

TAKING the FEAR OUT of Dating

By Michael A. Goodman

Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University

Dating and courtship can be both brutal and beautiful. Because life is busy and dating sometimes causes frustration, some young people may choose to simply not date. Add to this a general societal fear of marriage, and young single adults often find themselves in a state of limbo, disengaged from developing significant relationships.

Yet prophets continue to encourage young single adults to become more engaged in trying to become engaged—to realize the ideal of marriage and family.¹ Pursuing this ideal requires that we simply start where we are. But how? By understanding and living important principles, you can make your dating experience much more beautiful and successful. Though no one can fully control the process of progression toward marriage, the following points can help you begin to enjoy and succeed in your dating endeavors:

1. Patiently prepare yourself.
2. Live life relationally.
3. Seek opportunities.
4. Deepen select relationships.
5. Communicate expectations openly.

Patiently Prepare Yourself

Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles counseled future missionaries to prepare for their missions by becoming missionaries now.² Similarly, you can prepare for a future relationship by becoming whole as an individual now. Create the kind of life you would like to invite others into. The Savior taught, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). By fully incorporating the gospel into your life, your happiness will increase. You will naturally want to share that joy with those around you (see 1 Nephi 8:12; Enos 1:9).

Ask yourself, “How can I create more wholeness and happiness in my life now so I can eventually share



By understanding and living these principles, you can make your dating experience much more enjoyable and successful.



that happiness with another?” Then act on the inspiration and the ideas that come. A single friend in her 30s once told me, “I don’t think a change in my marital status would make me any happier. I have to decide that my life is worth living now and find pockets of joy no matter what my circumstances are. If I build that habit when I’m single, I suspect I will continue it when I’m married.”

Some young adults pray and long for a temple marriage but feel they have no power to obtain one. Perhaps the counsel in Doctrine and Covenants 58:3–4 applies:

“Ye cannot behold with your natural eyes, for the present time, the design of your God concerning those things which shall come hereafter, and the glory which shall follow after much tribulation.

“For after much tribulation come the blessings.”

Sometimes tribulation simply means that things don’t happen when you think they should. In the words of Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, you must exercise “faith in the Lord’s timing for [you] personally, not just in His overall plans and purposes.”³ This doesn’t mean you simply stand by. As the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote to the Saints, “Let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance,

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY PAO LAM (PAUL) KWONG

to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed” (D&C 123:17).

Live Life Relationally

You can also prepare for your ideal marriage by learning to live your life relationally (that is, focused on building *all* types of relationships with others) before you find yourself in a dating relationship. Many feel so much pressure to focus on individual achievement and self-fulfillment that they put these things ahead of other people. Remember what President Thomas S. Monson taught: “Never let a problem to be solved become more important than a person to be loved.”⁴

The two great commandments illustrate this reality; they command us to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves (see Luke 10:27). The Savior taught us to prioritize our relationships with God and with each other above all else. If it becomes your nature to love God and love your neighbor, you’ll be better prepared to develop the kind of dating relationship that can blossom into eternal love.

Seek Opportunities

Put yourself in places where you can develop relationships with the kind of people you want to date. Though you might find a gem anywhere, you will more likely find one if you go where gems are often found. If you



would like to date kind and service-oriented people, go where kind and service-oriented people go. If you would like to date people who have a strong relationship with God, go where people are striving to develop a strong relationship with God. This is not rocket science. You will meet the kind of people you would like to date by going to places and doing the kinds of things that those people do.

Deepen Select Relationships

As you live life relationally and seek opportunities, you will make many friends and acquaintances. You will likely find that you would like to get to know some of these friends better. Purposefully seek to deepen these relationships. Find opportunities to discuss topics beyond daily activities. Show those you care about that you enjoy spending time with them.

Build them up and help them feel better about themselves. You may even feel inspired to invite someone to an activity that will allow the two of you to get to know each other in a deeper, more personal way. Before you know it, you might find yourself dating.

Communicate Expectations Openly

Once you begin dating, you must see the experience for what it is and recognize what it is not. Unhealthy and inaccurate expectations cause much of the frustration associated with dating. As Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said, “Dating is pairing off to experience the kind of one-on-one association and temporary commitment that can lead to marriage *in some rare and treasured cases*.”⁵

To ask someone out or to accept a date means to agree to spend a

couple of hours getting to know someone and to treat him or her with kindness and respect. A date is not a commitment to be together exclusively from that point forward; it is not a commitment to become engaged or to get married; it is not a commitment to raise a future family together. If people eliminated false expectations and focused on showing kindness and getting to know one another, dating could become much more enjoyable.

An understanding of expectations will not magically occur—you must communicate. Different expectations almost always guarantee heartache. If one of you thinks the two of you are hanging out while the other

thinks you are on a date, or if one of you commits to a couple of hours together while the other assumes you have begun preparation for your engagement, there is a good chance neither of you will be happy by the end of the evening. Both of you must decide what your time together means. Kind, open communication in the beginning pays rich dividends in the end.

By following these basic principles and practices, you might find that the dating world is not nearly as frightening as it may have seemed before. As you patiently seek to realize in your life the ideals of marriage and family, you will draw nearer to Heavenly Father and our Savior and significantly increase your chances of developing a meaningful relationship. The joyous rewards of dating are more than worth the effort, and even though the ideal of marriage may not be realized, the happiness and fulfillment from living according to these principles will enrich the lives of those who follow them. ■

NOTES

1. For examples, see the following: Thomas S. Monson, “Priesthood Power,” *Ensign*, May 2011, 66–69; Richard G. Scott, “The Eternal Blessings of Marriage,” *Ensign*, May 2011, 94–97; Quentin L. Cook, “Choose Wisely,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2014, 46–49.
2. See David A. Bednar, “Becoming a Missionary,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2005, 44–47.
3. Neal A. Maxwell, in Dallin H. Oaks, “Timing,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2003, 12.
4. Thomas S. Monson, “Finding Joy in the Journey,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 86.
5. Dallin H. Oaks, “Dating versus Hanging Out,” *Ensign*, June 2006, 12; emphasis added.

DATING AND MISSIONARY WORK

As a past mission president who also teaches missionary preparation at BYU, I’ve found that many of the lessons learned by missionaries can apply to the dating scene. The same process missionaries go through to become effective disciples of Christ will help young adults become better at courtship. Examples include the following:

- See dating as a spiritual, not just social, activity.
- Realize that God is interested in your success. Just as He will help you on your mission, He will help you in your dating and courtship.
- Be purposeful. As a missionary, you wouldn’t sit in your apartment waiting for investigators to come to you. Be proactive in either asking others on dates or putting yourself in situations and places where you can be asked.
- See each person you date as a beautiful son or daughter of God and treat them that way.
- Instead of just socializing, seek to serve those you date.
- Honor agency. You should invite, not coerce.
- Do not let rejection or heartbreak keep you down. Missionaries who allow discouragement to stop them from continued effort will experience less success and much less joy.
- Develop charity. The more Christlike love you have for others, the more natural you will be and the more enjoyable your dating experience will be.

