

Couples

Avoid a Date with Disaster

Our writer went undercover to ask guys crucial dating questions. Avoid their mistakes to raise your game

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Couples *Avoid a Date with Disaster*

I JOINED MATCH.COM WITH A SPECIFIC MISSION: TO PINPOINT THE MOMENTS GUYS GO WRONG ON FIRST DATES, USUALLY WITHOUT REALIZING IT.



FOR 3 MONTHS, I DUTIFULLY SIFTED THROUGH HUNDREDS OF E-MAILS—SOME STRANGE, OTHERS ENDearing. I EVEN 'WINKED' AT A FEW GUYS.

AFTER TALKING ON THE PHONE WITH SEVERAL MEN, I AGREED TO 40 DATES, CHOOSING ONLY THOSE I'D CONSIDERED OFFLINE.



WHAT MY MATCHES DIDN'T KNOW: I HAD COMPOSED A LIST OF CRITICAL FIRST-DATE QUESTIONS AND THEN ARTFULLY WORKED THEM INTO OUR CONVERSATIONS, LATER KEYING HURRIED BATHROOM-STALL NOTES INTO MY SMARTPHONE.



MY UNDERTAKING WAS A BIT

sneaky, sure—but so is most every other woman's first-date agenda. We rarely ask a question for the sake of conversation; there's often some veiled reason behind it, says Helen Fisher, Ph.D., a Rutgers University anthropologist and the author of *Why Him? Why Her? How to Keep and Find Lasting Love*. In other words, with one slip of the tongue, you could be mentally dismissed before the check—or, in the case of Chad,* his kids' meal—arrives.

When Chad so rudely hollered at a passing waiter, "Yo, can I get some chicken fingers?" I knew we wouldn't be swapping honey mustard-flavored saliva later. I wasn't just playing the harsh critic: "On the first date, the woman has little information to go on, so she overweights the few things she does know about you," explains Fisher. My fieldwork could save you—and help you secure date #2.

*All men's names have been changed.

FIRST-DATE QUESTION 1

"What are we doing tonight?"

Half of my dates were at the same brewery. Why? Because it's close to my place, and the guys left the prep work up to me. Your planning, or lack thereof, is the first signal of your interest level, so avoid the extremes. If you leave it to her, "she'll feel like she's just taking a number," says Yvonne K. Fulbright, Ph.D., the author of *Sultry Sex Talk to Seduce Any Lover*.

But if you sound desperate to impress, you'll probably just make her a little uncomfortable. "When men spend a lot on a first date, women wonder, 'What do I have to give in return?' Don't put that pressure on her," says Fisher.

Play it safe by offering two options—one traditional and a bit upscale (say, steak dinner), the other adventurous and less pricey (say, sushi and a walk downtown). Just don't suggest a movie. You can't assess chemistry—the kind that involves conversation—in a darkened theater.

FIRST-DATE QUESTION 2

"What do you do for a living?"

Yes, we're probing for intel about your position and income. But it's not because we want to dip into your savings. Rather, as an Australian study found, women value the traits—intelligence, ambition, drive—that often accompany wealth. We interpret your success as our future stability.

Even so, when one of my dates, a federal air marshal, announced his income and then said, "You probably think my job is pretty badass," I dismissed him. Instead of leaving me to infer his success—and trust me, women can—he recited his achievements résumé-style. I wasn't impressed.

A better move: Tell her your job enables you to spend time doing what you love (like vacation in Paris). It's a way to unobtrusively flash your resources while showing that you have interests. If you hate your current gig, simply say, "I don't love my job," and then explain what you really want to do.

FIRST-DATE QUESTION 3

"What's your type?"

I'm Southern, which to many guys translates as cute and sweet. And I'm still wearing my jeans from high school. Still, the guy who said he liked "cute, skinny, sweet" girls freaked me out. "Even if you describe her, it only makes her think, 'Wow, I'm like every other girl he goes for,'" says Fulbright. "She doesn't feel special, and it makes you seem a little rigid."

The same goes for detailing your dislikes. ("I won't date a girl who has a kid. Or who didn't go to college." A real response, by the way.) "You're just going to make the woman nervous," says Fisher.

Focus on your ideal areas of compatibility—say, an interest in road biking or travel. And be sure to show some flexibility. Your line: "I'm looking for a woman who shares some of my interests and who has some of her own that I might adopt." That way she won't think you'll write her off if your love of the Yankees isn't mutual.

I GENERALLY PREFER TO LET GUYS MAKE THE FIRST MOVE, EVEN ONLINE. LUKE WAS DIFFERENT. FIRST, THE DAVIDIC: HE WAS STRIKINGLY—I MEAN CELEBRITY-CALIBER—HANDSOME. BUT HE WASN'T A SHIRTLESS-MODEL TYPE. IN HIS PROFILE, HE TALKED ABOUT FAMILY AND ADVENTURE AND INTELLIGENCE. I E-MAILED HIM.

TWO WEEKS LATER, WE WERE ON OUR FIRST DATE. AND HE WAS EXACTLY AS ADVERTISED—AND EXACTLY NOT THE TYPE OF GUY I'D EXPECTED TO MEET ONLINE. THAT LED TO MY FIRST QUESTION.

LUKE ASSUMED AN EXPRESSION OF TOTAL SERIOUSNESS, THEN THOUGHTFULLY REPLIED...



OR, AS ANOTHER DATE PUT IT, "I'M TIRED OF THE BAR SCENE. I MEAN, I'M 24 YEARS OLD." I THINK I WAS HIS FIRST MATCH.COM MEET-UP FOR A REASON.



FIRST-DATE QUESTION 4

"What's your family like?"

My family was dysfunctional, and I want someone who can relate. But one guy surprised even me when he revealed, "My dad's kind of an asshole. My parents never really cared about me." As Whitney Casey, relationship expert for Match.com, explains, "When you say anything that sounds angry or emotional on a first date, it's like it's on steroids." Translation: If you say "asshole," she may hear "abusive alcoholic."

We *do* want an honest glimpse into your family life. Just temper that honesty. One of my dates, for example, said, "My dad died when I was 19. But my mom's everything a mother should be." He disclosed something personal without being overly emotional, and then ended on a positive note.

If your family is truly fantastic, "pick the one quality you love about your mother, then the quality she loved about your father—why she married him," says Casey.

FIRST-DATE QUESTION 5

"Why'd you decide to try online dating?"

The most common response I received: "I'm tired of the bar scene." Maybe my dates were trying to convey maturity. But, really, they just left me wondering if they'd traded nights out for nights online. "Women don't want to say you met at a bar," concedes Casey. "However, dating is a numbers game. Join a dating site but keep going out—even if it's to wine tastings or restaurants—and ask friends to set you up."

Once you land an online date, tell her about your relationship-oriented reasons for joining the site. One guy, for example, told me, "My brother met his fiancée on Match, so I figured I'd give it a try." Another said, "My buddy met his wife on the site. He convinced me to sign up." If you don't have a success story to share (or the mention of marriage makes you sweat), say, "I'm looking to meet the right girl, and this seemed like the best way to do it."

FIRST-DATE QUESTION 6

"Want to split the bill?"

As anticipated, none of my dates took me up on my offer to go Dutch. But when one said, "No, that's okay. It's pretty cheap," he may as well have. "The point of paying is not the amount but that you don't want her putting any money out," says Fisher.

To really impress her, shift the focus away from your wallet and onto the relationship. My favorite response: "Are you kidding? It's the least I can do. I've been looking forward to meeting you." (This almost made up for his starting at ESPN all night.)

Warning: She'll probably argue with you. But most likely she doesn't mean it. In an msnbc.com survey, more than half of women said they always offer to pay, but 34 percent admitted to being annoyed when men actually accepted. If she keeps insisting, say, "I'll get this one and you can get the next." That's a safe reply even if her offer was sincere.

EPILOGUE

The postdate text

"Hope that wasn't too painful for ya." I had just walked in the door after a particularly bad date when this text message rolled in. I could barely muster a response. "It shows that he thinks you're out of his league, that he has no self-confidence," says Casey.

A poorly executed postdate text can negate even a near-perfect evening. The right one, on the other hand, can turn a "maybe" into an "I want to see you again." "Men need to be attracted to women physically," says Casey. "For women, that's not the first priority. Women want a confident man." Sending her a postdate text that puts your feelings out there can be risky. But that takes confidence, and women take notice.

Once you're back home, shoot her a short text that shows gratitude and includes "Let's do it again soon," says Casey. Then a day or a day and a half later, ask her out for a second date. ■