

The Dating Dilemma Of A Pandemic

A good part of 2020 has officially been spent at home. Dating wasn't necessarily a priority in the beginning, but as time passes, people reveal how they've navigated the dating arena, and health professionals explain what is a safe-during (we're far away from post)-pandemic-dating protocol to follow

By Samreen Tungekar

20 days into the lockdown, I attended a virtual speed dating event in April, and wrote about it here. It was all new, the virtuality of everything, and I was one of the less-well-reads who didn't think that the pandemic was set to take over all of the year. I got back on to dating apps out of sheer curiosity to see what's the crowd like, now that the immediate gratification of hooking up was out of the question. Other than a few Covidiot, there were some new "here only because of the lockdown" bios, and another few that said, "Can I take you out before corona does?" None have taken me out (yet).

The dating space is in a time when the casual aspect of it is one that needs to be thought through. You have to be able to trust someone to even be within 10 feet distance. As things open up, we are trying to get that cup of coffee with a friend or by ourselves, keeping precautions in mind. But what happens to casual dating, and to hooking up?

Anantika from Mumbai was initially on Bumble just out of boredom. A guy did initially ask her out for a drive (like I said, covidiot), but she refused. "A lot of people wanted to video call on the app, and I wasn't up for it, it's weird to video call someone you don't know at all. Eventually I did unmatch a few, and some conversations just fizzled out on their own," she says.



on dating apps right now creates an anticipation that I don't like," he says.

Sahil Singh Yaduvanshi, a freelance video content creator, is in Chandigarh, and is on all apps, but hasn't really been looking to date. "My Grindr has very limited profiles, but I've been swiping



Atmadip Mukherjee is a final year engineering student from Hyderabad, and he is at home, with his parents. He's generally more social, but during the lockdown, he has restricted his usage of apps. "I met this one person through a dating app, but I knew of him through mutual friends. So there was an element of trust, and we were very careful, and socially distancing. Also, I feel being

on Tinder and on Bumble. I've not really interacted with people as such, especially because I know it's not going anywhere," he says.

Mukherjee has observed that there are more people, in fact, eager to meet, despite the pandemic. "It's actually surprising. I think people are thinking of this situation as a break, and because of

the fear and angst this year has, a lot of people are being impulsive in wanting to date too," he opines.

Yaduvanshi feels while there are people who are adventurous to meet up, dating apps are more about having a getaway, because you can't get laid right now. "We're all so preoccupied normally, and now we have a bit of time to think about it, and interact with people," he says.

But have people's priorities on these apps changed, thanks to all the apparent self-reflection we've all been doing? Anantika doesn't think so, but she feels people are slightly more patient in actually getting to know each other before they meet. "I've always been someone who wants to take some time to get to know someone before I meet them, but people sometimes don't want to be patient. Now, they are, because they know there's no way you can meet someone immediately anyway, so might as well invest in knowing them," she adds.

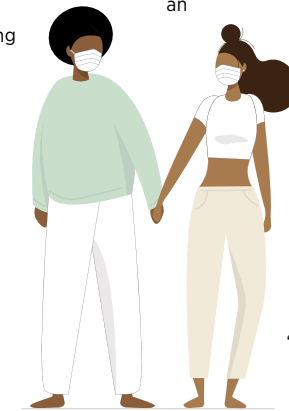
Video calling dates before meeting is a more viable option now than it was in the time when we caught up for a movie with a Hinge potential. Nachiket Kumar, a consultant in a big four firm in Bengaluru, believes virtual dates have become a reality. "I have started spending more time on calls. Yes, seeing Netflix shows together through sharing screens is there, but being on call has become more like old times," he expresses.

I know people, mostly living alone, are open to the idea of cautiously meeting up a person or two. The rest of us still don't have those guts. Anantika doesn't want to meet anyone for another six months at least, Mukherjee is very clear that he won't be meeting a stranger at all, till he's at home, and a vaccine is out. Payal Shah, a journalist from Mumbai, feels that now that things are opening back up, she feels more inclined than before to meet new people, but would not be comfortable going to a very people-heavy place. "The person's COVID etiquette and general hygiene will definitely factor into my decision about whether or not I can continue seeing them," she adds.

Dating apps have also been very proactive with their features since March.

Tinder made Swipe Night, a first-person interactive event from the US, available in India, launched a Prompt feature to make pictures more interactive, and made Tinder Passport — a paid feature for Tinder Plus & Gold subscribers — free in the earlier months of the lockdown. According to Tinder, India saw a 25 per cent increase in the rate of Passporting, compared to other parts of the world, and this was even before Passport was made free. In India, conversations have been up an average of 39 per cent, and the average length of conversations is 28 per cent longer. TrulyMadly says the initial days of the first lockdown saw huge spikes in some metrics, which later settled at 25 to 30 per cent above normal levels. The average time spent daily went up by 27.7 per cent, according to TrulyMadly.

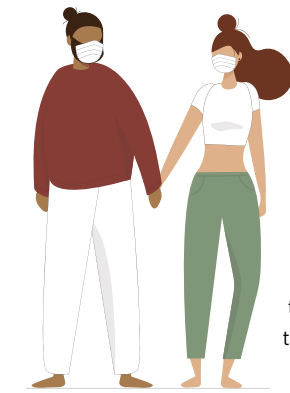
So yes, we've all been incessantly swiping, as stats suggest. But that being said, mental health has officially taken a turn for the worse, even if we're kind of used to the lockdown life. Smiti Srivastava, a psychotherapist, explains how the trust factor during the pandemic works. "It's the relatedness of the stress, the exhaustion, and the utter hopelessness of when this will be over that makes one more vulnerable. This creates more opportunities for trust to exist between people. There is more honesty with mutual understanding, and an



increasing number of people are talking about how they're mentally exhausted. People are reflecting on what kind of a relationship they're able to truly work out in a pandemic, and are trying to trust their feelings about it," she says.

Srivastava adds, "Needless to say, if you've already been having virtual dates and have established a certain level of emotional intimacy and trust, physical intimacy can feel very tempting. But the pandemic has restrained us. The risk in meeting someone new is making people more selective in choosing who to meet. In countries where testing is free, people are asking for a Covid negative report before meeting."

When asked about concerns she's observed people have while approaching



someone new, she feels there is a polarity among people in India when it comes to socialising with people/meeting others personally. "The concerns that people have depend on how concerned and informed they are. While there is no replacement for physical intimacy, research goes to say that video calls come as close to 80 per cent of the oxytocin release that is felt when you're in physical proximity to someone," she informs.

Giving a little more insight, Srivastava says a lot of people are turning to apps due to the anxiety of the uncertain times. "Finding someone to be with plays a big role. You have something and someone waiting for you once this is all over," she says, adding that while a lot of people are using the time to make room for more meaningful relationships, flings are taking a backseat, and most are taking a break from the dating scene altogether.

But, if you're extremely sure you want to hook up, or just engage with someone new, Dr Sharmila Majumdar, one of India's first certified female sexologists, gives some insights. "Even though coronavirus is not a sexual infection, it's extremely important to be careful, as traces of this virus can be passed on through fluids, through seminal fluid, or kissing, etc. Kissing is not safe at all. Having one partner is advisable, and sterilising yourself before and after any sexual interaction is a must. Penetration without being face to face, a rear position, is safer. Right now, it's advisable to abstain. Avoiding oral sex is important. There are many other ways to express intimacy — cooking for your partner, sending love notes, video calling is better. Cases are increasing, and if things are opening up, medically it's still a pandemic," she cautions.

However, Majumdar believes that no matter how the pandemic affects our sex lives, Indians will bounce back. "We're the land of Kama Sutra, our couples will be able to bounce back, with each other's support and solidarity. I don't think we have anything to worry about when it comes to sexual health," she smiles.

Swipe right, guys. It's going to be fine. ©

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