

## Check mate: Tutors teach smart dating

By Hilary Stout

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You can spend thousands of dollars these days on matchmaking services to help you find a mate. After that's taken care of, you can spend tens of thousands of dollars on marriage counseling to help keep the relationship working.

Now into our self-help obsessed culture comes another offering: workshops and classes aimed at that fraught stretch in between, otherwise known as romance or dating.

Essentially, it's courtship tutoring. Couples therapists and others in the marriage-counseling and education field are proffering their expertise to help single people avoid the mistakes that commonly doom relationships. The objective is to teach individuals to recognize the most important characteristics they want in a partner (example: "Well, I guess her religion *does* matter"), then to intelligently screen for someone who qualifies, and, finally, to pace the relationship so as to grow steadily closer rather than letting one aspect (such as sex) overshadow another (such as communication).

The movement has all the trappings of an academic discipline, complete with aptitude tests and models of logic – such as the Relationship Attachment Model, a measure of five "bonding dynamics" used by one program to determine whether you and your love interest have a healthy balance.

Putting aside whether this stuff can be taught, the theory behind it all is that smarter dating can lead to happier and more stable marriages. The notion is compelling enough that the U.S. Army is testing a curriculum developed by John Van Epp, a marriage and family counselor in Medina, Ohio, called "How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk." The Army hopes to soon offer the course – renamed "Premarital Interpersonal Choice and Knowledge" for the military – to all its young servicemen and women.

"I think that any organization would say that if their personnel are in stable, strong, healthy relationships, their work production would be stronger," says Ronald Thomas, the project officer for the program.

Another leading couples-counseling program, called PREP, is developing a program tailored to low-income single women to help them recognize and maintain healthy relationships with men. And the "Jerk" program has been adopted in high schools, colleges, domestic-violence programs and programs for unmarried mothers around the country.

"Singles lack a plan," Van Epp says. "They go into dating, to love, to relationships and they are winging it."

Not surprisingly, the biggest market is the Bridget Jones demographic, 30- or 40-something unmarried professionals who have proved so lucrative as subject matter to Hollywood. As is with most things single, there seems to be a majority of women enrolling in the classes, though instructors say a significant number of men participate.

Alix Thompson, a 36-year-old marketing consultant in New York City, paid about \$350 in March to take a weekend seminar called “Keeping the Love You Find,” sponsored by Imago Relationships International. Thompson, who has been through a divorce and a “dysfunctional” relationship after that, says she was in the “fabulous” stage of a new romance and was starting to get nervous. “I wanted to do things differently” this time, she says.

The daylong workshop, which took place in a conference room at an uptown hotel, had lectures, written work and role-playing exercises, such as one where participants said goodbye to someone from their past using different approaches.

“It helped me communicate better,” says Thompson, who is still happily involved with her boyfriend.

The question remains, however, whether successful dating is really teachable.

“It certainly can be taught, but the motivation to learn it isn’t high,” says Steven Stosny, a psychologist who offers a popular singles seminar at the annual Smart Marriages conference for professionals in the therapy and marriage-education field. “You are either too desperate to hear any kinds of limits you should set on possible mates, or you’re too much in love or too enamored.”

But such shortsightedness is partly what leads to unhappy marriages and divorce later on, many people in the counseling field now believe.

“I think the biggest weakness in the field historically is we haven’t done nearly enough to move back further to deal with issues of how people choose in the first place,” says Scott Stanley, a leader in the divorce-prevention field and co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies in Denver.

There are some straightforward tips from some of the classes including: Spend a major holiday and all four seasons together before you think about getting married. Forget the superficial commonalities. “Mutual interests are a trap,” Stosny says. “You like to hike, I like to hike – without a genuine value connection, those are meaningless.”

And past relationships and family matter. For instance, “you need to look at their parents’ relationships and what kind of marriages they had. We tend to repeat the patterns,” says Bridget Brennan, who teaches relationships skills classes in St. Louis.

Angie Naughton, a 39-year-old science teacher, signed up for one of Brennan’s singles courses and says it taught her how to be pro-active and to recognize her “non-negotiable” requirements. Also to cut to the chase. After meeting an intriguing man on a hike, she asked him about everything from children to spirituality when he first called. “Bridget definitely helped me focus. Instead of dating for two or three months and then asking important questions, I just asked right up front,” she says.

The answers were satisfactory. The two are talking about getting married.