



WHAT'S BEHIND ALL THESE BAD DATES IN THE PANDEMIC?

Late-night FaceTiming, nonstop texting – and major disappointment when you meet IRL. We're all so thirsty, we're seeing connections that might not actually exist

When Amy, a 36-year-old graphic designer in Brooklyn, met a sweet and funny musician on Hinge in April, coronavirus numbers were still so high in New York City she wasn't sure even a masked date was a good idea. Instead, they opted for long phone calls, which quickly progressed to FaceTiming until all hours of the night — only putting each other on hold to go to the bathroom. “We'd joke about how old-fashioned and romantic it was to get to know someone that much before meeting up, like we were pen pals in hell,” Amy tells me.

Finally, after three weeks of intense back-and-forth and even some light sexting, they met up for a walk through McCarren Park, where she felt absolutely nothing, aside from a little guilt for wasting both of their time. “At first I thought it was awkwardness from the masks, but it never went away,” she says.

She notes that he didn't do anything wrong. He was a little bigger around his stomach and hunched over than she imagined, and she didn't like the smell of his cologne, but “there were no glaring red flags. I was surprised by how much I didn't want to kiss him, and even hugging him to be polite felt weird.” Just days before, she'd stayed up all night talking to him. But now, she ended the date after a single lap around the park, with a reluctant side-hug goodbye. “He took the hint and never followed up, or maybe he wasn't feeling it either,” she adds.

Chris, a 23-year-old app developer in Montreal, had a similar experience with a Tinder match. They messaged on the app for a while, before moving the interactions to Instagram, where they followed each other and started replying to each other's Stories regularly. Within a week, they met up for coffee, which he quickly learned she doesn't consume, along with alcohol or meat. "The conversation was good, but it felt one-sided. Like I'd talk about my interests, but she couldn't relate. Then she talked about her interests, but I couldn't relate," Chris recalls of the otherwise pleasant three-hour date. He asked her out again, but "the second date only confirmed that there wasn't much chemistry there."

According to relationship experts, this is more the rule than the exception when it comes to dating in a pandemic: We're all so thirsty, we're seeing connections that might not actually be there.

"With quarantine, people have more free time, less opportunity to be out doing things with friends, increased loneliness and higher levels of stress and anxiety," explains Jessica Small, therapist and life coach with Growing Self Counseling and Coaching. "The circumstances of dating are ripe for creating false intimacy in relationships."

Rachel Federoff, a relationship expert and matchmaker for Love and Matchmaking, agrees. "It's a bit like going to a grocery store on an empty stomach or ordering takeout when you're starving: Your eyes are bigger than your stomach, and you want it all," she warns. "The desperation is taking over, whereas pre-COVID it would have been more thought-out and selective."

In a 1997 paper published in the journal *Human Nature*, celebrated biological anthropologist Helen Fisher describes how lust, attraction and attachment all work together. In particular, lust is little more than "the craving for sexual gratification," Fisher writes. And cooped up in quarantine, lust has never been easier to cultivate, as it doesn't have as much to do with the other person as attraction does — it's mostly about being horny. Fisher and her colleagues confirmed this in another 2002 study, where they further defined lust as something that "evolved to initiate the mating process with any appropriate partner." Attraction, on the other hand, "evolved to enable individuals to choose among and prefer specific mating partners, thereby conserving their mating time and energy."

As a result, attraction is rooted in a complex constellation of factors like "timing, state of health, access to resources, childhood experiences and myriad other cultural and biological forces [that] play crucial roles in triggering who becomes attractive," Fisher concluded in 1997, a quarter century before dating apps and coronavirus conspired to make us all feel connections that aren't really there.

The sum of these parts is what's often referred to as chemistry. In quarantine, people can pick up some of these puzzle pieces through virtual interactions — attraction based on pictures and good conversation mostly. But it's not until you're in person when everything else comes into play. "You can see the person behind the voice on the phone or text, you can see their mannerisms, habits, quirks," Federoff explains, "You can smell them — perfume, cologne, those natural pheromones. Not to mention, the nerves are heightened again, and there's nowhere to hide."

For this reason, Federoff recommends only phone calls prior to meeting up for the first time and “absolutely no texting,” which may seem extreme, but “like an email or written note, there’s zero feeling in a text and things can be taken out of context. After two to three phone calls, take it to Zoom or Skype. This way you break up those nerves and actually get to see each other and start the chemistry experiment. Either way, it will be there or it won’t.”

Ultimately, a false sense of connection can cause people to think things are going much better than they are. When Valerie, a 40-year-old sales rep in Boston, matched with a single dad on Tinder, they had late-night conversations on the phone and texted endlessly. And when they finally met for a picnic in the park, she definitely felt a spark. In fact, they kissed, and had three more dates after that. But a month into their relationship, he went camping with his kids and completely ghosted her. “Maybe he got eaten by a bear,” she jokes. Though she assumes she dodged a bullet, the timing of him disappearing right before her 40th birthday stung. “It wasn’t a disaster, but I took it harder than I otherwise might have, just because of the accelerated pace of things, and what felt like more investment,” she admits.

The real risk of assuming intimacy early on isn’t having a mediocre walk in the park, but getting turned off to the dating process altogether. That’s why Small advises people to go slow and keep it light. “You don’t want to move a relationship too quickly out of the honeymoon phase,” she says. “The early stage of a relationship is generally fun and carefree. It’s a source of excitement, lust and novelty. The lightness of a new relationship keeps us interested and invested.”

Chris continued to swipe after his first failed attempt at quarantine dating, learning from his mistakes in the process. He didn’t follow his next match on social media or put too much stock in his initial attraction to her pictures; instead, he asked questions to make sure they had things in common, which gave them more to talk about when they finally did meet up. “We’re still hanging out and it’s going really well,” he tells me.

Meanwhile, Amy is currently talking to a few men on various apps, but she’s keeping the conversations brief. “[The relationship with the musician] was early in quarantine and seemed cute at the time, but it was more of a letdown than it should have been,” she says. And so, now — much like waiting to kiss or hook up — she’s saving her best stuff for IRL encounters.

Until then, it’s nothing to swoon about.