

# The New Rules of Dating

by Dr Victoria Lukats MBBS MRCPsych MSc

**More than ever, we are being encouraged to play the dating game our own way.**

It can seem like something out of *Sex and the City*. Could it be that affluent, well-educated single people now see multiple non-exclusive dating as the norm?

**Call me old-fashioned ...**

**Well, we're in for a surprise.** With the great increase in the popularity and acceptability of Internet dating in recent years, we may be fooled into thinking that we have moved to a more American style of dating. It could lie somewhere in our future, but we certainly haven't got there yet.

A recent national survey has shown that we are still more old-fashioned in our approach to dating than our American counterparts. It seems that only a tiny proportion of the single population are in casual, non-exclusive relationships. The vast majority are either unequivocally single or part of an established couple.

As for casually dating several different people at the same time, it is a bit of a no-no for around 45% of single people surveyed; they believed that this sort of behaviour was never acceptable. Some 55% do, however, think it's ok – provided the situation is made clear to everybody involved. The bottom line, unfortunately, is that there is no clear line on what people see as normal dating etiquette these days.

**If you could read my mind**

The rules of dating have changed subtly in recent years, but the problem is that, as with most social rules, they are unwritten and unspoken. On a first date, how many people would freely admit that they were seeing other people? We all need to be sensitive to the other person's expectations, but a first date is probably not the time to talk in great detail about the possible future of your relationship!

Even if we desperately want security and commitment, it's not a good idea to come on strong in the early stages. At this point, it's all about moderation ... What most people find attractive is someone who appears secure and confident. You should seem positive about the prospect of a new relationship, but appear needy or clingy and you could scare a potential partner away.

**What do I call you?**

Being British can make matters more complicated. In the early stages of a relationship we will tend to say that we are 'just seeing someone'. We won't commit to the words 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend'. Things are different in Spain ... Either a woman has a boyfriend ('*novio*'), or she doesn't. If a couple spend the night together, then they are definitely boyfriend and girlfriend.

In time-honoured fashion, we British are not so clear about these things, and traditional gender roles also influence matters. Research suggests that, compared to men, women are more likely to take the lead from their partner. They are more likely to refer to someone as a 'boyfriend' once the man in question has already spoken of her as his girlfriend. For most people this happens once it's clear that the relationship is exclusive, perhaps after three or four dates.

## **Sex: worth waiting for?**

Sex clearly plays a role in the development of a relationship, but how long should you wait? Many men would be happy to get down to it on the first date, while women would generally prefer to take things more slowly. Still, 44% of men say that they would normally have had sex by the end of the third date. The figure for women is 23% ... So who's telling the truth? Overall, however, the vast majority of people would tend to have sex after a few dates or maybe wait up to a month. A minority of people would prefer to wait even longer and, perhaps surprisingly, one in twenty 18-29-year-olds still say they would wait until they were married.

It's clear that, in modern Britain, unwritten rules still govern our behaviour and expectations when it comes to relationships. We need to accept that those rules are diverse and that expectations vary, not least between women and men. It's not just about doing the right thing for yourself – it's about doing the right thing for your partner too.

**Do you have any questions that you would like to see discussed in future editions of the PARSHIP newsletter? Then contact Dr Lukats at [drlukats@parship.co.uk](mailto:drlukats@parship.co.uk).\***

**Dr Victoria Lukats MBBS MRCPsych MSc works as a psychiatrist.**

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\*Any reader questions that appear in the PARSHIP.co.uk newsletter will do so anonymously. Unfortunately, PARSHIP.co.uk and Dr Victoria Lukats cannot enter into personal correspondence on relationship issues raised by readers.

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