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Six Rules for Digital Dating

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Sage advice from Aish.com's dating experts.

- *"If he's in Oregon and I'm in Chicago, can we have our first few dates over Skype before we decide to meet each other in person?"*
- *"When someone suggests a woman for me to date, I check her Facebook page before deciding yes or no. What do you think of this?"*
- *"I once texted a guy for six hours and felt we had an incredible connection. I never heard from him again. How can I keep this from happening the next time?"*
- *"How can I know someone I'm emailing is a safe person to date, or that he's not married, in prison, or too socially awkward to ever meet?"*

Technology has fundamentally altered the way we communicate. We can send messages, update our social network, and share in a world-full of information with one click of a mouse.

But all this comes at a price. Because we're accustomed to communicating in 140 characters or less, we expect that an "instant" connection will lead to an instant relationship. What happens fast is often superficial, and we are losing the ability to develop a relationship gradually and move it to the next step.

Relationships that are meant to endure don't instantly materialize. They take time to nurture and develop, and if we don't have the tools and patience, a relationship that holds genuine promise will likely end up nowhere.

Daters who are serious about developing a meaningful relationship are advised to follow these six rules:

(1) No digital diversions. When you're on a date, don't text or email anyone, or answer a text or chat message. Your Blackberry or smartphone should be turned off and put out of sight. Similarly, keep your cellphone off (no, "silent mode" is insufficient). You may feel the need to be connected and available every moment of the day, but that prevents you from connecting to the person sitting across the table. If you allow these outside distractions to enter your "dating space," the energy and attention that you're supposed to be directing exclusively toward your date has been shattered. That's bound to give a bad first impression – and build resentment at any stage of the relationship.

(2) No over-texting. Texting is a great way to say, "Bus running late. Meet u in 20 min." It's not a substitute for spoken communication. If our default communication is texts, tweets and Facebook posts, we might think we know a lot about the person and are growing closer.

This is a false sense of intimacy, because the texts and tweets don't convey the sender's tone or mood. We can't really get to know someone without spending time together – sharing experiences, observing body language, facial expressions, and engaging in a face-to-face exchange of ideas and feelings. These are essential, intangible elements of social interaction. We don't know if the personal chemistry is in sync, or if we are capable of having a real-time conversation.

Use texting only for short messages about where and when to meet, sudden changes of plans, or a quick "Hi, thinking of you" on a day that you're not seeing each other.

(3) Don't delay the first live meeting. It's fine to exchange basic information online, but as soon as you get a sense this might be a good person to meet, follow up on their references and arrange for a meeting. When two people "date online" for months, without arranging to meet, they may feel as if they're personally relating. Yet often when they finally do meet for the first time, they are disappointed that the other person doesn't look, sound, or act like the mental picture they've developed. And often, the dissonance between that "image" and the reality is too large to overcome – and they are blocked from ever being able to accept the other person.

(4) Don't use email as a substitute for going on dates. Once you've met, email may be a good way to keep in touch when you can't interact in person, but the way to build a relationship is through live conversation. Skype and video chat are good alternatives when geographic distance precludes seeing each other often, but they cannot replace face-to-face dating. Even something as simple as planning a date should be done on the telephone; firing off a quick text message might be perceived as treating the whole date too flippantly.

(5) Don't rely exclusively on social networking sites. The web is a good way to get a general idea of whether or not to date someone. But a two-dimensional photo doesn't capture what a person really looks like, and reading a profile doesn't give enough information about what they're really like. Find out information about a potential date the old fashioned way – by talking to people who know them. Otherwise, you might waste a lot of time emailing someone with an appealing Facebook page, but who is far from what you're looking for. Alternatively, you might pass up a great opportunity.

(6) Don't break up electronically. Yes, it's hard telling someone, "It was nice to meet you, but I don't think this is going to work out." But a virtual break-up is much more hurtful to the other party. If you've ever been at the receiving end of such a text message or email, you know the feeling.

So while technology has dramatically increased the *quantity* of information exchange, it has undeniably undermined the *quality*. It also negatively affects our attention spans, which means those trying to develop a connection may have a hard time sustaining meaningful conversation. They're accustomed to communicating in short spurts, rather than taking the time to explore a subject in-depth, understand and convey emotions, and engage in a prolonged exchange of thoughts and ideas.

So when it comes to dating, try to get out of that instant-message mindset. It may be a bit "old-fashioned," but it is essential to building a successful, long-term relationship and marriage.

This article can also be read at: http://www.aish.com/d/w/Six_Rules_for_Digital_Dating.html

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