

Dating Online: a guide for greenhorns

BY MARGARET BLACKSTONE

Using an online dating service is not for everyone, but then neither is dating. Being recently divorced, I'm not quite ready to think of the word date as anything but a holiday fruit meat. Then it occurred to me that online dating sites might be a great opportunity for those of us living with MS. Why? You can let your computer screen serve as the thick skin you may not have. In other words, you're protected by your anonymity as you begin getting to know people electronically first. Most importantly, you have a choice.

You can choose to reveal your health status when you feel comfortable that the reaction you'll receive will be acceptance and continued interest in you. That could be as soon as you start exchanging e-mails or after actually meeting. Either way you have done some exploring first.

There is another very practical reason: It's not all that easy to meet people, given our busy lives or the fact that some of us live in more isolated locations.



When I started my online dating adventure, I chose **Chemistry.com**, an offshoot of the much larger site, **Match.com**. I figured this would be about as much as I could handle. The process of joining this program was none too simple, but I considered this a positive. It meant that all members had to be at least patient and smart enough to answer some serious questions involving personality traits, and more. Here is one which I think was meant to test emotional intimacy perceptiveness. Two people are seated on a bench, close together but not touching. Question: Have these people a.) just met? b.) been married? c.) just started dating?

While I was plowing through question after question, my high school age son came in. His take: "Mom, this is worse than the PSATs!" I was feeling that way myself, but I got through it, wrote a brief personal profile, gave a sign-in ID and password, and my journey had begun. (Oh yes, I paid too. These services are not free.)

I must admit to a certain thrill when I got my first e-mails with headings such as "someone is interested in you," and "your matches are waiting to hear from you."

"Who should I respond to first?" I asked my son.

"The architect. Of course." He knew we needed some advice on household remodeling. But the architect also seemed the most interesting. We had been rated for "compatibility" and had each given "short answers" to questions posed by each other. It was only then that e-mailing could begin.

The architect responded immediately. Very quickly, we had exchanged phone numbers and were talking regularly. We then set a drinks date. I will confess, I was a little disappointed that he was not handsomer. Still, we found we had much in common and we talked—so much so that when we stood up to say good-bye and I experienced a brief spell of vertigo, I'd realized I'd forgotten to say what I'd planned.

I blurted out "Oh, I forgot to tell you, I have MS."

I e-mailed him the next day to apologize for my abruptness, and he responded "Well, it's not as if you leaned over and whispered in my ear 'I have leprosy.'" I have to say I laughed, and we made another plan to get together.

Some words to the wise

The first thing that turns people off is lying about your age or posting a five-year-old picture of yourself. I found many of my dates thanking me profusely for simply telling the truth. Whether it's from embarrassment, shyness, or trying to lure a younger set of suitors, such a tactic will only backfire. Anyway, we should be brave enough to be proud of who we are.

One thing came up again and again in the profiles I read. They were less a profile of who the fellow was and more of a description of the perfect woman, right down to "she must be beautiful, vibrant, witty," and ending just short of demanding 36-23-36 measurements! This is not a beauty pageant or a cattle drive. This is a process of getting to know another person. I'm not the only person who is insulted by this.

Coming off that first date I had a heady sense of confidence (unusual for me), so I jumped right in, and soon set up one date, two dates, three dates, four.

In brief:

Date #2: Tea in a lovely shop on Greenwich Village's MacDougal Street with a man who was editor of a medical advertising magazine. (My interest there had a hint of business given my writing.) The next morning I received an e-mail with the heading 'An Intuition'. The gist was "I realize you are not my 'soul mate.'" Okay. Was this The MS Factor? I don't think so. I decided not to worry and "erased" him, as he wanted.

Date #3: This fellow had posted his high school yearbook photo. This I had to see. He turned out to be a part-time camera man, overweight, and quite involved in eating and drinking too much. "Ah, it's the holidays," he said. I had the feeling it was always the holidays. He wanted to see me on New Year's Eve but then decided he'd go to his grown son's family in Vermont. Then I got a truly kind note from him saying he and his ex were going to try to work it out. I figured I had done an accidental good deed.

There were a few more funny forays, before I made the intelligent decision. Personally, I had had enough. My Internet ride was more good than bad. In answering those questions asked by strangers, I learned a lot about myself. I also learned that the Internet offers a great opportunity for people to take out vengeance on strangers. I learned very quickly to cut those losses and not let any

undeserved hurt penetrate my computer screen and my thin skin.

Perhaps most importantly, I was reminded how simple it is: All of us want companionship and human interaction. And there are many nice and genuine people who are just plain lonely. This led me to realize that I am not lonely. I have



Some thoughts on openness

I recently met a man via an online site who had just broken his ankle. He hobbled out of the driver's seat, propped himself against the car and dragged the offending right leg out of the car. He was wearing a walking cast, and only then did I realize he'd been driving left footed, not complaining, not calling attention to his injury. I snuck my hand through his arm, immediately, and held on.

While those of us with MS tend to want to do for ourselves and avoid asking for sympathy, don't be afraid to share your condition, symptoms, or fears with someone you're just getting to know. A vulnerable gentleman is nearly irresistible.

a rich life filled with many interests and many wonderful friends.

Online dating meant meeting people I would not have encountered in my regular daily life. I'll never forget a new friend, a union organizer, telling me, "There are only so many meat packers' daughters." Profound and true. He and I probably

Some selective sites

Chemistry.com: This is a slightly more selective (read you pay a little more) branch of the much larger **Match.com**.

Match.com: This is one of the most popular online match-making sites.

EHarmony.com: much like **Match.com**. Well respected.

Specialsinglesonline.com: Tracy Saks, diagnosed with MS 20 years ago, started this site to connect singles with disabilities in 2004. There are currently more than 5,000 registered members, most in the U.S. "Anybody who has a disability knows that although others can be sympathetic, the ones who truly understand what the journey is like are other people with a disability," Saks said. "That's what inspired me to create this site."

Connexion.org: This is a site exclusively for gay men and women. It gets good reviews from people I know who use it.

Dodgeball.com: This is a contact service. You sign up in the usual way, but you use your cell phone. The trendy description is "mobile social software." This service offers more than dating/mating possibilities, such as text messaging friends your location when you're out for the evening to create an instant party.

Safety always comes first

Personally, I felt quite protected by all the steps it took before even planning a first meeting. I'm cautious by nature, so I did not meet anybody near my home and I did not give my address.

I didn't go far either. My suggestion is to pick a local place, and if a meeting more than a few miles away is suggested, think twice. That's for you girls. Guys can go a bit further for a first meeting, depending on how you're doing physically. But even if someone has an issue regarding travel, I still suggest meeting in a public place.

wouldn't have met any other way.

It turned out my MS was the least of the problems I encountered. For those with whom I became friendly, it simply ceased to be part of the conversation, except for those kind words, "What can I do to help?"

P.S. I did invite the architect to my New Year's Day party. He loved my cooking and had a fabulous time. On saying good-bye, I said, "I really don't know about anything right now."

He gave me a kiss, and said, "That's okay, you don't have to right now."

Nice. We made another date. From what I remember of chemistry class, and I always got A's in chemistry, unless something blows up, most experiments take some time. ■

Margaret Blackstone recently revised her 2003 book, **The First Year—Multiple Sclerosis: An Essential Guide for the Newly Diagnosed**. Look for it in local bookstores or from online booksellers.