

Looking for love: Where are the right places?

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If you're single, you already know this: Meeting compatible people is harder today than ever these days.

The average single people today look a lot different than they did 25 years ago. Because people move around more often, often postpone marriage until they're a little older and unfortunately get divorced more frequently, the singles demographic has been blown wide open. Add to that today's lightning-fast pace of life and the traditional methods of meeting potential mates just aren't enough any more.

When you're in your early 20s and everyone in your social circle is single, it's a natural state. Once you get to that stage where most everyone you know is married, single people find themselves meeting fewer and fewer eligible mates and it can feel anything but natural.

But with a little luck, a little creativity, and a little effort, there's no reason why you can't have someone to trade cards with by Valentine's Day. Here are some of the newer ways singles folks are meeting each other in Worcester

County these days.

Speed Dating

I attended an 8-minute dating event (they have them all over the state) hosted by Maureen Trickett. There were 28 men and 28 women split into two rooms. The smarter folks came early for a little extra face time mingling at the bar before registering and separating by age group into their respective rooms.

Once everyone arrived, they sat in their assigned seats, had an 8-minute conversation with the person of the opposite sex, and when the bell rang, they moved to the next table. Each person was given a scorecard so they could jot down a few notes about the person they'd just met. The scorecard also comes with some helpful sample "conversation starter" icebreaking questions.

After four of these conversations, there was a 10-minute intermission for some complimentary appetizers, followed by four more conversations, and some additional mingling time.

Participants don't exchange any personal information except first names. After the event, par-



Eight-minute dating event organizer Rebecca Potts explains the ground rules last week at Desmond O'Malley's. (Staff photo by Ellen Bullock.)

ticipants are asked to log into the 8-minute dating Website (www.8minutedating.com) and click on a box next to the first name of people they'd met and would like to see again for either business, friendship or a date. If both people select each other for the same thing, the 8MD people provide e-mail addresses.

At the very beginning, people were feeling awkward, but as soon as the night got underway, they seemed to relax very quickly. Everyone I spoke with told me they had fun and had met someone they would like to speak with again that evening.

The key to these events seems to be numbers. You have to have an even number of men and women or it doesn't work. Trickett told me there are almost always plenty of women signed up — in fact, they had to waitlist a few the night I was there. So, if you're a guy, the odds are in your favor at 8MD. Hint for guys: if you really want to stand out at one of these events, wear a nice, clean shirt and some decent shoes. The women were "all done up," but some of the guys could have put a bit more effort into it. I was told that's not unusual.

8MD guarantees you will meet someone you want to see again, or they'll invite you back for free. There are similar companies like SpeedDate and HurryDate as well. Some of these companies host theme nights for business professionals, gays, over 40, and other demographics.

Bowling

AMF Town and Country Lanes on the westbound side of Route 9 in Shrewsbury (508-754-

7050 or JEBSCA2@aol.com) hosts a "Meet and Greet Bowl" every Wednesday night for singles. It essentially follows the speed dating format at a more relaxed pace. Singles bowl with each other for 20 minutes, then switch partners.

Online services

By far the largest online dating site is www.match.com, having been online for more than 10 years now, but there are dozens of them and they all follow more or less the same models. There are black versions, gay versions, Jewish versions, versions for the very wealthy and probably any other demographic you could name. Essentially, you fill out some online forms, upload some photos of yourself, and write a little about yourself and the person you'd like to meet. The more specific you can be, the better your chances of meeting a good match for yourself. You can search the site for the kind of person you think you'd like to meet, and they can search for you. Most of the single people I know use or have used one of these services and they all met some nice people through them.

Networking

A lot of people apply the principles of business networking to finding a mate. They advise not to fear making sure that your all of your friends and family know you are single and the type of person you are looking for.

They also say you should engage in activities you enjoy to help maximize your chances of finding someone like yourself (e.g. running clubs, taking classes,

etc.), and always be on the lookout for someone with that spark you're looking for. The person whose cart you just rammed in the cereal aisle just might be that special someone.

And there is no end to the amount of online dating advice out there. With a little effort and some Internet access, you can find a staggering number of articles and quizzes dedicated to helping you find the right mate. You can discover how to attract that special someone, how to know when they are attracted to you, how to get that first date, what to wear, where to go, who should pay, how to get the second date, how to decline a second date without hurting the other person's feelings, and on and on. Links2Love.com is a large resource for this kind of information. For example:

Want to know your first date IQ?: www.links2love.com/quizzes/perfect_first_date_quiz.htm.

How about your flirtability factor? www.links2love.com/quizzes/flirting_quiz_how_to_flirt.htm.

Did you know you have a Kissing IQ? Do you know what yours is? www.links2love.com/quizzes/kissing_quiz.htm.

When you are starting to get serious about someone, you can even enter your names into the Online Love Calculator to assess your long term compatibility: www.links2love.com/love_calculator.htm.

