MY TURN

'I'm Dating Expert—I See 3 Ways Relationships Are Struggling in 2022'

JAMES EARL

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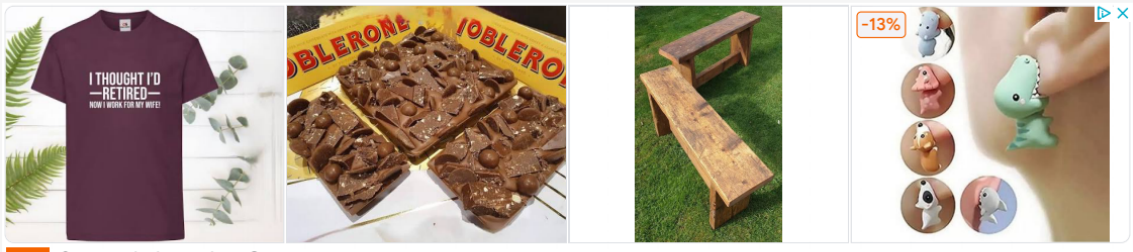

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My career began over thirty years ago after gaining my masters degree in social work at Sussex University. After graduating, I did all sorts of different things. I was a musician for several years; working as a jazz pianist while building my career in academia at the University of Richmond in London. I taught philosophy, which in my view, is pretty aligned with psychotherapy.

I decided to forge a career in psychotherapy in the late 2000s. As the U.K. was plunged into an economic recession, venues were shutting down and music programs were being scrapped. I was still working as an academic, but realized that alone was not going to sustain my whole family.

So, I decided to reinvent myself in the field of psychotherapy. In 2010, I trained as a relationship counselor and have been in private practice for the last thirteen years. I work with new or long-term couples experiencing sex and relationships issues like affairs, lack of desire or communication problems.

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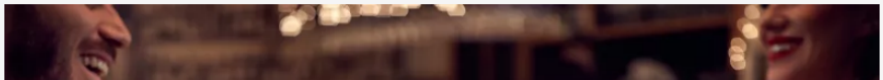

James Earl is a psychotherapist and relationship counselor based in southwest London. He specializes in communication, restoring desire, help with sexual issues and recovery from affairs.

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The initial dating process

In my opinion, while dating we do two things at once. Firstly, we are looking for some play and have fun with, whether that is finding someone to have a conversation with, laugh with or spend time with—and that can include seeking sex and sexual attraction.

But, I think we are also looking for the possibility that it could be more meaningful. Of course, this isn't the case for every individual. But for many of us, even if we are just enjoying the here and now, we are on the lookout for that connection.

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I believe we go to bed with people at the beginning not just because we want to have sex with and are attracted to them, but also because we're checking them out as a potential long-term partner.

For example: Do I feel okay being naked with this person, or is it just a bit weird? Do I feel like this person has a sense of humor? And the really important questions: Do I believe I can trust this person? Do I feel they are fundamentally a good person?

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If the answer to those questions is no, we generally say: "Thanks, bye." But, if the answers to those questions are yes, I believe that has the potential to turn into a serious relationship.

The moment we answer those questions, in my eyes, is the point where playing turns into dating. It takes on a new role, which is where the long-term relationship really begins. You start to think: "He or she could be a good companion."

In my experience, this takes place within the first few months; early in the relationship we get our lasting impression of this person. Ultimately, when we're in a long term relationship, we take on a whole load of things that are boring or irritating, so we have to find someone we can tolerate those things with. In my eyes, the financial crisis we're experiencing presently does impact the initial dating process.

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1. Financial instability impacting dating

If you're just playing with someone, financial compatibility perhaps does not matter too much—unless you have a particular taste for expensive meals out. But, if you're looking for long-term prospects, in my view, those things become important. Often we look for partners with financial stability.

I think everybody is feeling less secure and has a question mark over whether they can afford to make it by themselves or offer anything to a partner. So I think it's had a really disheartening effect.

2. Housing costs delaying commitment

James says the cost-of-living crisis could have a detrimental impact on dating. Stock image.

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I think the economy has always impacted relationships, however the current cost-of-living crisis is a dramatic new development in an issue which has been prevalent for a really long time.

At present, I believe there is a massive mental health crisis amongst young people in the U.K.. When you assess the reasons why, you could argue that financial insecurity is a large contributor to that.

The majority of young people can not afford to buy anywhere to live; many won't be able to get a mortgage until they are in their thirties. In terms of dating, this means both women and men may defer a long-term relationship, and certainly having kids, until they are financially stable. People are unsure about when they can afford to live together, buy a home or have kids, meaning they go through their initial dating phase for much longer.

Because that phase is not developing, they may break up. Dating usually looks like it's on a trajectory somewhere, so if there is no next stage because the couple can't afford to move on, sometimes that means the relationship ends and the whole process starts again.

Another impact is that people in new relationships may move in together for financial reasons. They may then not feel they can leave the relationship if it's no longer working, because of economic instability.

3. Starting relationships without the "honeymoon period"

James says starting relationships without the so-called "honeymoon period" means there could be issues down the road if a couple wish to "amp up" their relationship. Stock image.

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As the cost of living crisis affects the way couples date and whether they feel they can move forward with relationships, one aspect that can get lost is the "honeymoon period" where a couple is spending time together having dinners, going for drinks or taking part in fun activities together.

In my experience, starting a relationship without having a "honeymoon period" can have a varied effect further down the road.

I often work with couples in long-term relationships and one of my early questions is: "How did you meet and how was the dating phase". Quite often people say: "Yes we had the initial dating phase; we were really into each other and had lots of sex".

However, some couples also say: "Yes, we liked each other, but it wasn't like dynamite." These couples have stayed together, so that tells me that those people are looking for that next stage and that companion and partner are not necessarily looking for the things that make the best fun in terms of the bedroom.

In my experience, if a couple doesn't have a honeymoon period to refer to, it's difficult to imagine ramping the relationship up later down the line, because there's not a memory of back when things were great to base that off.

While there can be a benefit to not having that very exciting honeymoon period because there's no huge decline in passion, I believe the downside is that there is less to refer to if you do want to try and amp the relationship back up by referring to how it was.

Planning low-cost dates during the cost-of-living crisis

James says that after finding the right person, dating doesn't have to involve huge expense. Stock image.

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Putting aside the question of looking at a potential partner's financial viability, I believe that when it comes to dating someone without spending lots of money—if you find the right person, you can have fun doing a hell of a lot of things.

In regards to finding that right person, I believe there are two key things to ask. One is: Do they provide more fun than you would have by yourself? Secondly: Does that person aid our individual process of growth? You want your partner to boost your blue-sky thinking and join your enthusiasm. If you have those two things, and your fun and growth is better they are by yourself, why would you want to leave?

Assuming you have all of that as a base position, I believe that having fun is possible when you're stressed and don't have enough money to paint the town red, as long as you choose something which gives you a good feeling of connectedness.

We can create connected energy outside of the bedroom in lots of different ways. Whether it's reading to each other, playing a game, baking a cake or just clowning around together, all that stuff is possible at home and without too much expense.

An example of a low-cost date is, if you live in a large city, perhaps meeting your partner at a central location and walking to some local galleries. Spend some time there before going for a single drink looking out over the city at dusk. That would not only be highly romantic, but also allow you to talk with one another more than you would if you went to the cinema or theater.

If you are worried about your finances while dating, I would say that everybody else is likely in the same boat. There are a small number of very wealthy people who are insulated from all of this, but otherwise it's a general situation, so don't be put off.

Connecting with people is fun and doesn't have to involve huge expense; if someone does not like that, they may not be the perfect person for you anyway. I would rather feed the ducks with someone and have a real laugh than go to a swanky restaurant and be bored.

James Earl is a psychotherapist and relationship counselor based in southwest London. He specializes in communication, restoring desire, help with sexual issues and recovery from affairs.

All views expressed in this article are the author's own.

As told to Newsweek editor, Monica Greep.

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