digital dating

Taking precautions when using Internet and phoneline dating services

by Melissa Davis

My friend Brian swears by phone sex services. "Dating for the electronic age—quick and dirty," he says. "The first-time sex is never a disappointment, and I don't have to spend the night."

Telephone and Internet dating have become increasingly popular amongst the single set in recent years. And the trend doesn't seem to be restricted to any particular demographic—although women do seem to gravitate more towards Internet dating, while men use both the Web and the telephone. Various companies target their services to either male or female users and also on the basis of sexual orientation. Service users can create individual "profiles" detailing everything from their age and HIV status, to hobbies and fetishes.

The broad appeal of telephone and on-line dating makes sense. On the one hand, it provides shy people with viable alternatives to the bar scene, blind dates, and other highly social venues where people traditionally meet. On the other hand, it offers bolder types a novel approach to cruising. The appeal also exists in the fact that these services provide something for everyone—anonymous sex, casual dating, and even the opportunity to explore and cultivate a serious, intimate relationship.

All this, and so much more, from the privacy of your own home! Safe, convenient, easy. Sign me up!

Quick and easy

That's what Jamie, a single, HIV-positive, gay man in his late forties thought. He used Web-based dating services, directed at men who have sex with men, for about a year. "The draw was easy," he said. "Quick. Anonymous."

Jamie was looking exclusively for anonymous sex and found the Internet services very accessible and a fast, easy way to meet other guys in Vancouver. "Initially, it was quite addictive, especially after some successful hook ups. I could see how people get obsessed with it—that 'high' of casual, anonymous sex," he said.

However, Jamie also cautions new users about these services; his advice is applicable to both Web and phoneline dating. "Don't try to make the service something that is isn't." Although the purpose of casual phone and on-line cruising is to meet for sex, there is a high degree of no-shows for sex dates. It goes without saying that some people simply don't present as well in person as they do on-line or over the telephone. "I limited my expectations," Jamie said. "I wasn't looking for romance—and, in that sense, I knew I wouldn't be disappointed if things didn't work out."

HIV-positive people who use the Internet and phoneline dating services for anonymous sex, casual dating, or to explore relationship possibilities, encounter some unique issues. Many PWAs appreciate the uninhibited quality and freedom from disclosure that is possible when masturbating during phone and on-line sex. Disclosure issues often arise for PWAs who meet for sex and want to communicate their status and negotiate safe play practices. As well, chatting on-line or via e-mail for an extended time, without a personal meeting, can create a certain quality of depth, intimacy, and trust. For this reason, some PWAs feel more comfortable disclosing their HIV status in an on-line communication rather than during a personal meeting: words can be carefully chosen, nervousness can be concealed, and the recipient has private time to consider the information and how they wish to respond.

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A great leveler

Andrew is a forty-five year old gay male who lives in Seattle. He also describes himself as someone "who happens to be HIV-positive"—one of many aspects of his identity. Andrew began exploring on-line dating services initially out of curiosity, but with the underlying hope of meeting someone with whom he could connect. "I think that using the Internet is *the* new way of meeting people," he says. "I am in my mid-forties and don't go out drinking or socializing in the gay scene here in Seattle, which effectively limits my options of meeting someone."

While Andrew claims that Web-based dating can be somewhat impersonal, he also views it as "a great leveler"—a communication tool to discern whether or not you have compatible interests or chemistry with people you meet on-line. "I think the Internet enables two people to get to know each other's attitudes, feelings, outlooks, and what they are looking for in the other person."

Andrew approaches disclosure as he always has: "I decided years ago that 'honesty is the best policy'. While it is a gamble that the other guy may walk away after finding out I am HIV-positive, living with integrity, for me, means disclosing before we get sexually involved."

Andrew and Jamie's objectives were very different, but somehow they connected on-line. While Jamie stated clearly at the outset that he was not looking for a relationship, he couldn't deny that their e-mail exchange had created some "spark". Both of them agree that the outcome has been wonderful. "Sometimes I'm still amazed that we met at all," says Andrew. "But day after day my interest about Jamie grew and, after we really started to get to know each other, we decided to meet." Although they have been maintaining a long-distance relationship between Vancouver and Seattle over the past year, Andrew is planning to immigrate to Canada within the year.

So, what do we make of newfangled dating rituals in the electronic age? Telephone and on-line sex can be fun, thrilling, and safe. Hooking up for sex in person can also be fun, but remaining cautious and mindful of personal safety is important. Taking the time to get to know someone on-line can be a good experience, provided you keep your expectations reasonable. As Andrew says: "Don't get your hopes up that technology is going to find your knight in shining armour. The Internet and the telephone are just tools, which bring people together. It's the people that make things work, not a telephone dial or a keyboard."

Tips for using phone dating lines and Internet dating sites

When creating a voicemail or on-line profile:

▼ State clearly and briefly who you are and what you are seeking.

▼ Be cautious about how much information you reveal: too much might compromise your privacy, too little might create suspicion. Honesty is the best way to avoid disappointment.

When talking on the phone or chatting on-line:

▼ Determine whether you can trust a person before disclosing your home or work telephone number or e-mail address. Use a phone-line dating service to keep your own telephone number private, and/or set up a separate, free e-mail account to use for dating.

▼ You can report problem callers to the phoneline dating company's customer service department. They can block the caller's number from system access. Similarly, if you receive any e-mails that cause concern, don't hesitate to block the sender's e-mail address and/or create a new e-mail address and profile for yourself.

▼ It's easy to be very open from behind a computer screen, but keep in mind that there are dishonest people on-line. Be cautious about the risks involved in disclosing very personal information and sending photographs through the Internet.

Hooking up for a date or sex:

▼ Consider meeting, for the first time, in a busy public place such as a coffee shop, restaurant, bar, or with friends. Don't rely on your date for transportation. This will give you the flexibility to leave when you want. Later, if you feel confident that your date is trustworthy, you can always go somewhere more private.

▼ Tell someone about the date: who you are meeting, the time, and the location. Leave a note or voicemail, send an e-mail, or ask someone to phone your cell phone at a certain time to make sure you are okay.

▼ Use common sense and basic rules of personal safety. If you feel uncomfortable, trust your intuition and leave.

▼ If you plan to meet a stranger for sex, take condoms with you.

▼ Don't feel pressured to do anything you don't want to.

▼ If your safety is threatened or you are harmed in any way, the incident can be reported to the police. ⊕

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