

Transcript Season 2 Episode 8 : Tips for Safe Dating in a Digital Age

Podcast Opener:

Everyone needs some advice now and then. If you are getting ready to leave home or have been on your own for a while, Grown Up U: Facts for Success can give you trusted advice that can take the stress out of adulthood. Listen and find some answers to the questions being constantly bombarded at you.

Podcast Script:

Valerie Turner:

In the digital age, navigating online dating websites and apps can feel like a minefield, especially as romance scams have become more prevalent. When it comes to online dating, one should remember these key points, never wire money or share personal information, beware of quick requests for money or escalating feelings and set personal expectations for online dating.

I'm Valerie Turner, Monroe County Extension Agent – Staff Chair and in today's Grow Up U podcast we are going to discuss these key points and more, in an effort to keep you from falling victim to online dating hoaxes. Our guest today is reporter Rebekah Hall from the office of communications for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

Rebekah recently interviewed Dr. Brittney Schrick, extension assistant professor and family life specialist for the U of A System Division of Agriculture, who said going into online dating "with your eyes open" is key to avoiding falling victim to one of these hoaxes.

Rebekah, thanks for joining us today to share your reporting. I read your article and Dr. Schrick's advice reminded me of my Nana's advice, to keep your eyes open and your wallet shut especially when engaging with new people in new places. I guess her advice is still relevant today. And I understand romance hoaxes are a big business.

Rebekah Hall: According to the Federal Trade Commission, people have reported losing over \$1 billion to romance scams in the last five years. These scams occur when a criminal uses a fake online identity to gain a victim's affection, then uses this trust to defraud the victim in a number of potential ways.

"There are people who do this with nefarious intent, they go into it with a purpose of hurting others," Schrick said. "Regardless of what your intentions are, you can't always assume that others' intentions are true."

Valerie Turner: Your article talks about red flags people should look for when online dating. Tell us more about the red flags.

Rebekah Hall: As a rule, people using dating websites, such as Match.com, or one of the many dating apps available, as well as other social media platforms, should never wire money to a person they've only recently met on the service.

Schrick said it's important to beware of early requests to meet or quickly escalating feelings, such as starting the conversation with talk of love or marriage. This can often lead to requests for money or support, such as "I'd really love to come see you, but I'm broke. Could you buy my plane ticket?"

"Quick escalation tends to be a huge red flag." "People don't want to waste a lot of time with someone who's not an easy mark, so they're not going to stay in a conversation."

If the person gets quickly irritated or asks the same question repeatedly in search of a different answer, that would "typically be a sign of somebody who does not have a real relationship in mind," Schrick said.

Other red flags include messages riddled with spelling or grammar errors, as well as unsolicited intimate pictures. Schrick also recommended searching a person's name on Facebook or Google and doing a reverse Google image search using a picture from the account a user is interacting with.

"If the account is who they say they are, it should just go to search results that feature their name," Schrick said. "But maybe they've cloned a profile of someone else, or they just found a random picture on Instagram or Google and created a profile. If the image shows up all over the place with lots of different names and locations, you should be able to figure out, 'oh, this is not who I thought it was.'"

Valerie Turner: Schrick gave pretty specific red flags to watch for, so, how's a person suppose to get to know someone safely online? What things did she say were important to think about or not to do?

Rebekah Hall: While it's necessary to use caution when interacting with people on dating platforms, it's also important to be aware of one's own expectations and desired outcomes.

"I think it's important to ask yourself: are you looking for a life partner? Or are you lonely and looking for someone to go to dinner with sometimes?"

"Are you open to dating someone who is younger than you, or older than you? Are you open to dating someone who is divorced, or who has children? Because you're going to go into interactions with somebody differently based on what you're really looking for."

Valerie Turner: Are there things a person needs to avoid telling online?

Rebekah Hall: One should avoid sharing personal details while online dating, such as place of employment, neighborhood, number of children or their school and other identifying information. Schrick said that "keeping it broad" while discussing hobbies, interests or life structure can help determine compatibility.

“If you have a hobby that’s really important to you, maybe casually mention ‘I can’t wait to see the basketball game,’ or ‘it’s getting to be that time to start my garden and I can’t wait.’”
“Mentioning that you have grandchildren or that you have children in a broader sense might be a good early conversation to have, because if you’re talking to someone who has no interest in being around children or grandchildren, you probably ought to find that out early on.”

Valerie Turner: It sounds like it is important to talk in general or more broad terms when discussing personal details in the early stages of getting to know a person. But that casually bringing up children or grandchildren, to find out early if the other person has an interest in children, is also important. I’m sure it could be a devastating blow to find out months into dating someone, that they did or didn’t have the same views as you about children or grandchildren.

So, let’s say we have been talking to a person for a couple of weeks and we decide we want to meet them in person. I understand that the top priority should be our safety. In your article, Schrick had some very specific things to remember, and plan for, when it came to meeting someone in person, especially for the first time.

Rebekah Hall: Meet in a neutral location. Rather than meeting at someone’s home, a public, well-lit meeting place is best. Tell someone about the date and its location. Schrick recommended enabling the “share my location” feature on a smartphone and sharing that with a trusted friend or family member or telling them where the date is taking place.

Don’t rely on someone else for transportation. “If you can get there yourself, rather than being picked up, that’s obviously a better plan because then you can leave whenever you feel compelled to leave, as opposed to being at the mercy of the other person,” Schrick said.

Avoid becoming intoxicated. Early in a relationship, it’s a good idea to avoid getting intoxicated with “somebody you don’t have a reason to trust yet,” “And if you ever feel like you’re more intoxicated than you should be, based on how much you’ve taken in, contact someone and let them know that something’s wrong, even if it’s a bartender or waiter.”

Plan to pay for yourself. “As ridiculous as it is, especially for women, there is often an expectation of reciprocation, if your date paid for you,” Schrick said. “If someone insists on paying for drinks, or dinner, or an outing, keep in mind, how did they insist? If you tried to pay and they got really irritated, that might be a red flag.”

Start with a short meeting. To put less pressure on the interaction, it can help to start with lunch or day-time date where both parties have something to do afterward, rather than “going straight for an evening date where you’re expected to spend hours together.”

And have an escape plan. Schrick said this could be the “super sitcom-y and old fashioned” way of having a friend call halfway through the date with an emergency, or “just be super honest and say, ‘you know what, I don’t see this going anywhere, and I really appreciate you meeting me, but I think we probably ought to just call it a night.’”

Valerie Turner: Those are some really important points to remember when it comes to personal safety. I think people should remember and apply some of these in everyday activities, especially if you are single and living away from home, family or close friends. Remembering to let others know where you are, avoiding intoxication, especially in the company of people you have just met or know only vaguely and always having an escape plan. These are precautions that can be applied to almost any activity a person does.

So, Rebekah, let's say I've been exploring the online dating world for several months and really have had no luck. What advice did Schrick have for this person?

Rebekah Hall: For people who have spent many months – or years – online dating to no avail, their efforts can feel fruitless and exhausting. In this case, Schrick said, "Taking a break is honestly the best thing you could do for yourself," Deleting the apps or taking time away from dating websites can be refreshing and relieve both self-inflicted and cultural pressures to "find the one."

Schrick also said that for young women, this pressure can feel particularly acute, especially when compounded by one's family environment and life goals.

"To some degree, especially for younger women, I think it can feel very urgent. And it's not," Schrick said. "Going into any of these online dating conversations from a place of 'all these people are terrible, so I guess I'll just pick the least terrible one,' that's going to get you in a potential for a really damaging relationship."

After taking a break from online dating, Schrick said she recommends trying to meet someone the old-fashioned way: in person.

"If you're still really interested in trying to date, especially now that COVID restrictions have been largely lifted, try to get back out there in person." "Go somewhere new. Try a different restaurant or try a new hobby, do something more in the old-fashioned vein to give yourself more of a break."

Valerie Turner: I liked Dr. Schrick's advice for giving yourself a break, getting out there and trying something new. I'm not personally in the market for someone new in my life but I am ready to getting out now that COVID restrictions are largely lifted.

Thank you, Rebekah for joining us today and reporting on how to avoid romance scams while online dating.

I want to remind listeners do be safe when dating online. Keep your personal information private. Beware of quick escalations of feelings or requests. Shut down unsolicited pics or incessant requests for pics. Stay local. Look for more information about your date. Beware of online dating messages with lots of spelling or grammar errors, and never wire money to new acquaintances.

For more information on this topic Rebekah suggested the Pew Research Center 2019 survey on online dating, the Federal Trade Commission data spotlight on romance scams and the Federal Trade Commission guide to romance scams.

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