

Sex, Lies & E-mail; Internet dating offers plenty of opportunities to meet that special someone, but therapists warn that what you see online is not always what you get. [FINAL Edition]

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Esther Gwinnell was having a bad day.

The Portland, Ore., psychiatrist received a phone call one morning last year from a devastated friend whose husband had fallen in love with someone he had met online.

A few hours later, Gwinnell saw a patient who had had an affair -- first in cyberspace and then in the flesh -- with someone she'd met on the Internet. And that afternoon, she received an e-mail asking her for advice about a patient who was being stalked by a former Internet lover.

"I thought to myself, 'What's wrong with this picture?'" says Gwinnell. Thus began research for her book "Online Seductions" (Kodansha International, 1998).

By now, most people know someone who has had an online romance. Couples meet in chat rooms, usually under assumed names. Next, they move to "private rooms" for one-on-one keyboard conversations. At some point, they may exchange their e-mail addresses and correspond directly. Eventually, some share their real names, phone numbers and photos and meet face to face. Some even get married.

Proponents of Internet romance say that people online are "falling in love from the inside out," sharing their thoughts and feelings before they reveal names, physical descriptions or geographic locations. Just like in "You've Got Mail," the 1998 movie where the characters played by Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks meet online, play cyber footsie and eventually live happily ever after.

But some therapists are cautious about the psychodynamics of online dating. Internet lovers are sharing a lot more than their blissful dreams for the future. Freed from the conventions of face-to-face meetings, they're also using the Internet to act out their fantasies, work out their demons and expose their hang-ups.

Their focus is not always on what the other party likes to read or eat. For every Web site or chat room with the frilly sweetness of "The Cyber Wives Club," there's one--or 100--whose focus is on sex, not romance. In these locales, people flirt, seduce and type themselves into an erotic frenzy. The messages they exchange often resemble the X-rated dialogue of the phone-sex trade. After an hour or so of this, you begin to wonder how many of your neighbors are using the World Wide Web every night to find a new mate or a new thrill.

While the Internet allows people looking for love and/or lust to find partners, mental health experts are concerned that the combination of anonymity and intimacy on the Web can play havoc with personal relationships.

Very few books are devoted to Internet dating. At one end of the spectrum is "Virtual Spaces: Sex and the Cyber Citizen" (Berkley Books, 1997), in which Cleo Odzer, a New York anthropologist and a cable television personality, chronicles her "real-life descent into the sometimes enlightening, sometimes frightening and always shocking world of cybersex"--sort of a wired Erica Jong.

At the opposite end, Gwinnell's book combines thoughtful analysis with how-to advice, based on her own Internet experiences and hundreds of interviews. "Some of the e-mail letters I came across during my research were very romantic," says Gwinnell. "Some of them brought tears to my eyes."

Perhaps the most widely known book that explores identity and relationships on the Internet is Sherry Turkle's "Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet" (Simon & Schuster, 1997). A psychologist and a sociology professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Turkle examines participants in Multiple User Dungeons (MUDs), special chat rooms where people role-play and engage in online sex games.

Somewhere in the middle, "Online Friendship, Chat-Room Romance and Cybersex" (Health Communications, 1996), coauthored by psychologists Sheree Motta and Michael Adamse, offers how-to tips and some breezy discussion of gender gaps and other issues.

And most recently, "The Psychology of the Internet" (Cambridge University Press, 1999) by University of Maryland professor Patricia Wallace, examines group dynamics, aggression and love on the Internet, among other topics.

At this point--about nine years since the Web became widely available--only a few psychologists and psychiatrists have conducted controlled, formal studies on Internet dating. "A tremendous amount of effort and millions of dollars are being spent on ways to develop the Internet and bring it to your home, but relatively very little is going into understanding the Internet's effects on humanity," says Nathan Shapira, a fellow in the department of psychiatry at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine.

At last year's annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, Shapira presented a paper that linked heavy Internet users with personality disorders. Only after selecting the 25 people for his study did he discover that all of them had a history or displayed symptoms of bipolar disorder and/or impulse control disorders. Shapira believes such people are most attracted to and harmed by the Internet, but his study didn't answer two obvious questions: Does the Internet attract people with personality disorders? And does this outlet make them sicker?

Last October, a Carnegie Mellon University study, whose findings were published in the journal *American Psychologist*, associated greater use of the Internet with declines in

communication with family members, declines in the size of a person's social circle and increases in depression and loneliness.

But what about online dating specifically? What are the dangers of relying on a machine for a link to love? Can you love a person for, say, three years, as many people claim to have done, without knowing even his or her name? Is that love?

While Internet use can expand the number of relationships-- intimate or not--and reduce the costs of long-distance communication, habitual use can also reduce a person's social contacts with family members and in-person friends, experts say. In extreme cases, spouses, children, neighbors are pushed aside.

" 'My husband fell in love with someone on the Net,' 'My wife left me for a cyber boyfriend,' 'My boyfriend is having an e-mail affair'- -those are the sad stories I hear," says Gwinnell.

Many of the relationships cited in the books on Internet romance amount to extramarital affairs, whether they lead to physical trysts or not. In chat rooms with such names as "Married and Flirting," it's fashionable to be "married" to two people at once: one in RL (real life) and one in VR (virtual reality). Cyber weddings, complete with descriptions of gowns and music, take place in secret, with only chat room buddies in attendance.

Psychologist Michael Adamse highlighted one such relationship in his book. A woman named Sharon, who is married and has a daughter, falls in love with Sylvia. Later, Sharon discovers that Sylvia is actually a man. Despite this wrinkle, their relationship blossoms until they finally "marry."

"I was suddenly married to two men, and although this was not a legal marriage, the commitment to each other was very real . . . ," Sharon writes in Adamse's book. Eventually, her real-life marriage breaks up. She flies to Scotland to meet her Internet husband, they have a one-weekend fling, and then the cyber marriage ends, too.

Even when real-life relationships remain intact, an online affair raises other issues. Gwinnell found that anonymous Internet love is often narcissistic. "Essentially, people are writing in their diaries" when they compose messages to their Internet lovers, Gwinnell says. "They're romancing themselves."

Gwinnell found that these people reported more pleasure in writing prose rather than reading it. "They want to write about walking along the promenade and plucking a rose for their lovers," says Gwinnell. "We obviously have a deep need for love letters and fiction."

On the darker side, Gwinnell is alarmed at the level of transference taking place. A psychiatric term, transference refers to the process of "transferring" emotions from childhood onto present- day relationships. If your mother abandoned you, for example, you might seek mother figures over and over again.

"Unhealthy issues from a person's past play into most love affairs at some point, but on the Internet it's just so blatant with people role-playing and adopting personas," says Gwinnell. "You have people taking the biggest psychological issue in their whole life and throwing it out there to millions on the Web."

Wallace, Turkle and Gwinnell all compare the confessional nature of Web relationships to that of the patient-therapist link. As in therapy, cyberspace provides an apparently safe environment for role-playing or acting out issues. But in therapy, there are protections for the patient: The therapist is trained and has a clear-cut ethical duty to act only in the patient's interest and to avoid personal entanglements. The Internet offers no such safeguards. According to Gwinnell, individuals can become confused or obsessed with their role-playing and can lose sight of their real personality. With no therapist to intervene, they can cause themselves--or others--serious psychological damage.

Authors such as Gwinnell are also alarmed at the level of fantasy and deception involved in online relationships.

"At its most basic, Internet dating can be bad because people get deceived," says Gwinnell. People often switch sexes when creating chat room identities. Income levels, politics, race, criminal records, mental health histories and marital status often remain secret long into relationships. One of Gwinnell's patients invited his Internet lover to meet at his house after a long correspondence, and an hour into the date, police officers banged on his door and arrested the woman, who had previously been convicted of armed robbery and assault.

What follows often is deep shame. "People say that they can't believe they were so stupid," she says.

Gwinnell identifies two kinds of deception. One is innocent. "Here, people pretend as if they are attending a masquerade ball," she says. "You're safe at home in your bunny slippers, typing away. It's a 'come as you are' party."

The second deception is deliberate. "Here, people are out to hurt others in a truly deceitful way," she says. She cites a woman who spent the weekend with a long-term Internet lover, only to discover later that the person she had met in the flesh was actually the man's roommate. "She went home and sent her lover an e-mail that said how different he looked from his photo, and the guy told her the truth and she never heard from him again," says Gwinnell.

Happily Ever After

Love stories with happy endings do exist.

Peter Rutigliano, a computer programmer in Pittsburgh, met his wife on the Internet in 1993. "We found out a lot about each other within hours," he says. "Both Catholic, both the youngest of three children, both had an old VW Beetle, both of us like parsley in

water," he says. A few days later they met, and neither he nor his wife has spent much time in chat rooms since.

Kim Golden, a 29-year-old book buyer originally from Philadelphia, met her husband on the Internet in early 1993. A graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University at the time, she posted a message on a bulletin board. Someone from Sweden responded. Three weeks later, they exchanged phone numbers.

One month, Golden received a \$900 phone bill. "I painted houses to pay for it, and my parents gave me a loan," she says.

After six months of correspondence and phone calls, Torg Malmgren flew to Washington to visit her. She met him at Dulles Airport, bringing two friends with her for support and safety.

"Just for a second everything in me tightened as we waited for him to come through passport approval, but then he smiled and I knew I wanted to be with him," she says. The Internet lovers married in May and are living in Stockholm.

Wooing via the written word is nothing new, of course. Many people need a cold shower after reading James Joyce's lusty letters to his milkmaid wife. Historically, soldiers away at war have returned home and married their pen pals. Prior to the phone, steamy notes seared through the postal system, from city to city, neighborhood to neighborhood and even house to house. "In Venice," says Gwinnell, "the mail used to be delivered four times a day."

But in letter writing, you often receive enough physical cues to help you develop an accurate picture of the person. "For one, the postmark lets you know where they are on the planet," says Gwinnell. "You have handwriting--is it curlicue or bold and masculine? You have the texture and scent of the paper."

Despite claiming to look beyond irrelevant, material baggage, Internet daters fall prey to common biases when they meet face to face. If one person doesn't meet the other's expectations--physical, financial, sexual--that relationship often comes to a chilly halt.

"Self-disclosure of intimate details of a person's life increases significantly in Web relationships," says Wallace. "But these relationships are extremely fragile. Once they get transferred out of the ether they often die."

Still, Adamse remains "cautiously optimistic" about the odds of finding your special someone on the Internet. "Anything that helps people connect is a good thing." Gwinnell agrees, but stresses the need to examine more fully the nature of those connections. "All of the issues involved in love are there: excitement, betrayal, possession, exhilaration," she says. "Internet love is love, but with some quantitatively different parameters."

Online Love: The Rules of Engagement

To avoid painful mistakes from Internet relationships, psychiatrist Esther Gwinnell suggests that you follow the same guidelines you would if answering a personals ad.

Get as much real data about the person as you can. Ask the person to fax a copy of his or her driver's license and birth certificate, for example.

Ask very pointed questions: Are you seeing anyone now? Are you married? How many online relationships have you had? Why did your last relationship end? How many times have you been married? What would your ex tell me about you?

Ask for a reference. Is there anyone you know who might know this person? Peter and Kim Rutigliano discovered a former professor who knew them both. Kim says she asked him, "What do you think of Peter?" and he replied, "You mean, would I recommend that my daughter date him?" The professor gave her the go-ahead. For long-distance affairs, psychologist Michael Adamse suggests asking people who visit the person's favorite chat rooms.

Before you meet, talk on the phone at least once and exchange photos. "You set yourself up if you rely only on e-mail," says Kim Golden. "I think you can hear in a voice whether that person is sincere."

For a first encounter, meet the person in a public place. "Don't go to a hotel or to the person's house," says Gwinnell. Involve your friends. Tell them where you will be, what time to expect you back. Leave phone numbers with them, and set up an emergency call-back plan. "Tell you friends you'll call them back at 8 or 7 p.m., no matter what," says Gwinnell. If you're flying to meet your Internet date, leave flight and hotel information with friends.

Once you meet, follow through. If you don't think the relationship is going to work out, let the other person know, says Gwinnell. It is very easy, and cruel, to simply disappear into cyberspace. "Closure for that other person is very important," says Gwinnell.

Sidebar: Online Shorthand

"Most of what takes place in a chat room is either sex or inane conversation," says psychologist Michael Adamse. "But the meat and potatoes takes place in the private rooms," where people who meet in group chat rooms go for one-on-one conversations. Here is Adamse's list of chat room acronyms, which have evolved to reduce typing time.

ASAP: As Soon As Possible

AYT: Are You There?

BL: Belly Laugh

BRB: Be Right Back

BTW: By The Way

DIKU: Do I Know You?

F2F: Face To Face

FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions

FWIW: For What It's Worth

IM: Instant Message

IMCO: In My Considered Opinion

IMHO: In My Humble Opinion

IRL: In Real Life

ISO: In Search Of

LOL: Laughing Out Loud

MOTOS: Member Of The Opposite Sex

MOTSS: Member Of The Same Sex

OH: Online Husband

OHinL: Online Husband-in-Law

OIC: Oh, I see!

OTOH: On The Other Hand

OW: Online Wife

PTMM: Please Tell Me More

ROFL: Rolling On The Floor Laughing

RTFM: Read The {Friggin} Manual

S/AC: Sex, Age Check

WYSIWYG: What You See Is What You Get

[Illustration]

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