness: The Most Underrated Dimension of First Dates

We often think of first dates as chemistry tests. But many people are actually testing for something subtler: follow-through.

Trust doesn't just mean honesty. On a date, trustworthiness shows up as behavioral consistency.

- Do your actions match your words?
- Are you present or distracted?
- Do you take ownership of your intent, or hide behind jokes and ambiguity?

Longitudinal studies show that trust, specifically the perception that someone is emotionally responsive and reliable, is one of the strongest

<sup>77</sup> Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2018). *Attachment in adulthood: Structure, dynamics, and change* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

<sup>78</sup> Simpson, J. A., & Rholes, W. S. (2017). *Adult attachment, stress, and romantic relationships*. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 13, 19–24.

predictors of long-term relationship quality.<sup>79</sup> And while it doesn't always create an initial spark, it determines whether the spark sticks.

People don't just want connection. They want to feel like they're not alone in holding it up.

That's why flakiness, vagueness, and over-apologizing are so damaging. They don't just make you look disorganized. They erode the sense that someone could actually *relax* with you.

Attraction often begins with chemistry. But it deepens through reliability.

### Boundaries: Regulators of Pace

There's a common myth that boundaries kill attraction; that saying no makes things cold or awkward. In reality, healthy boundaries are what make sustainable attraction possible.

Boundaries aren't ultimatums. They're pacing tools. They regulate how fast vulnerability, intimacy, and escalation move. And that pacing is crucial because too much intensity, too soon, tends to burn itself out.

Research shows that relationships that "slide" into intimacy emotionally or sexually without explicit decisions tend to have poorer long-term outcomes.<sup>80,81</sup> Not because early connection is bad, but because momentum outpaces clarity.

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<sup>79</sup> Joel, S., Eastwick, P. W., Allison, C. J., et al. (2020). [Machine learning uncovers the most robust self-report predictors of relationship quality across 43 longitudinal couples studies](#). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117(32), 19061–19071.

<sup>80</sup> Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). [Sliding versus deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect](#). *Family Relations*, 55(4), 499–509.

<sup>81</sup> Owen, J., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2013). [Sliding versus deciding in relationships: Associations with relationship quality, commitment, and stability](#). *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 12(2), 135–149.

Clear boundaries signal maturity, self-awareness, and the ability to regulate one's own needs. They prevent resentment. They invite respect. And they protect the kind of tension that actually makes dating feel alive.

People think boundaries kill the spark. But usually, they protect it.

### Conversation Skills: Why Depth Emerges from Ease

People assume that good dates are defined by deep conversation filled with revelations, philosophy, and vulnerability. Research on self-disclosure shows that moderate, reciprocal sharing builds intimacy far better than premature depth.<sup>82</sup> Dumping your life story early can overwhelm or confuse someone. But gradually increasing vulnerability, while tracking the other person's signals, creates the conditions for actual connection.

What matters more than what you say is how attuned you are to how it lands. Responsiveness — that sense of being listened to, understood, and emotionally seen — is what drives connection forward.

Conversation on dates isn't about impressing. It's about attunement. And attunement requires letting go of the outcome, and tracking the moment instead.

- Sometimes that means asking good questions.
- Sometimes it means knowing when to change the subject.
- Sometimes it just means letting silence hang for a second longer than you're used to.

Ease isn't a lack of effort. It's the outcome of well-regulated attention.

### Reframing the Spark Myth

<sup>82</sup> Collins, N. L., & Miller, L. C. (1994). [Self-disclosure and liking: A meta-analytic review](#). *Psychological Bulletin*, 116(3), 457–475.

We've been sold the idea that attraction is instant. That if it's right, you'll feel it immediately. That dates should be electric, otherwise, it's a "no."

But in reality, the spark is just arousal. And arousal can come from all sorts of things: novelty, excitement, and even fear. One famous study found that people on a high, shaky bridge were more likely to report romantic attraction than those on solid ground because their bodies misinterpreted fear as excitement.<sup>83</sup>

What feels like magic may just be cortisol.

Conversely, many of the best relationships start not with fire, but with something gentler: a kind of low-key momentum. A desire to keep talking. A sense that things feel easy. Not explosive, but safe. Engaging. Comfortable in a way that invites curiosity.

That's not a consolation prize. That's the real thing.

As Eastwick and Finkel have shown, our stated preferences and initial impressions often don't predict who we actually connect with over time. What we *think* we want rarely survives contact with the real thing. And the real thing often starts quieter than we expect.<sup>84</sup>

The spark is nice. But consistency is what builds attraction that lasts.

A good date isn't one where you say all the right things or feel a massive rush of dopamine. A good date is when you feel more like yourself and are curious about the other person.

This phase of dating isn't about winning someone over. It's about testing for co-regulation.

<sup>83</sup> Dutton, D. G., & Aron, A. P. (1974). [Some evidence for heightened sexual attraction under conditions of high anxiety](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 30(4), 510–517.

<sup>84</sup> Eastwick, P. W., Luchies, L. B., Finkel, E. J., & Hunt, L. L. (2014). [The many voices of Darwin's descendants: Reply to Miller](#) (2014). *Psychological Bulletin*, 140(3), 673–681.

## Going on Dates

- Can we share space?
- Can we move at the same pace?
- Can we create something new together, even for a moment?

When dating is working, it doesn't feel like a performance. It feels playful.

And if it doesn't, it's not a failure. It's just feedback.

Dating was never meant to be a solo grind, but in today's world, it often is. Without the right structure, it becomes a maze of missed signals, delayed replies, and fleeting connections that never quite take off. Instead of feeling exciting, dating can start to feel like pressure: to impress, to perform, to "win" someone over. Over time, this erodes your energy, breeds self-doubt, and makes even small moments feel like high-stakes tests.

But when you stop chasing perfection and start designing for connection, everything shifts. You move from guessing to sensing, from performance to presence. Dating becomes less about proving your worth and more about building shared rhythm, clarity, and trust. It's not about overhauling your personality—it's about reducing friction, reading signals clearly, and pacing intimacy in a way that builds real momentum.

If you're ready to stop spinning your wheels and start creating a connection that lasts, ***The Solved Membership*** offers tools and guidance to make dating feel less confusing and more human—so you can move through it with more clarity, confidence, and calm.

[Join \*The Solved Membership\* today.](#)

## Chapter 7: The 80/20 of Dating

Dating advice can turn into noise fast. Texting “rules,” timelines, scripts, strategies, and endless hot takes about what you should or shouldn’t do by date three, date four, week two, month one.

Most of it is a distraction.

Not because details don’t matter, but because rules don’t account for the person in front of you. They ignore context. They ignore individuality. They turn dating into a performance where you’re constantly managing optics instead of building an actual connection.

Principles work better than rules.

Principles keep you grounded across different people, different situations, and different levels of chemistry. They also protect you from the biggest dating trap: trying to “figure it out” with someone who isn’t showing up consistently.

That’s what the 80/20 is for.

You don’t need to master ten skills to improve your dating life. You need a few high-leverage practices that immediately reduce confusion, cut wasted time, and keep you emotionally steady. The goal isn’t to control outcomes, but to stop bleeding energy into situations that were never going to become stable.

### The 80/20 Principles That Give You 80% of the Results

#### 1) Use “Fuck Yes or No” as your main filter

This is the highest-leverage idea in the whole episode.

After a reasonable amount of time, once intentions are knowable, you should not be in a “maybe” situation. If it’s not a clear yes from both people, treat it as a no.

This isn’t about rushing commitment. It’s about refusing ambiguity once there’s enough information to see the pattern.

A “no” can look like:

- They disappear for long stretches and come back as if nothing happened
- You keep texting but you won’t make plans
- They dodge conversations about what they want
- You feel like you have to convince them to choose you

Your rule: if you’re regularly confused, it’s not a yes.

This one principle cuts out most of the chasing, waiting, bargaining, and self-doubt.

## 2) Stop playing rules; start playing the person

Rules are tempting because they feel safe. They give you something to do when you feel uncertain.

But dating isn’t math. It’s closer to poker: you don’t play the cards, you play the player.

So instead of counting texts or timing replies, pay attention to the person’s overall pattern:

- Do they make things easier or harder?
- Do they bring consistency or friction?
- Do you feel respected in the small moments?
- Do you feel calmer over time, or more unsettled?

You can text first. You can be direct. You can move faster or slower. None of that matters nearly as much as whether the other person responds with real effort.

### 3) Lead with clean intent

Most “flirting” is just decoration. It’s indirect communication meant to protect you from rejection.

The highest-value version is simple: communicate interest clearly.

That can be as basic as:

- “I like talking to you. Want to grab a drink this week?”
- “I’m into you. I’d like to see you again.”
- “I’d rather do this in person. When are you free?”

This does two things at once:

1. It signals confidence
2. It forces reality to show itself sooner

This way, you get fewer time-wasters. You get quicker answers. You stop drifting into long text-based pseudo-relationships.

### 4) Pick one cornerstone skill for each stage

You don’t need to improve everything at once. Stage by stage is enough.

- **Pre-dating:** start with lifestyle/appearance (the fast leverage), build confidence (the long leverage).  
Lifestyle means the basics: fitness, grooming, clothing that fits you, hygiene, and a life that makes you feel good in your own skin.
- **Meeting people:** prioritize real-world exposure + direct questions.  
Apps can work, but the “hit rate” tends to be higher face-to-face.

Your goal should be meeting people where behavior is harder to fake.

- **Going on dates:** prioritize emotional regulation and boundaries. Dating involves uncertainty. If you can't tolerate ambiguity without spiraling, you'll chase, overexplain, or shut down. If you can't set expectations, you'll stay in situations that drain you.

If you only pick one, choose the one you personally lack most. That's where your leverage is.

### 5) Be realistic about what you're selecting for

A lot of modern dating pain comes from unrealistic expectations: waiting for perfection, waiting for certainty, waiting for someone who checks every box with no friction.

Most people you truly like will still have some things that annoy you. That's normal.

The skill is learning the difference between:

- Normal human flaws you can live with
- Core misalignments that you will resent later

Chemistry alone doesn't solve misalignment. But being overly picky doesn't protect you either. You're looking for a "good enough + consistent + mutual effort" situation, not a fantasy.

And at some point, real love becomes something you build through commitment, not something you wait to feel before you commit.

## The Whole System in Five Lines

If you do nothing else, do this:

## The 80/20 of Dating

- Drop rigid rules; use principles.
- Make your interest clear early.
- Watch the pattern, not the promises.
- If it's not a clear yes from both sides, move on.
- Choose realism over perfection, and commitment over endless comparison.

That's the 80/20.

It won't guarantee you the outcome you want with a specific person. It will guarantee you waste less time, feel less confused, and stop abandoning yourself just to keep something going.

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# Conclusion

People often think dating is supposed to feel effortless. As the right person appears, the connection will unfold naturally, and everything will click without confusion. But for most people, it doesn't happen that way. Not because they're doing something wrong, but because dating is one of the few parts of life where your emotions, instincts, fears, and hope all show up at once, usually before you have enough information to feel safe.

That's why dating can feel so destabilizing. It doesn't just test your ability to connect with someone else. It tests your ability to stay connected to yourself while you do.

At first, the concepts in this guide may feel like ideas you hold in your head. Over time, they may become something deeper. They become the judgments that you trust. A steadier way of interpreting behavior. A calmer relationship with uncertainty. A stronger ability to tell the difference between attraction and alignment, attention and effort, chemistry and consistency.

And this isn't about becoming rigid. Dating will always require flexibility, because people are complex and timing matters. But flexibility only works when it has structure. When you know what you want, what you don't want, and what you are no longer willing to rationalize. Without that, flexibility turns into self-abandonment. You bend and bend until you can't tell if you're being patient or just shrinking.

Your dating standards will change as your life changes. What you wanted at 21 won't be what you need at 30. What felt exciting before may feel draining later. What once felt "safe" might start to feel like settling. Growth doesn't always look like being more selective. Sometimes it looks like being braver. It looks like choosing someone stable when your instincts crave intensity. It looks like letting the right

## Conclusion

connection take time instead of trying to force it to prove itself immediately.

As you practice what you've learned here, things begin to connect.

- When you understand how modern dating shapes behavior, you stop personalizing every shift.
- When you understand signaling and effort, you stop chasing uncertainty.
- When you understand your own patterns, you stop mistaking familiar pain for compatibility.
- When you choose better pacing, you stop getting attached to potential.
- And when you stop rewarding inconsistency, your dating life becomes quieter in the best way.

You will still get it wrong sometimes. You'll misread someone. You'll hope longer than you should. You'll feel pulled toward what isn't good for you. That doesn't mean you failed. It means you're human, and you're learning in real time.

Dating isn't meant to be an endless cycle of confusion, performance, or emotional whiplash. It's meant to be a path toward something steady. Not just for a relationship, but for a life where love can actually last.

And when you date this way, you become harder to lose.

# Suggested Reading

- *Models* — Mark Manson
- *The Courage to Be Disliked* — Ichiro Kishimi & Fumitake Koga
- *Attached* — Amir Levine & Rachel Heller
- *Attachment in Adulthood: Structure, Dynamics, and Change* — Mario Mikulincer & Phillip R. Shaver
- *Love and Limerence* — Dorothy Tennov
- *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* — Robert B. Cialdini
- *The Art of Seduction* — Robert Greene
- *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men* — Lundy Bancroft
- *Daring Greatly* — Brené Brown
- *The Gifts of Imperfection* — Brené Brown
- *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* — Marshall B. Rosenberg
- *The Science of Trust: Emotional Attunement for Couples* — John M. Gottman
- *How to Be an Adult in Relationships* — David Richo
- *Come Together: The Science (and Art!) of Creating Lasting Sexual Connections* — Emily Nagoski