

Shopping for Love

Speed dating and other innovations in matchmaking can confound even the most focused dater, but simple tips can help

BY SANDER VAN DER LINDEN

AS A PSYCHOLOGIST, I have always found the concept of speed dating fascinating. During a series of mini dates, each spanning no more than a couple of minutes, participants in a speed-dating event evaluate a succession of eligible singles. They make split-second decisions on matters of the heart, creating a pool of information on one of the more ineffable yet vital questions of our time—how we select our mates.

The concept of rapid-fire dating has gained tremendous popularity, spreading to cities all over the world. One speed-dating company in New York City, for example, holds a gathering almost every day. Last year online coupon company Groupon hosted the world's largest speed-dating event, with 414 attendees crammed into a restaurant in Chicago. Start-up companies now meet with investors, pregnant couples interact with doulas, and homeless dogs court potential owners, all using the speed-dating format.

Some years ago I caved to my curiosity and tried it out myself. As it turns out, I like to talk—a lot. When the little buzzer went off after three minutes, I often found myself still trying to explain to my bedazzled dating partner why my last name has four syllables (it is Dutch). As you might imagine, I did not find the love of my life.

I made some beginner's mistakes; however, I am not alone in having struggled with speed dating. Even if meet-and-greet matching events might seem like the most efficient way to comb through many options at once, a wealth of data reveals that the context in which we make a choice weighs heavily on the outcome. Speed-dating events can promote a particular decision-making style that might not always work in our favor. Yet we need not be passive victims of our circumstances. Knowing how your environment influences your mind-set, a



quality known as ecological rationality, can help you make the choices that are best for you.

Decisions, Decisions

Traditional dating can seem haphazard, contingent on seemingly minor details such as whether you signed up for the right yoga class or patronized the same bar as your future love interest. Online dating, too, has its drawbacks, requiring hours to sift through profiles and craft careful introductory e-mails before arranging to meet in person. Speed dating, by comparison, offers the opportunity to chat up many eligible singles in rapid succession.

In a typical speed-dating event, participants pair off at individual tables and chairs for a few minutes of conversation. When the buzzer sounds, half of the singles move to another chair and a different partner, in a kind of round robin. After the event is over, the daters submit to the event's organizers the names of the individuals they would like to see again. It sounds simple, but each vari-

able in the design of the event can affect the daters' outcomes.

In spite of maxims about so many fish in the sea, for example, recent research tells us that the heart prefers a smaller pond. In a study in 2011 in the journal *Biology Letters*, University of Edinburgh psychologist Alison P. Lenton and University of Essex economist Marco Francesconi analyzed more than 3,700 dating decisions across 84 speed-dating events. The authors found that when the available prospects varied more in attributes such as age, height, occupation and educational background, people made fewer dating proposals. This effect was particularly strong when individuals were faced with a large number of partners. Additionally, in speed-dating events where the characteristics of the daters varied much more, most participants did not follow up with any of their matches.

Results observed in the world of online dating support this finding. A study in 2008 by Lenton and Barbara Fasolo of the London School of Economics and Political Science indicates that participants often

misjudge how the number of options available to them will affect their feelings. Participants presented with a broad array of potential partners more closely aligned with their anticipated ideal did not experience greater emotional satisfaction than when presented with fewer options.

search goods include laundry detergent and vitamins. Other desirables can be identified only through an interaction; these “experience goods” encompass movies and puppies.

In a study published in 2008 psychologist Dan Ariely of Duke University

of the social environment in which the decision is made. To conserve both mental exertion and time, we judge potential partners by comparing them with others we have encountered rather than by measuring them against some cognitive ideal. In a 2006 study, for example, Raymond

(We judge potential partners by comparing them with others rather than by **measuring them against a cognitive ideal.**)

Prior research by Lenton and Francesconi provides some insight into why people might struggle with speed dating. They found that when the number of participants in a speed-dating event increases, people lean more heavily on innate guidelines, known as heuristics, in their decision making. In essence, heuristics are ingrained rules of thumb that allow us to save effort by ignoring some of the information available to us when we evaluate our options. For example, in those events with a relatively large number of participants, the researchers discovered that people attend predominantly to easily accessible features, such as age, height, physical attractiveness, and so forth, rather than clues that are harder to observe, for example, occupation and educational achievement.

These rules of thumb are evolutionarily adaptive, however, and not necessarily a bad thing. Millions of years of experimentation with different heuristics, conducted in a range of environments, have led us to learn which ones are most effective. Very generally speaking, good looks and youthful vigor are indeed useful metrics for mating because they signal health. Yet if lifelong love is what you are after, a smorgasbord of singles might propel you to make stereotypical selections.

Know Your Environment

One problem with both speed dating and online dating may arise from how we hunt for the things we want. Some items can be found with a simple search targeted at objective qualities. So-called

and his colleagues set out to demonstrate that when it comes to dating, people are the ultimate experience goods. They asked 47 single men and women to list the qualities they look for in people they would consider either marrying or dating. Independent evaluators then rated the characteristics as either searchable or experiential. In both conditions, men and women mentioned more experiential traits—nearly three times more for dating partners and almost five times more for spouses.

Ariely and his co-authors argue that criteria such as “the way someone makes you laugh” or “how your partner makes you feel good about yourself” are harder to define in an online profile than a fondness for kittens, baseball or crème brûlée, leading people to make judgments based on searchable characteristics. They note that using attributes such as weight and height to choose a partner is similar to trying to predict the taste of a food based on its fiber content and calories. A similar argument could be made for speed dating, in which the conversation can resemble an interview more than a fun experience.

In an upcoming book, Lenton, Falso and their colleagues summarize the key message of recent research: how we end up choosing our wives, husbands, boyfriends and girlfriends is a function

Fisman of Columbia University and his colleagues showed that when participants in a speed-dating event were asked what they seek in a potential partner, their answers did not match what they ended up finding attractive during the event. What we select depends on what else is being offered.

Becoming aware of that malleability in our taste, and gaining control over our decision-making strategies in response, is known as ecological rationality. It is equally important when choosing between jams at the grocery store and partners to date; the only difference is the stakes.

If you do attempt speed dating, avoid static, standardized conversations. Annual income and body mass index, after all, cannot give you that warm, fuzzy feeling inside. To obtain more experiential information, try telling a joke or casually mentioning that you plan to go, say, bungee jumping next month to see how he or she reacts. Perhaps if I had been more ecologically rational a few years ago, my speed-dating experience would have been more successful as well. **M**

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(Further Reading)

- ◆ **People Are Experience Goods: Improving Online Dating with Virtual Dates.** Jeana H. Frost, Zoë Chance, Michael I. Norton and Dan Ariely in *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pages 51–61; Winter 2008.
- ◆ **Too Much of a Good Thing? Variety Is Confusing in Mate Choice.** Alison P. Lenton and Marco Francesconi in *Biology Letters*, Vol. 7, No. 4, pages 528–531; August 23, 2011.