**Dating 101**

Dating has changed a lot over the course of the last 15-20 years. Gone for the most part are the days when a mutual friend would introduce us to someone via a blind date or relatives worked with someone who had a great son or daughter that they thought we should meet. And no discussion about dating would be complete without mentioning internet dating! Internet dating has created a “swipe” mentality, swipe to the right if you’re interested in getting to know the person or to the left if not and all this based on profile photos and a brief synopsis of what the person wants prospective dating partners to know about them, to be reviewed within a matter of minutes. Dating was scary in our teens and 20s and can still create some degree of anxiety now that we are older, but I want to share some tips that I hope will make it easier this time around!

1. If you are anxious about stepping back out into the dating scene, make it easier on yourself by engaging in group dating, activities geared to singles that may involve having dinner together, outdoor activities such as hikes, or other shared interest type activities. Get to know people in the group and if you spot someone you’d like to get to know better, do just that, start with casual conversation.
2. Be flexible with your expectations. Let me hasten to add that I am not saying to date someone who is not a believer or to lower your expectations in what you will accept in a dating partner in terms of their character, integrity, etc., I am saying that if your “date list” includes only wanting to date someone who is 5’10” or taller, and you meet this wonderful person who is 5’8”, then don’t let your expectations get in the way of what could be the beginning of a great relationship!
3. Check your baggage. As we get older, life happens to all of us and we have the battlescars to show it! No one is perfect, but before you embark on a new relationship, think about your past relationships or marriage(s) and issues that arose and how you dealt with them. Learning how to work through the hurts and pain of past relationships lays the foundation for a healthy relationship in the future. You owe this to yourself, you are worth it! There are many wonderful resources out there to assist with this: **The Singles Network** is a great resource; check out their website:  [www.TheSinglesNetwork.org](http://www.thesinglesnetwork.org/); you can find many tools, including articles, devotionals and links here to help you in your journey as you develop your identity and fulfillment in Christ, grow in your relationships and disciple others; check out the new devotional on this website, entitled, “*Singles & Relationships*” which covers topics of friendship, difficult people, forgiveness, romance, etc. in regards to family and  friends, and much more! **Pray for a Mate** is another wonderful resource for churches and ministries to start a prayer group for those who want to be married; this website is: [www.prayforamate.com](http://www.prayforamate.com/); At Pray for a Mate meetings, you will learn to: affirm whether you are called to be married or not; allow the Holy Spirit to reveal what needs to change or be adjusted in your life so that you have the greatest success at marriage or remarriage; heal from the past, confront your fears and concerns; learn more about yourself and God’s best for you, and build an accountable group of friends who are all on the same journey. If you are interested in starting a Pray for a Mate group, check out the website for more information! These groups are starting all over the world and people are getting healthier! DivorceCare (recovery support group to help people deal with the pain of separation and divorce), GriefShare (grief recovery support group where you can find help and healing for the hurt of losing a loved one), Christian counselors, and books written by Christian authors are other great tools to help you in your pathway to healthier relationships and maybe marriage one day! DivorceCare and GriefShare are ministries that are offered in churches and communities nationwide; local listings should be available by simply doing an internet search.
4. Look to God to meet your needs for completeness and wholeness. This one goes along with the previous tip: while it is critical to take steps to get yourself healthy, you also need to be able to recognize the flags when someone is entering a new relationship without doing any work on themselves. I’m sure you’ve all heard the definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results. Many people go into relationships, looking to find someone to complete them, to make them happy. People with this mindset will most likely always have failed relationships, as they have not worked on what they need to change in themselves and are looking to others to do what only God can do! God is the only one who can satisfy our true craving for intimacy and completeness.
5. Create a safe network of friends who can serve as mentors, prayer partners, accountability partners, etc. The friends that I am referring to here would be the ones whom you could call at 3 AM if you needed to, the ones who will give you honest advice, even though it may not always be what you want to hear! These are the kinds of friends who have your best interests at heart. When you start dating someone that you really are feeling an attraction to, then have opportunities for your dating partner and these close friends to meet and get to know each other. The close friends will be able to see any flags for potential concerns that you may not be able to, for as the old saying goes, “love is blind.” Once our emotions and heart get involved, we often tend to see only the best in the person we are dating and don’t tend to put a lot of focus on those small things that--down the road--can create serious problems in a marriage.
6. Don’t rush intimacy! I mean this on all levels! The one that most often comes to mind when we think of intimacy is probably physical intimacy, but if you are truly wanting to date God’s way, physical intimacy will only happen after marriage. The other kinds of intimacy are important too! Be careful about sharing too much too soon when you first get to know someone. Emotionally intimacy can set you up to be hurt if you have shared things that are deeply personal and the relationship doesn’t work out. Another intimacy that we need to be mindful of establishing too quickly is spiritual intimacy and your first response, like mine used to be, may be to say, “wait a minute, isn’t spiritual intimacy a good thing…??!!” Spiritual intimacy is a good thing, but if it happens too early, it can result in too much pressure on the friendship before it has had time to develop. Praying with each other about each other in private, or on the phone, can cause intimacy to occur too quickly. This type of intimacy is best reserved for those in a serious dating relationship as being vulnerable and exposing your heart to God in prayer is too much to share with a new or casual dating partner. I want to mention another area related to this point and that is to guard your heart from acting married before you are married. Discussing marriage too prematurely can create pressure and stress on a budding friendship, especially when your thoughts and feelings are out of sync with where the relationship really is at that point in terms of commitment levels! Feelings can change daily or even hourly, so be wary of trusting them! Part of the joy in building a friendship is letting it develop slowly over time, building the foundation of mutual respect and trust. If you continue to date and pursue marriage, these basic qualities of the friendship are what will sustain the relationship in the hard times.
7. Have fun! Don’t overthink things, just get out there and enjoy making new friends and having new experiences!

I hope these tips are helpful. God wants us to have healthy relationships that are honoring to Him. While 1 Corinthians is known as the “love chapter,” I think Philippians 2: 1-5 (NASV) could be called the “relationship verses”: *If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.*

May God bless you in your dating journey.

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