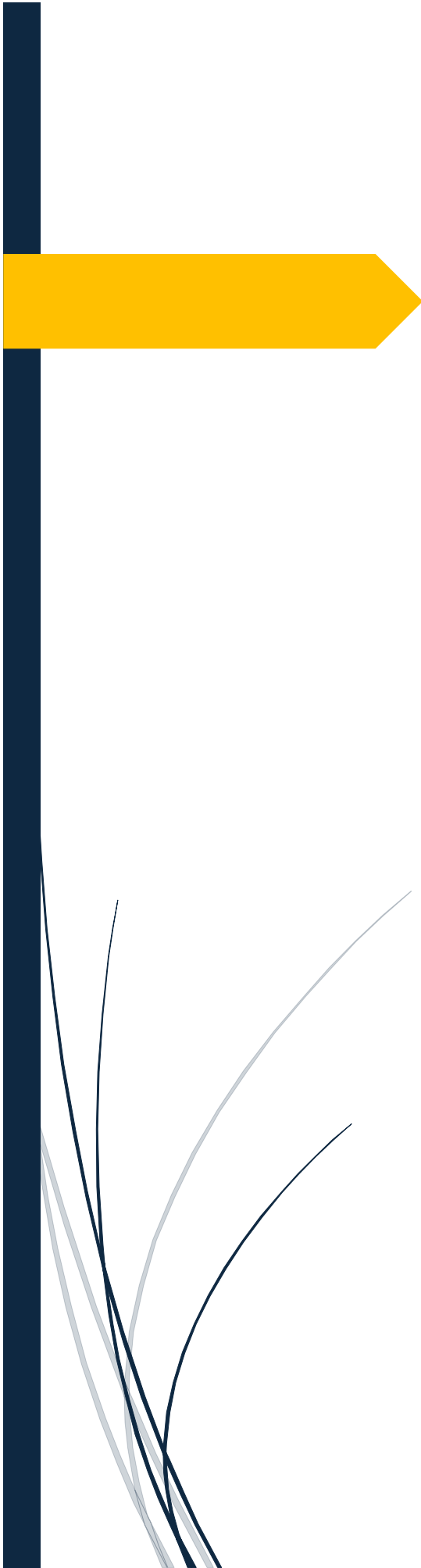




The Dating Game

Dating, Discovering, and
Finding What Fits

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Dating can be exciting. It can also be confusing, awkward, disappointing, energizing, exhausting, hopeful, and occasionally ridiculous.

You may find yourself wondering:

- When should I text?
- Should I wait?
- Do they actually like me?
- Do I like them—or do I just like that they like me?
- What am I looking for?
- Am I being too picky?
- Why haven't they responded?
- What did I do wrong?
- How do I know when to keep trying or move on?

Dating involves uncertainty.

There are two people with different histories, preferences, expectations, vulnerabilities, schedules, attachment patterns, communication styles, and ideas about what they're looking for.

And neither person has all the information yet. That's the point. **Dating is a game.** But that doesn't mean you need to **play games with people.**

It means dating involves:

- Attempts.
- Uncertainty.
- Incomplete information.
- Timing.
- Risk.
- Feedback.
- Learning.

And sometimes... **another round.**

The Goal Isn't to Get Picked

It's easy to enter dating thinking: **Do they like me? Will they text me? Will they ask me out again? Did I say the right thing?** Without realizing it, dating can become an audition.

You're trying to be:

- Interesting enough.
- Attractive enough.
- Funny enough.
- Successful enough.
- Relaxed enough.
- Not too interested.
- Not too distant.
- Not too much.
- Not too little.

But you're not the only person being evaluated. **You're evaluating too.**

Instead of only asking: **"Do they like me?"** also ask: **"Do I like what I'm learning about them?"**

That changes the game.

ME + YOU → WE?

Dating isn't a relationship yet. It's an exploration of whether one might develop. Think of it as: **ME + YOU → WE?** The question mark matters.

ME

- Who am I?
- What matters to me?
- What am I looking for?
- What have I learned from previous relationships?
- How do I behave when I'm interested in someone?
- What are my vulnerabilities?

YOU

- Who are you?
- How do you communicate?
- What matters to you?
- What are you looking for?
- What do your behaviors show me?

WE?

- Is there mutual interest?
- Chemistry?
- Compatibility?
- Reciprocity?
- Availability?
- Enough fit to keep exploring?

Early dating doesn't require knowing the answer. You're gathering information.

Dating Is Discovery

You don't need to enter dating with a perfectly constructed picture of your future partner. Some of what you want can only be learned through experience.

You might discover:

- "I really value that."
- "I thought that mattered, but it doesn't as much as I expected."
- "I didn't realize how important this was to me."
- "I'm attracted to this characteristic, but it doesn't work well for me relationally."
- "That's something I can work with."
- "I don't want that dynamic again."

Dating helps you: **RULE IN → RULE OUT → REFINE**

You're not only discovering other people. You're discovering **yourself in relationship with other people.**

Look for Characteristics, Not Just Credentials

It's normal to have preferences.

- Age.
- Appearance.
- Education.
- Career.
- Income.
- Location.
- Interests.
- Lifestyle.

Those things may matter. But they don't necessarily tell you what it will be like to have a relationship with someone. Pay attention to **characteristics** too.

Are they:

- Open?
- Reliable?
- Curious?
- Adventurous?
- Kind?
- Playful?
- Accountable?
- Flexible?
- Affectionate?
- Independent?
- Emotionally expressive?
- Patient?
- Ambitious?
- Grounded?
- Social?
- Reflective?
- Direct?
- Generous?
- Consistent?
- Spontaneous?
- Dependable?
- Growth-oriented?

And then go one step further. **What characteristics seem to bring out a version of ME and a relationship dynamic that works well?**

You may discover:

- **"I thought I wanted spontaneous. I actually want adventurous AND dependable."**
- **"I value independence, but I also need someone who initiates connection."**
- **"I thought ambition was extremely important. I'm learning that curiosity and availability matter more to me."**

That's not inconsistency. That's learning.

Let Your List Evolve

Instead of building a massive checklist for the perfect person, try four evolving categories.

- **I VALUE** = Characteristics experience is teaching me are important.
- **I ENJOY** = Characteristics I appreciate but don't necessarily require.
- **I CAN WORK WITH** = Differences, imperfections, or characteristics that may require flexibility but aren't incompatible.

- **DOESN'T WORK FOR ME** = Patterns, characteristics, values, or lifestyles that experience has taught me aren't a good fit.

Your lists can change. They probably should.

Dating provides information you couldn't have before you started dating.

Someone Doesn't Have to Be Bad to Be Wrong for You

Sometimes people stay engaged because they can't find a good enough reason to stop.

- **"They're really nice."**
- **"There aren't any red flags."**
- **"Maybe I'm being too picky."**
- **"I should give it another chance."**

Maybe. But compatibility doesn't require wrongdoing.

Sometimes: There's not enough attraction. Conversation feels difficult. Your lifestyles don't fit. Your relationship goals differ. Your communication needs don't match. Something important feels missing. You simply aren't interested enough.

Someone can be a perfectly good person and still not be your person.

Ruling someone out isn't necessarily a judgment of their value. It's part of discovering fit.

Chemistry Isn't Compatibility

Chemistry matters. But chemistry and compatibility answer different questions.

- **CHEMISTRY = Am I drawn toward you?**
- **COMPATIBILITY = Can our personalities, values, needs, lifestyles, communication, and expectations work together?**

Strong chemistry can exist without compatibility. Compatibility can exist without enough chemistry. Dating gives you time to discover both.

Don't ask one to answer for the other.

Don't Interview. Discover.

Dating apps and limited time can make dates feel like interviews.

- Where do you work?
- Do you want kids?
- Where did you grow up?
- What are you looking for?

Those questions can be useful. But don't forget to **experience the person**.

Notice:

- | | |
|--|--|
| • Do they listen? | • Do their actions match what they're telling you? |
| • Are they curious about you? | • Are they present? |
| • Do they ask questions? | • Do you feel comfortable being yourself? |
| • Do they interrupt? | • Do you find yourself performing? |
| • How do they talk about other people? | • How do you feel after spending time together? |
| • How do they handle differences? | |
| • Can they laugh at themselves? | |

A person's biography gives you information. **Their behavior gives you information too.**

Patterns Matter More Than Moments

Early dating makes individual moments feel enormous.

- A great date: **"This could be it."**
- An awkward text: **"Something is wrong."**
- A delayed response: **"They're losing interest."**

Try not to make one moment carry too much weight. Look for patterns. **CONSISTENCY** Do their actions generally match their words? **RECIPROCITY** Are both people contributing? **CURIOSITY** Are they interested in knowing you?

FOLLOW-THROUGH Do they do what they say they'll do? **RESPECT** How do they respond to boundaries and differences? **AVAILABILITY** Do they actually have room for a relationship?

ACCOUNTABILITY Can they acknowledge mistakes or misunderstandings? **COMMUNICATION** Can the two of you communicate reasonably well?

One great evening doesn't prove these things. Neither does one awkward moment disprove them.

Let time provide information.

Engage → Leave Space → Observe

Dating creates endless questions about timing.

- Should I text?
- Should I wait?
- Should I double text?
- Should I ask them out?
- Should I let them initiate?

There isn't one rule that works for everyone.

But there is a useful principle: **Express interest without doing all the work.**

- You can initiate.
- You can communicate.
- You can ask someone out.
- You can tell someone you enjoyed seeing them.

Then: **Leave room for reciprocity.** Think: **ENGAGE → LEAVE SPACE → OBSERVE**

Rather than: **ENGAGE → NO RESPONSE → ENGAGE MORE → WORRY → ENGAGE MORE**

Space provides information. What does the other person voluntarily contribute?

Don't Give Relationship-Level Investment to Dating-Level Information

A few good interactions can create a lot of imagination.

One great date becomes: **"Maybe this is it."** Three dates becomes: **"I can see us together."**

Soon you aren't only responding to the person. You're responding to the **future you've imagined with the person.**

Try separating: **WHAT I KNOW** from **WHAT I'M IMAGINING**

Early dating requires being able to say: **"I like this, and I still don't know where it's going."**

That's not pessimism. That's staying connected to reality while allowing possibility.

Let Investment Follow Information

A useful progression is:

- **CURIOSITY** = "I'd like to know more."
- **INTEREST** = "I like what I'm learning."
- **INVESTMENT** = "We're consistently choosing each other."
- **COMMITMENT** = "We've agreed to build something together."

You don't need to eliminate excitement. Just try not to emotionally arrive at **commitment** while the actual relationship is still at **curiosity**.

Let investment grow alongside information.

Ghosting Creates an Information Vacuum

Someone stops responding. No explanation. No conversation. Nothing. The brain dislikes unfinished stories.

So it creates one.

- "I wasn't attractive enough."
- "I talked too much."
- "I shouldn't have sent that message."
- "They met someone better."
- "Something is wrong with me."

Maybe. But you don't actually know. What you know is: **Communication stopped.**

Everything else may be interpretation. Ghosting gives you information about the person's willingness, ability, or availability to continue communicating.

It does **not** provide an objective measurement of your worth.

Don't turn missing information into self-indictment.

Rejection Isn't a Measurement of Worth

Dating requires selection.

- Sometimes: **I CHOOSE YOU** and **YOU DON'T CHOOSE ME.**
- Sometimes: **YOU CHOOSE ME.** and **I DON'T CHOOSE YOU.**

- Sometimes: **NEITHER OF US CHOOSES.** and sometimes: **WE CHOOSE EACH OTHER.**

Only the last one moves toward a relationship. That means the objective isn't: **Become someone nobody rejects.** That's impossible.

The objective is: **Find relationships where selection is mutual.** You don't need universal desirability.

You need enough compatibility, chemistry, availability, timing, and mutual interest with **one particular person.**

Dating Is a Game of "Failure"

If you date twenty people and eventually build a meaningful relationship with one, was that: **19 failures + 1 success?** Maybe that's the wrong math.

Those experiences may have taught you:

- What you value.
- What you don't want.
- What attracts you.
- What doesn't.
- Where you're vulnerable.
- How quickly you attach.
- What communication works for you.
- What characteristics matter.
- What patterns you want to avoid.
- What kind of relationship you actually want.

The better equation may be: **EXPERIENCE → INFORMATION → REFINEMENT → ANOTHER TRY**

A date doesn't have to become a relationship to have been useful. Sometimes the successful outcome of a date is: **"No."**

You learned something.

Protect the ME While Looking for WE

Dating becomes particularly difficult when your sense of worth begins moving with the dating market.

- Match? Up.
- No response? Down.
- Great date? Up.
- Ghosted? Down.
- Second date? Up.
- Rejected? Down.

That's a fragile structure.

Build scaffolding around **ME.**

- Friends.
- Family.
- Work.
- Capabilities.
- Interests.
- Exercise.

- Purpose.
- Routines.
- Community.
- Values.
- Fun.
- Rest.
- Things you're learning.
- Things you're building.

Dating should be: **PART OF YOUR LIFE** not **THE STATUS REPORT ON YOUR LIFE**.

A strong ME allows you to explore WE without losing yourself in the process.

Don't Abandon Yourself to Be Selected

Pay attention to what happens to **you** when you really like someone.

Do you:

- Agree more?
- Hide opinions?
- Become constantly available?
- Ignore things that bother you?
- Drop other activities?
- Over-text?
- Over-explain?
- Try to impress?
- Change what you're looking for?
- Move faster than you actually want?
- Accept behavior you normally wouldn't?

Dating isn't only about whether another person likes the version of you they're meeting.

Ask: **Do I like the version of ME that's showing up here?**

That's valuable information too.

Keep Your Life Bigger Than Dating

Continue investing in:

- Your friendships.
- Your interests.
- Your health.
- Your work.
- Your capabilities.
- Your routines.
- Your community.
- Your goals.
- Your fun.
- Your identity.

A date can be disappointing without your entire week becoming disappointing. Someone can disappear without taking your worth with them. A promising connection can be exciting without becoming the center of your life.

That's the scaffolding.

DO MORE / DO LESS

DO MORE

- Approach dating with curiosity.
- Notice characteristics, not only credentials.
- Let experience refine what you're looking for.
- Rule people in and rule people out.
- Look for patterns over time.
- Pay attention to reciprocity.
- Express interest and then leave room for response.
- Separate what you know from what you're imagining.
- Let investment follow information.
- Notice how you feel around someone.
- Maintain your friendships, interests, routines, and identity.
- Treat rejection as information about fit—not proof of your worth.
- Ask whether you like who you're becoming around someone.
- Allow good people to still be wrong for you.

DO LESS

- Auditioning.
- Trying to become universally desirable.
- Building a future from a few good dates.
- Confusing chemistry with compatibility.
- Turning every delayed response into a story.
- Pursuing harder when reciprocity is missing.
- Treating ghosting as evidence about your worth.
- Ignoring incompatibility because there aren't obvious red flags.
- Giving relationship-level investment to dating-level information.
- Abandoning your life when someone exciting appears.
- Expecting yourself to know exactly what you want before you've learned it.
- Calling every connection that doesn't become a relationship a failure.

The Bottom Line

Dating isn't only about finding someone. It's also about **discovering what you're looking for.**

You're learning about: **ME**

- Who am I in dating?
- What matters to me?
- What characteristics work well with me?

YOU

- Who are you actually showing yourself to be?
- What do your actions tell me?

WE?

- Is there enough mutual interest, chemistry, compatibility, availability, and reciprocity to keep exploring?

Sometimes the answer will be: **No.**

That's part of dating. Sometimes you'll be interested and they won't be. Sometimes they'll be interested and you won't be. Sometimes neither person will be sure. And sometimes: **You'll choose each other.**

Until then, keep gathering information. Keep refining. Keep your life around you.

And remember: **Dating isn't an audition for your worth.**

It's a process of discovering mutual fit.