

Family Counseling Service: Looking for Love Online? How to Stay Safe

By April Stevens

Dating is always an adventure, but online dating has particular aspects that can make it even more eventful. There are pros and cons. If you've tried online dating, I'm sure you could name a few yourself.

One major pro is the convenience. You can browse literally thousands of profiles of people you may never meet otherwise, on your schedule. You get to check out pictures, get to know their personality, and can decide if you want to talk to potential dates, with just a swipe. Some dating sites make it even easier, with systems to match you with supposed compatible partners.

Cons can have serious negative consequences. Predators may use online dating to find victims; whether for monetary gain or sexual assault. Predators usually have a type, and online dating profiles make it easy for them to find their next victim.

There are some tell-tell signs to look out for...

"Catfishing" is the term to describe those who use social media to scam others into giving them money. In my online dating experience, I've encountered this – some people claimed they worked overseas, internationally, as engineers, in the oil industry, as contractors, and, sadly, in the military. Many men will say they're widows with children, pulling at your

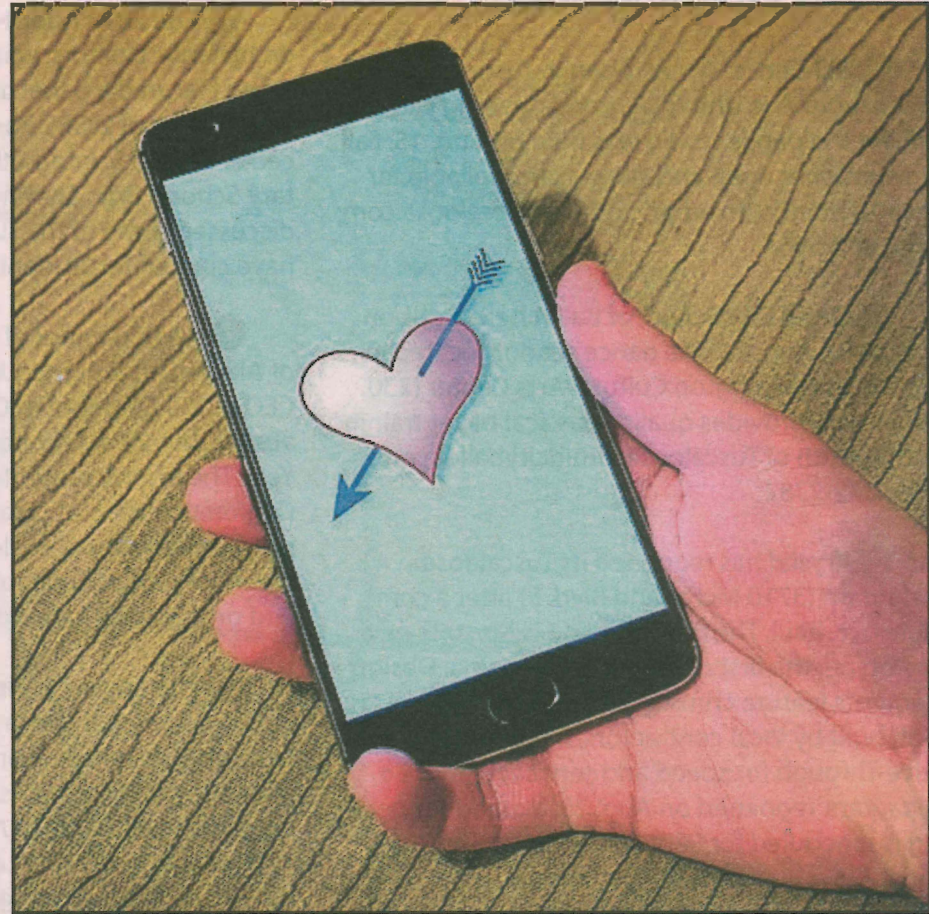
heart strings. Some women will send provocative photos. Both will usually want a serious relationship very quickly. Eventually, the scam artist will ask for monetary help.

Sexual predators will often use different methods. They will also try to gain your trust quickly. They may ask for explicit photos. They may ask to talk off the site early, to avoid being monitored. They may change plans "at the last minute" to catch you off guard, and to make you more vulnerable. They will know exactly what to say, because they've read what you said you're looking for.

If you're dating online, how can you protect yourself? Be careful. Always meet in a public place. Drive separately. Bring someone with you, even if they sit at a different table, to add an extra layer of protection. Do not go to their home by yourself, and do not invite them to yours. Make them earn your trust before allowing them deep access into your personal life. If something feels off, leave, or don't go.

Online dating can be fun, but it can also be dangerous. Take precautions to protect yourself, so you enjoy the experience. At Family Counseling Service, the counselors can advise you about safe boundaries in relationships. Be safe out there.

Love and Peace,
April L. Stevens



April L. Stevens, LICSW, PIP, is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker and counselor with Family Counseling Service in Tuscaloosa.