THE
RIGHT WAY TO
DATE ONLINE

Today, you can pick up your phone or open
your laptop and meet thousands of eligible bachelors.
But how do you find the right one for you?
And how do you know he's for real?

By Elena Donovan Mauer

I'm busy, have responsibilities with work and a house, and no way to meet people who might share my admittedly eclectic set of interests," says Kay B. of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "I don't want to spend time in bars or date people from my work, and don't have time for random chance to drop a compatible guy onto my path. Online dating is a good way to cut to the chase."

Dating online through sites such as *Match.com* and *eHarmony.com*, and apps such as Tinder, seems like a no-brainer for many women. But we've all heard horror stories: Guys who are only out for sex, women who get "catfished" (a person's profile is made up), those who are used for money. There was the headline of the man who choked his date because she "didn't match her profile." How do you avoid all of that?

CREATE A PERFECT PROFILE

*A*ccording to Dr. Wendy Walsh, a psychologist and author of *The 30-Day Love Detox*, start with a great profile. "Men always want to see a photo," she explains. "But don't post lots of sexy pictures if you're looking for a long-term relationship." You may see other scantily clad women and feel the need to keep up, but know: Sexy photos attract guys looking for sex or something short term.

"Head shots where the woman was smiling attracted me," says Tony D. of Philadelphia, who dated online for about eight years. "You'd be surprised how many don't smile."

The words you write are important, too. Walsh says to avoid lists of qualities you want in a mate—they're impersonal and difficult to live up to. Tony says that women who listed what they didn't want sounded too negative. Also, don't go with a generic or just-scratching-the-surface profile. "Tell a real anecdote, a story from your life, and talk about your values and real life goals," says Walsh. "It's OK to say you want to get married one day, if you do—you should write what you want. If you have a middle-of-the-road profile, you're going to be seen as an object by men."

A common mistake is casting a wide net. Many women want to attract a lot of potential dates, but the goal is to find one person who likes you for you.

Kay, who's now in a committed relationship with a man she met online, says, "With online dating, I could spell out who I am, what I'm about, and what I was looking for in a relationship, then let people either be interested or not."

Keep it brief. Include the most notable five things about yourself, and no more, says Walsh.

LET YOURSELF BE PURSUED

*S*ounds sexist but "men don't like to be chased," says Walsh. So if you see a guy whose profile appeals to you, the trick is to look at it twice. On most dating sites, he'll be able to see that you've viewed it more than once. If he's interested, he'll likely contact you directly, says Walsh.

And don't get bummed if you haven't been contacted by 50 guys in the first week. Really, your goal is to meet just one person who likes you for you, so it's okay if only a couple are reaching out.

HAVE FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT ASAP

*D*on't think of it as online dating, warns Walsh. "Think of it as online meeting," she says. Use your dating site to make the introduction. If you're interested in the person, suggest an in-person meeting ASAP. Too much time chatting over the Internet doesn't give you an idea of how you relate in the real world. Plus, communicating online only opens you up to noncommittals, scammers, catfishers, and, well, total duds.

Once you meet in person, you'll know whether or not this is a relationship you want to continue to pursue. "A casual, no-pressure meeting was helpful in determining if there was any real chemistry," says Bryon M. in Fort Myers, Florida, who dated online about three years before meeting his wife. "If you feel you might enjoy meeting someone for coffee, then take that chance. The alternative means scrutinizing over details they have written about themselves in an effort to try to impress you. Get face to face to see who they really are."

TAKE SEX SLOWLY

*Y*ou like the guy, he's hot, and you get along great. It's OK to jump into bed, right? Wrong! With any kind of dating, Walsh says it's important to wait until you're completely immersed in someone's life, and you've met his friends or family, before you have sex.

Sex is connected to emotions. Being physically intimate in short order means letting your guard down before you've gotten to know this person and his circle. "Maybe he's married or his friends hate him," points out Walsh. "Meet his friends first. There should be care and commitment before sex."

REALLY LISTEN

*Y*ou know other women who have made this mistake before: Don't think that he's "just saying it" or that he'll change his mind if he says he doesn't want a serious relationship, to get married, or to have kids—or that he does. If he says he wants different things from the relationship than you are sure that you do, don't kid yourself. He's not likely to do a 180.

RECOGNIZE THE WARNING SIGNS

*A*s you start dating someone from a dating site, there are some things to keep in mind:

His peers. What are his friends doing? If they're spending weekends in Vegas gambling and clubbing, chances are he's going to want to do that, too. If you're looking for someone who can settle down, this probably isn't your guy.

His spending. If the guy forgets his wallet or "will pay you back"— especially after he's made a display of paying for dinners—you could have a scammer on your hands.

A gut feeling. You have instincts for a reason. "I trusted my gut and deleted anyone who gave off a creepy vibe, no matter how minor," says Kay.

Be skeptical of people online, says Walsh, but also be open-minded. You might find that all that negativity surrounding online dating isn't universal. It can be a positive experience. Case in point: Jeanette D. of Virginia, who met her husband online. "I didn't have any bad experiences," she says. "It was fun." **NY**