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## Dating: The Benefits and Risks

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*by George P. Rowe, Extension Family Life Specialist*

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Since about 1920, young Americans have enjoyed much freedom when choosing dating companions and activities. Even today in much of the rest of the world, unmarried young adults can enjoy each other's company only in the presence of a chaperon. On the other hand, the freedom U.S. young adults enjoy in dating relationships places greater responsibility on the couple than in countries where more dating restrictions are present. The purpose of this NebFact is to examine the benefits and risks of dating in the United States.

Going on a date can mean different things to different people. Dates are often group activities, while other dates involve only a couple. A dating partner can vary from being a casual acquaintance to a steady relationship, sometimes referred to as "going together" to engagement. Some married couples go on "dates" as a way to add vitality to their relationship. A dating relationship may be as short as one meeting, or may result in a life-time commitment.

### **The Joys and Benefits of Dating**

Young adults choose to socialize with each other for many reasons, but traditionally, people date for fun, conversation, companionship and a general good time. Dating activities may include movies, concerts, parties, dances or sporting events. Dates provide the opportunity for friends to enjoy each other's company in social activities, and such socialization is a healthy outlet for relieving the pressure of work and school responsibilities. Dating provides an opportunity for individuals to learn how to relate to others and experience the joys and sorrows of developing a "couple" relationship. Dating permits couples to interact in various settings, to test compatibility and to learn what tolerance and commitment are all about.

### **Guidelines to Maximize Dating Benefits**

Through dating, two people should be able to enjoy each other's company and the activities they choose to participate in. Dating can be even more enjoyable if certain guidelines are followed in choosing and going out with dating partners:

**Dating Partners are Equals.** The time has long past when young women had to settle for an inferior

status and only young men were in positions of power and control. In relationships, be it one date or many, both persons function as equals.

**Good Communication is Key.** Being able to share one's true feelings and beliefs with another is an important part of the dating process. Without honest communication, it is difficult for a healthy relationship to take place.

**Dispute Settlement Needs to be Done through Negotiation** No two human beings agree on everything. When conflict does occur, negotiation is an appropriate way to deal with the problem. Negotiation is a way to resolve conflict with a compromised and mutually satisfying solution that considers the needs and wants of both parties.

**Positive Social Behavior is Essential.** Dating partners should exhibit high standards of personal and interpersonal behavior. Reckless and aggressive acts, such as excessive drinking, verbal abuse or physical abuse are unacceptable.

## **Guidelines to Reduce Dating Risks**

Along with the positive attributes of dating in America today, the freedoms enjoyed by dating couples also present potential risks. Young people need to actively seek ways to minimize these possible risks as they enjoy the benefits of dating.

**Physical Abuse.** Physical abuse includes kicking, biting, choking, hitting, battering (beating up) or threatening to use a gun, knife or other weapon. Nebraska law defines physical abuse as "any attempt to intentionally, knowingly or recklessly cause bodily injury with or without a deadly weapon, or placing by physical menace another in fear of imminent serious bodily injury." Any signs of physical abuse should be reported.

**Emotional Abuse.** Emotional abuse is defined as any verbal or nonverbal communication intended to cause psychological pain to another person. Although Nebraska has no law punishing this form of abuse, exposure to emotional abuse can leave life-long scars. Research shows young men and women are being equally aggressive to each other on measures of verbal abuse. This means that when one partner attacks verbally, the other usually responds. Common forms of emotional abuse include: insulting remarks and cursing the partner; public humiliation and intimidation; treating the partner as inferior; trying to control what the partner does; yelling and screaming; excessive teasing about partner's faults; and manipulation with false accusations and threats. Continued abusive behaviors are valid reasons to sever a relationship.

**Economic Exploitation.** Economic exploitation is stealing, damaging or destroying a partner's money or property. Examples include threatening to take money, forcing a date to pay solely for items that are to be shared or stealing money or property belonging to the partner or members of the partner's family. Anyone can be guilty of economic exploitation.

**Alcohol and Drug Abuse.** Another dangerous form of dating abuse is being forced to ride with a driver who is under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Heavy consumption of alcohol and other drugs are associated with increased levels of violence among dating couples. One should refuse to date a person who both drinks and drives.

**Unwanted Sexual Contact.** Dating partners are often forced to have unwanted and possibly unprotected sex. Some may fail to resist sexual advances for fear of being physically or emotionally battered, while others may go along for the sake of popularity. Remember -- NO MEANS NO. Victims of unwanted

sexual contact should talk to their parents, counselors or other trusted individuals to learn how to report the incident to the proper authorities.

## **Making Dating Choices**

Young adults should never feel they have to date someone or go someplace that makes them feel uncomfortable. Dating is a time for enjoyable activities. It provides an opportunity to do things and go places that are mutually agreeable to the dating pair.

By taking common-sense precautions, the benefits of dating can be maximized, and the risks minimized, so that each person can have an enjoyable and fulfilling dating experience.

## **Dating Hazards Check List**

Score each item according to this scale:

Almost Always Often Seldom Almost Never

4 3 2 1

How often does the person you date practice these behaviors?

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. One who initiates sexual advances and then accuses you of seduction.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. One who feels insecure because you are independent and self-confident.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. One who does not appreciate the qualities that you value in yourself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. One who gives criticism but can not accept it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. One who tries to control many of your actions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. One who is intensely jealous every time you talk to a person of the other gender.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. One who avoids crowds on a date and wants to spend most of an evening in a secluded place.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. One who has to have a drink every time you date.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. One who insists on paying for all dating expenses instead of sharing costs when you offer to pay.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. One who uses any physical force to try to win an argument.

Total your score: \_\_\_\_\_. If your score exceeds 25 points, the potential risk of being abused is high.

## **References for Dating Risks**

### **Journal Articles**

Lloyd, Sally. (1991). The darkside of courtship: Violence and sexual exploitation. *Family Relations*, 40, 14-20.

Straus, Murray and Sweet, Stephen. (1992). Verbal/symbolic aggression in couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54, 346-357.

### **Free Pamphlets**

Breaking the Silence: A Handbook for Battered Women (1992) Nebraska Department of Social Services. Lincoln, NE 68509

What Are Sexually Transmitted Diseases? (1989). American College Health Association, P. O. Box 28937, Baltimore, MD 21240-8937

What Everyone Should Know About STD's (1992). Nebraska Department of Health, P. O. Box 95007, Lincoln, NE 68509

### **Videos Available**

I Know You Said No But I Thought You Meant Yes. (1991) 15 minutes 40VC531 (High School Age) 40VC532 (College Age) Department of Agricultural Communications, UNL 68583-0918 (472-3035)

Heart on a Chain VHS 15 minute and Dating, Sex, and Trouble VHS 24 minute. Available from Nebraska Domestic Violence Sexual Assault Coalition, 315 S. 9th St., Suite 18, Lincoln, NE 68508 (402) 476-6256.

### **Toll-Free Hotlines**

Nebraska AIDS Hotline  
1-800-782-AIDS

National STD Hotline  
1-800-227-8922

Nebraska Abuse Hotline  
1-800-652-1999

National Violence Hotline  
1-800-333-SAFE

Nebraska Alcohol and Drug Information  
1-800-648-4444

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