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Pros and Cons of Online Dating in Later Life

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As of 2013, half of adults ages 50-64 had a social media profile (Vandeweerd, Myers, Coulter, Yalcin, & Corvin, 2016) and today, a growing number of older adults are using online dating sites and apps to meet new people (Wada, Clarke, & Rozanova, 2015). Older adults who are divorced are significantly more likely to use these online dating sites than those who are widowed or have never married (AARP, 2012). Men are typically encouraged to use these sites by coworkers, while women are frequently encouraged by friends and family members (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014). Interestingly, one study cited by McWilliams and Barrett (2014) found that men see online dating as a way to quickly jump back into dating following the end of a relationship through death or divorce, whereas women use online sites as a way to ease into the idea of dating again.

As with most things, there are both positives and negatives associated with online dating. It is important to be aware of them in order to make an informed decision of whether to use or not use Internet sites to cultivate new relationships.

Positives

1. **Access to others** – Because of retirement, relocation, and the deaths of family members and friends, one's social network tends to shrink in later life (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2011). Whereas living close by and having the physical ability to go out and socialize used to be prerequisites to meeting new people, online dating has decreased these geographical, transportation, and physical limitations, thus allowing for older adults to expand their social network to include potential dating partners. Online dating is also beneficial when other ways of meeting new people fail to work.

   For example, when trying to meet new people through one's friends or the ways that worked when younger (e.g. church, clubs, bars) is not successful, online dating offers yet another opportunity (Vandeweerd, et al., 2016). This can be especially beneficial for divorced older adults who want to meet people outside of the network they knew with their ex-spouse, or when women need to expand their network because they feel uncomfortable dating the spouses of their late friends (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014).

   Even when online dating yields little success in creating new relationships, it is seen by some as the only way to connect with new people so they keep using it (Vandeweerd et al., 2016).

2. **Control** – Older adults, especially women, often find that the sense of control they feel in online dating is a positive reason for taking this approach (Vandeweerd et al., 2016). Traditionally, men have initiated dating interactions, but online sites make it easier for women to make the first contact if they choose to do so. The online world also gives a sense of

anonymity that takes away some of the feelings of vulnerability associated with initiating contact in person. One study found that more than 20% of initial contact on online dating sites was initiated by women, although the majority of initial interactions are still led by men. However, it is important to note though that the women using these sites may be more outgoing and proactive about dating than average women. Regardless, despite women's hesitance to make the initial contact, they are still influential in the pacing and termination of relationships created online (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014).

In addition to women feeling they have more control in initiating and maintaining online relationships, an AARP (2012) study found one of the top reasons people over 50 used online dating sites was because there was no pressure. They could respond if they wanted to, but they did not have to. This added to their sense of control over their dating lives.

3. **Safety** – Due to the fact that the interaction taking place on dating sites happens online makes some feel safe. For example, online daters can view the profiles of potential partners and capture a general understanding of who a person is before ever initiating any form of contact. They can even "Google" the person using other sources to check the background of the person before deciding to initiate contact (Vandeweerd et al., 2016, p. 263).

   The online platform also allows individuals to limit how much personal information is shared and delay exchanging contact information until they get to know each other better, at which time they will have been able to assess the level of risk and evaluate the potential for the relationship before meeting in person. Many women feel that it would be easier online to part ways if a relationship did not work out and there would be less risk of physical retaliation (Vandeweerd et al., 2016).

4. **Friendship** – Even though a romantic relationship may not work out, many women have found that friendship is one of the most positive outcomes of online dating. Some older adults decide to remain good friends after they realize that a romantic relationship will not work. This was especially found to be the case when the online daters lived in different states (Vandeweerd et al., 2016).

Negatives

1. **Effort** – Actively dating, whether in person or online, requires time and effort. However, the competitive nature of online dating requires regularly updating one's profile and responding to messages, which was seen by some as a negative of online dating (Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichiello, & Pitts, 2015).

2. **Misrepresentations** –Whereas older men look for an attractive physical appearance and youthfulness in the women they choose to date, women, in general, are less concerned with looks and instead pay attention to the socioeconomic status, occupational success, intelligence, and communication skills of the men they choose to date (Fileborn et al., 2015; McWilliams & Barrett, 2014; Wada et al., 2015). It is natural to want to appear as attractive as possible in these areas in order to bolster one's chances of finding a dating partner; however, this often leads people to misrepresent themselves as far as their age, weight, health, and pictures go (Vandeweerd et al., 2016).

   Some try to create a youthful identity (and look for a youthful identity in others) in order to bring a sense of balance to their aging body but youthful mind, emphasizing how old they feel. For example, one man commented that he rejects the profiles of women who list hobbies that are often associated with being old, such as bingo (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014). Some men lie about their marital status or the type of relationship they want in order to attract more women to have sex with them.

   Scammers attempt to woo potential dating partners into relationships in order to eventually get money from them (Vandeweerd et al., 2016). The disabled and elderly are especially at risk to be targeted (Hategan, Bourgeois, Parthasarathi, & Ambrosini, 2016). Because of the ease with which online daters could misrepresent themselves, making it difficult to get to know someone until meeting them in-

person, these meetings are seen by some as being risky (Vandeweerd et al., 2016).

3. **Unwanted sexual messages** – Older adults are not necessarily against sexual contact, but when sexual messages are sent too soon after meeting someone, they often make the recipient uncomfortable. These messages were reported more as unwanted than threatening though (Vandeweerd et al., 2016).

4. **Negative experiences** – Just as with meeting people in-person, there is always a chance for negative occurrences with online dating. According to a 2013 Pew Internet study of adults using online dating, 42% of women reported having been contacted by someone who made them feel harassed or uncomfortable (cited in Vandeweerd et al., 2016).

   Unfortunately, those who are harassed online may be less likely to report it though out of fear that it will not be taken seriously or that it will be seen as commonplace online. Older adults have reported being scared, uncomfortable, threatened, stalked, or abused (verbally, physically, and/or sexually) by the people that they have met online. Some women prefer to drive themselves when they go on in-person dates with those they have met online so they do not end up trapped in a bad situation with no way out. It is especially important for older adults to be vigilant in dating because the risks of dating and intimate partner violence, including financial exploitation, threats, and physical harm, are higher among older adults (Vandeweerd et al., 2016).

5. **Lack of success** – While some older adults do meet people online with whom they can create lasting romantic relationships, it unfortunately seems that most are unsuccessful (Fileborn et al., 2015). Several reasons have been cited for the lack of success, such as not being able to find any one "worth" dating (Vandeweerd et al., 2016, p. 265), the lack of responses to messages or dates not showing up for in-person meetings, having great online interactions but finding there is no chemistry when they met in person, not being attractive enough due to aging, the lack of new profiles after online dating for several years, and the impersonal and superficial nature of online dating. However, seeing others succeed in finding a partner gives enough hope for many to keep trying (Vandeweerd et al., 2016).

Summary

To summarize, there are several pros and cons to online dating. Some of the positives include growing a social network, gaining new friends and having a sense of safety and control. However, some of the drawbacks to dating online include the time, effort, lack of success, unwanted sexual messages, and the risk of people misrepresenting themselves. Nevertheless, in this age of technology, there are so many new opportunities, including online dating for adults in later life. It is important to weigh the positives and negatives and decide for oneself if this approach to meeting people is worth it. Online dating allows access to more people, a sense of control and safety, and friendship, but also requires effort, putting up with peoples' misrepresentations of themselves, and being willing to face the risks of having unwanted negative experiences or not finding someone.

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