

[http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2006/03/07/singles\\_education/print.html](http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2006/03/07/singles_education/print.html)



salon.com

To print this page, select "Print" from the File menu of your browser

---

## Singles going steady

**To avoid marrying a jerk, singles educators say you should stay out of bed on the first date and cross-examine your partner. Critics say their advice is hokum.**

By Sarah Elizabeth Richards

Mar. 07, 2006 | For Phil Majuk, all the signs were there: His apartment seemed so empty. He'd grown tired of hanging out with the guys every weekend. He longed for a female skiing and scuba diving companion.

And so it was that last February, for the first time in his life, Majuk, a 40-year-old electrician from Queens, N.Y., found himself itching to get hitched. He'd been dating a cute ministry student for a month and he didn't want to mess up a good thing. So he registered for John Van Epp's daylong dating skills seminar *How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk*, which teaches single people and those currently dating how to bond with partners and avoid wasting time with, well, jerks. There, he learned about Van Epp's "Relationship Attachment Model," which cautions daters to beware of *insta*-relationships and encourages them to really get to *know* their new companions before they trust them, commit to them or sleep with them.

Majuk had only been seeing his new girlfriend for a few hours a couple of times a week, but after the seminar he worried that they were moving too fast. Following the tips he picked up from Van Epp, he told her that he thought they should do a lot more conversing and a lot less cuddling, and was relieved when she agreed. Twelve months later -- and with a longer version of Van Epp's course under his belt (this one was given over five Sundays at a Queens church) -- Majuk, now 41, says they are "on track" for marriage.

"It's been a helpful tool," Majuk says of Van Epp's courses. "I wanted to make sure I was [dating] the right way. The whole reason of courting is to find out if that person is the right one for you. I don't want to get divorced."

Van Epp's sassy-sounding seminar is just one in a fast-growing field of classes dedicated to teaching singles how to approach love -- and get two steps closer to the altar. An offshoot of the exploding marital education industry -- whereby couples take easy-to-digest courses about relationship skills, often taught by people without degrees in counseling or psychology -- dating workshops also attempt to train couples how to have successful relationships, long before they're ready to register at Pottery Barn. And because there are more singles now than at any other time in U.S. history -- census figures estimate that 44 percent of adult Americans are currently flying solo, compared to about one-third in 1960 -- singles educators have found a large and lucrative market to exploit.

Though on the surface singles educators seem to have a similar goal -- to create stronger partnerships -- those who champion it are a diverse bunch. Entrepreneurs, social scientists hoping to lower the divorce rate, religious organizations pushing abstinence agendas, and pro-marriage conservatives hoping to get single mothers wedded and off welfare are all developing or promoting singles programs. The U.S. Army plans to offer dating education as an elective to some 10,000 single soldiers this year. Domestic violence shelters and public high school districts are buying into the concept. Several states have programs that give couples a discount on their marriage licenses if they can show they've taken such a class. And last month, Congress passed the Bush administration's [Healthy Marriage Initiative](#), which earmarks \$100 million annually for private organizations -- many of them religious -- to offer marriage education classes to help prevent "at-risk" singles and couples from ending up on welfare rolls.

Supporters argue that marriage will help strengthen families and prevent child poverty, emotional and behavioral problems, drug and alcohol abuse, and crime.

But critics charge that these programs, which were created using research with middle-class couples, aren't easily translatable to lower-income populations, who may be dealing with substance abuse or domestic violence problems. The one-size-fits-all nature of these courses may ultimately be the biggest drawback of relationship education, as well as the programs' focus on marriage as the goal for every couple, says Stephanie Coontz, a historian at the Evergreen State College and author of "Marriage, a History." "There are a lot of people clamoring to tell us they know how to do marriage better," Coontz says. But along with that comes "a lot of wishful thinking."

There's also the question of whether lectures and workbook exercises can really help make sense of the least rational human emotion -- romantic love. But that's just what singles programs are trying to do. However, the seminars don't just recycle the old saws about cultivating common interests or encouraging clients such as Majuk's time with the guys. They explore why we're attracted to certain partners and analyze relationship mechanics, dynamics and deal-breakers.

For example, Van Epp's program, which also goes by the title Pre-Marital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge (PICK), encourages daters to examine the "delusion of disassociative development" and investigate their love interests' family background and their exes. "When a single person is entering a relationship, they need a plan of what they're doing," explains Van Epp, 47, who says he has taught thousands of workshops over the past nine years and certified more than 500 instructors to teach his workbook and DVD. (McGraw-Hill just acquired his first book, which will be sold under the "Jerk" name and is expected in October.) "I want singles to feel they have the ability to manage their relationships and predict how the people [they are dating] will be down the road."

A former pastor and clinical counselor with a Ph.D. in psychology, Van Epp, who has been married for 26 years, says he developed his program from a growing body of research on relationship development and premarital predictors of marital success. Anyone who plunks down \$350 for the instructional materials from his Web site, [www.nojerks.com](http://www.nojerks.com), and passes an online essay test, can hang out a shingle announcing him- or herself as a "relationship educator." Besides the military, churches are his best customers. Van Epp sells a Christian version of his program, which accounts for more than a quarter of his business and includes a workbook supplement that quotes scripture about abstaining from sex before marriage. (Although Van Epp teaches that it's emotionally risky to be intimate with someone before you really know them, he acknowledges that the realities of our "hook-up" culture prompted him to leave the question of "When can we do it?" unanswered in his secular workbook).

It's not clear how many singles workshops are being offered across the country, though Diane Sollee, a couples therapist who in 1996 founded [Smart Marriages](#), a clearinghouse for marriage education information, says she knows of at least a half dozen relationship seminars that target daters, most of them offshoots of marriage education programs. For the past two decades, social scientists have been studying the behaviors that keep people married and in love, says Sollee. Now those findings have been translated into easily digestible skill sets that can be taught in 10-hour seminars. "People like learning rather than going to therapy," says Sollee. "To get counseling, you have to say something is wrong with you," she says, explaining that men stereotypically shy away from shrinks but tend to be more receptive to a seminar with conflict resolution tips. At the annual Smart Marriages conference last year, more than 2,000 people, mostly marriage educators and counselors from community and religious organizations, attended compared to 400 in the mid-1990s. "The idea that you can actually get smarter about marriage, that it doesn't have to be a 50-50 game of chance, is a huge paradigm shift that can change the whole singles experience," says Sollee. "Singles gain the confidence to marry."

It's too early to know if these courses actually help people stay happily married for the long haul; however, one of the most popular programs for couples, known as [PREP \(Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program\)](#), which was developed at the University of Denver in the early 1980s, claims that participants were a third less likely to break up after five years compared to others who didn't take it.

PREP aims to remedy the poor modeling many people witness growing up in divorced homes. "Adults enter marriage with less ability to communicate well and with a diminished sense of commitment and how it works in a marriage," explains Scott Stanley, co-founder of PREP, which offers versions for Christians, Jews, empty-nesters and low-income parents. (The state of Oklahoma, for example, used an adaptation of PREP for welfare recipients.) "That's where education comes in. The idea is, 'Maybe I can date better. Maybe I can be a better marriage partner,'" he says.

One recent Sunday, Laura Speiller, a pastor at New Life Fellowship Church in Queens, explained some dating strategies to a small coed class. "You can be treated like a queen in a dating relationship," she cautioned. "But it can be different in marriage. He's putting his best foot forward in dating. You're only seeing one side of the person."

Speiller, who was trained by Van Epp to teach *How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk*, advised using the "detective technique" to examine a person's past and attempt to infer whether he or she would become a lovable lug or just a big jerk. Daters should observe their squeeze's behavior around other people: Does he break plans with friends? Does she snap at her dad? Does he roll his eyes at his mother? Does she boast about how she bit off the head of a co-worker? You could be next, warns Speiller.

Once you have gathered enough info, she said, you can make an informed decision about whether to take the plunge into marriage. That decision shouldn't be made, however, until you have asked your sweetie a total of 99 questions, including what their mothers were like as wives, how they react to authority figures, whether they're comfortable with nudity and what they argued about with their exes.

It was enough to make one wonder whether Van Epp's approach might not be, well, paranoid.

"You can be safe without being neurotic," Van Epp insists. "There are people who over-think everything. They have to back off and lighten up, but when they know what to consider and look out for, they don't have to back off blindly."

According to his program, the more you hold back emotionally while investigating someone, the easier it will be to cut him or her loose if red flags set off your jerk radar. "If your areas of bonding stay at the lower level, you can get out quicker. You're not so attached," he explains, as though love were like a hedge fund.

The problem is that for many people, by the time they actually care enough about someone's ability to apologize or handle guilt (more things Van Epp says to watch for), they're already smitten. How can one reverse the process? "It's a delicate balance," Van Epp concedes, pointing out that couples don't stop acting on their best behavior until at least three months into a relationship. (Or as Chris Rock puts it, "You're meeting their representative!") "You *can* control what you do with your heart. I fell madly in love with my wife the first night I met her. [But] how I pace the building of the relationship doesn't have to be with the same intensity. Even with chemistry, it requires time and self-restraint."

Van Epp, like most other relationship educators, doesn't think jumping in the sack on the first date is a good idea -- and isn't moved by the argument that having sex early on is a useful way to weed out people you aren't sexually compatible with.

"There's research that the first sexual experience changes the level of closeness in a relationship," he says. "Ultimately, if things don't work out, the emotional upset of the breakup is much greater because they were involved sexually."

The premise of Van Epp's program is seductive: that with careful screening and "relationship health inventories," you can regulate how much you love someone and protect yourself from pain and rejection. But can such meta-analyses and schemata guide the way we fall in love? And is there such a thing as doing it in an emotionally "safe" way, as Van Epp contends?

"[These programs] give people an illusion of easy answers," says Coontz. "Some [educators] are just old-fashioned entrepreneurs selling untested programs. Then there are others who've been studying marriage all their lives. They're offering useful advice, but you have to source that."

Then there's the question of timing. Due diligence can be a good idea in theory, but it may be overwhelming at the courtship stage. "There's a difference between a marital and dating relationship," explains Barry McCarthy, a sex and marital therapist and author, with his wife, Emily McCarthy, of *Getting It Right the First Time: Creating a Healthy Marriage*. "Just like there's a different set of skills and attitudes that go into a permanent job vs. an internship. By the third month, talking about issues of your family of origin or money or career is a different conversation than with someone you've been dating for 15 months, whom you're planning to marry."

"To do some introspective work creates awareness of what you like -- that's a good thing," says relationship guru John Gray, of *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* fame. "But to necessarily make every date into a workshop is not for everyone."

Gray recommends a tried and true approach to figuring out whom to keep dating and whom to ditch: Go with your gut. (That's all you have to go on anyway since the part of your brain that makes intellectual decisions inconveniently shuts down when you're first in love.) "One morning you wake up and you feel, 'Wow, this is the person for me!' There's a knowing that's a sum total of experiences with this person. It's not a checklist," Gray says.

Nadine Dixon, 25, who took the class at New Life, although she wasn't currently in a relationship, found Van Epp's relationship checklist quite helpful. "I have an urge to write a list of 50 questions that I'll ask on the first date," gushed the administrative assistant from Queens. "I want to know right away [if someone is right for me]."

Dixon thought Van Epp's approach was useful in examining her own dating preparedness. "It's something you can turn inward. How does my family background affect me? How do I resolve conflict? What do I need to work on? Do I have what I'm looking for?"

"It is overwhelming," she admitted. "I'm like, 'Whoa! I'm not ready. *I'm* a jerkette. This is showing me that. I wish I would have learned this stuff in college."

Several programs actually hope to do one better -- by teaching "this stuff" to a segment of the population notoriously bad at romance: high school students. More than 200 school districts have purchased the [Love U2](#) series, a 40-lesson course on relationship and communication skills put out by the nonpartisan, non-religious Dibble Fund based in Berkeley, Calif.

"We have sex ed for kids but nothing on relationships," says curricula writer Marline Pearson, a social science instructor at Madison Area Technical College in Wisconsin. "We only talk to students about sex in a health context. What about relationships and emotions?" (Love U2 advocates sexual abstinence -- a factor that Pearson says is motivated by her audience's age, not by any political statement.)

Pearson, who says she became inspired to write the program after she saw many of her female students struggling with abusive boyfriends, uses some principles from Van Epp's program and PREP and makes them more accessible to teenagers. But isn't there value in early romantic failures -- the unrequited crushes, the three-day "relationships," the Depeche Mode song lyrics scribbled on notebooks?

"We're not trying to make them calculated, sophisticated dating machines," says Pearson. "I just want to plant a few solid ideas ... about what a healthy relationship looks like. Does it feel controlling or supportive and nurturing? Does it feel conditional or unconditional? Does it feel mostly about sex or material things? It works as well for 15-year-olds as 40-year-olds." Researchers at Auburn University in Alabama recently launched a five-year study of more than 5,000 high school students to look at whether students who completed the Love U2 program made better romantic decisions, practiced good communication skills and experienced decreased verbal and physical aggression in their dating relationships. They plan to test them before and after the course, follow them for several years afterward and compare them with students who didn't take it.

The U.S. Army is also getting into the act of educating singles. According to an Army study released in July on the need for "preventative educational programs that teach healthy relationship skills," servicemen have higher rates of marriage and are more likely to divorce when compared to male civilians. (The Army's divorce rate in 2004 was 6 percent for officers and 3.5 percent for enlisted soldiers -- three times higher than in 2002 because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; it fell slightly in 2005.) The study also found that servicemen and -women enter into "marriages of systematically lower quality than would be acceptable in civilian life" -- partly lured by military marriage benefits, such as off-base housing allowances or additional money for food expenses.

"The Army has a vested interest in helping soldiers get into relationships that last," says Chaplain Peter Frederich, family ministries officer for the Army Chief of Chaplains based at the Pentagon. "Research shows that if they form strong romantic partnerships, they are better soldiers and stay in the Army longer."

Many bases currently teach domestic violence prevention seminars and marriage education classes, such as PREP, but the Army is eager to add dating skills classes and plans to broaden Van Epp's program to most bases by the end of the year for nearly 10,000 soldiers, according to Frederich. (Van Epp says he has a contract to train 200 chaplains at 10 bases in the U.S. and Europe to become certified instructors.) Several hundred soldiers at Fort Jackson in Columbia, S.C., and Fort Knox, Ky., have taken a modified version of the program already. It's unknown if soldiers actually changed their dating behavior after taking the course, but an Army report on Van Epp's program found that 98 percent of about 120 surveyed participants said they felt the content was helpful and planned to use it.

It appears likely that institutions like the Army will continue to look to the social sciences to shed light on the way we behave in relationships and learn how to make them better. But ultimately, love is a crap shoot, a leap of faith, a voyage into the unknown (insert metaphor here). It isn't emotionally safe or predictable or methodical. It can blow up in your face and rattle you to your core.

And, workbook or no workbook, that's a risk we can't seem to stop taking.

-- By Sarah Elizabeth Richards

---

Salon Media Group, Inc  
101 Spear Street, Suite 203  
San Francisco, CA 94105  
Telephone 415 645-9200  
Fax 415 645-9204

[Salon](#) | [About Salon](#) | [Contact & Help](#) | [Advertise in Salon](#) | [Premium log in](#) | [Salon Personals](#)  
[Arts & Entertainment](#) | [Books](#) | [Comics](#) | [Community: Table Talk & The Well](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Life](#) |  
[News & Politics](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Sports](#) | [Tech & Business](#) | [Letters](#)  
[Investor Relations](#) | [Salon.com Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)

Copyright ©2006 Salon Media Group, Inc. Reproduction of material from any Salon pages without written permission is strictly prohibited. SALON is a trademark and a registered trademark of Salon Media Group Inc.