

Chapter 13

Romantic Relationships, Online Dating, and Mental Health Issues

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ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to present the overview of mental health issues associated with online dating and online romantic relationships with relevant research background. It briefly cautions about the possible risks involved in the world of online dating platforms and later delves into mental health concerns that can emerge out of experiences while selecting a potential partner online, developing a romantic relationship, and being involved in a romantic relationship online. It also discusses safety measures that need to be taken before and while being active on such online dating sites. The chapter draws attention to the specific role of mental health professionals that is needed while dealing with victims of online scams and abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Love and affection are very basic human needs. Romantic relationships are significant part of our lives and contribute in our physical, social and emotional well-being. A good relationship enhances our overall health. (Cohen, Frank, Doyle, Skoner, Rabin, & Gwaltney, 1998), and even help in speedy recovery from various disorders (Kiecolt-Glaser, Loving, Stowell, Malarkey, Lemeshow, Dickinson, & Glaser, 2005). Most of the people find their partners through their social or professional sphere. However, these circles are limited in number and thus the choices can become narrowing. Consequently due to the advent of new technology, people want to widen the scope of finding a more suitable partner and they find the solution in online dating sites.

Using the internet has not just remained a convenience but has become a necessity. With the advancements in technology, today we have plethora of very diverse social networking platforms which are unique in their own way connecting people together online. Social media has revolutionized and digitized human interactions and relationships. Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) found that the Internet has allowed users to find partners more easily, especially homosexuals and middle-aged people who operate in a “thin market.”

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-4047-2.ch013

With the popularity of online dating sites, the stigma of online dating has diminished considerably in the last decade. According to the survey conducted by Smith and Anderson, (2015), overwhelming majority of Americans suggest that online dating is a good way to meet people. Interestingly, more than 15% of adults say that they have used either mobile dating apps or an online dating site at least once in the past. Online dating services are now the second most popular way to meet a partner.

WHAT PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THOSE WHO PREFER ONLINE DATING?

1. In a research finding it was concluded that loneliness was found to be one of the major factor that encouraged people to go for online dating. (Lawson & Lake, 2006). The participants reported that they felt less lonely after being a part of the online dating websites.
2. It was observed that individuals scoring higher on the romantic beliefs and especially idealisation of the romantic partner were more vulnerable to being deceived on the online dating sites. These individuals also tended to be more agreeable and more likely to opt for online dating. (Whitty & Buchanan, 2012)

WHAT IS WRONG WITH ONLINE DATING?

In a popular blog post by Ryan Anderson, several warning signals regarding online dating have been put up and they seem to be resonating with reports of Indian newspapers on the same topic (Psychology Today, 2016).

1. People tend to lie about themselves on online dating sites. Out of over 1000 online daters in the USA and UK, 53% confessed that they have lied in their online dating profile; mostly about look, height, financial status. This was an attempt to project an ideal self to attract more partners.
2. It's basically virtual! Smith and Anderson (2015) found out that more than one third of their research participant (online daters) never actually went on a date and those who went found it difficult to connect to the person they had met online.
3. It makes people judgemental. Various online daters confess that they judge the person based on the looks. The apps and websites offer an interface where only the physical aspects of the individual are highlighted so as to make the website more appealing. Naturally the users dismiss the not-so beautiful candidate in just a swipe or a click.

EMERGING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES RELATED TO ONLINE DATING

However there are some shortcomings of this epidemic of developing romantic relationships. Right from becoming a victim to identity or financial frauds to brief, deceitful and virtual nature of relationships, online dating poses a serious danger to the person's sense of self and his or her relationships with others which in turn lead to many mental health-associated issues.

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