

How to bag a date for feb 14
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Did you know that January is the most popular month for first dates and budding romances?

According to online dating service Parship.co.uk Britain's singles will have gone on a staggering 8m first dates this January - three times more than December and twice as many as any other single month of the year,

triggered by a unique combination of loneliness and resolution that just doesn't occur at any other time of the year.

But what happens if you are one of the people who hasn't managed to find a January soulmate? With February 14 roaring towards us, the pressure is on to find a Valentine's Day date.

"It's a numbers game," says Dating Doctor Peter Spalton. "The more people that you meet and engage with, and share some interest with and have a stimulating experience of some sort, the more chance there is of finding the right one."

But forget clichéd chat ups, says Peter. There's nothing easier, or harder, than saying 'hello' to a stranger.

The best way is to pick up on something unusual about your potential dating target Do they have cool shoes? Are they standing next to a strange piece of art in a gallery? Is their shopping basket full of horror films?

"You've got to use your eyes and use the free information you get," he says. "It's better than a chat-up line because it says, 'I'm interested in you and what you're doing', not just some corny line I read off the internet."

Next comes a fairly short conversation - or email exchange, depending on whether you're online or off.

Listen intently and pick up on the other person's cues. But know when to stop: "When you get to a point when you think the conversation's flagging off a bit, that's the time you leave. Make some excuse and then you go. Because you don't want to leave on a low . . .

"You need to leave them with some anticipation and then you ask them for their phone number. It's very easy - just give them a compliment. It could be, 'It's been wonderful to meet you, I really enjoyed talking about whatever, I'd like to see you again, can I have your phone number?' The worst you can get is no."

Follow up within 24-48 hours to arrange a date, advises Peter.

So where are all these elusive, eligible singletons?

Bars: Forget them, we say. People aren't on their own there often. They're with a group so you've got the inter-group dynamics to handle. Plus, it's noisy and actually difficult to have a conversation.

Parties: Work them - parties are great because they tend to be quieter, it's more informal, it's less competitive and you can go up to someone at a party and just say 'hello'.

Supermarkets: Fantastic for starting conversations with people because there's so much information; stuff on the shelf, stuff in their trolley, you can see whether they've got a bottle of

champagne, or a cat and a dog.

Go get 'em, tiger.