

gifted for leadership

Help Young Women Navigate Dating

This download gives practical advice as you help the young women in your church make an important decision.



gifted for leadership

Help Young Women Navigate Dating

This download gives practical advice as you help the young women in your church make an important decision.

Click on an article you'd like to read:

3 INTRODUCTION

Guiding Those in Your Care

By JoHannah Reardon

5 LEADER'S GUIDE

How to use this download for a group study.

6 5 QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU DATE

Ever wish you could predict ahead of time whether or not a relationship will work out? These questions help.

By Diane Eble

9 ADVICE FROM GARY THOMAS

What does the Christian culture get wrong when it comes to dating and relationships? We asked a bestselling Christian marriage and relationship expert.

By Daniel Darling

15 HOW FAR IS TOO FAR?

Setting boundaries on intimacy

By Juli Slattery

21 WE'RE JUST NOT THAT INTO HIM

Are Christians too quick to judge their friends' relationships?

By Leilani Mueller

26 IS THERE A CHRISTIAN FORMULA FOR ONLINE DATING?

Trusting God after listing, praying, and searching the web for my Mr. Right.

By Anna Broadway

31 WHY LIVING TOGETHER ISN'T A TEST-RUN FOR MARRIAGE

Research shows how cohabitation sabotages lifelong intimacy.

By Juli Slattery

36 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles, books, and Bible studies to help you further



Introduction

Guiding Those in Your Care

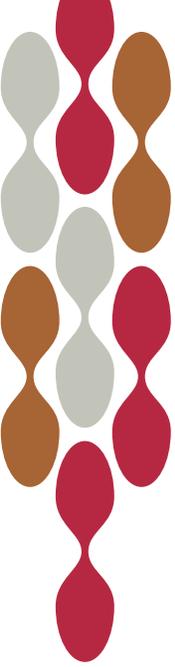
By JoHannah Reardon



Whether you are a pastor, a women's ministry leader, a mentor, or a mother, you will find this download to be useful as you try to help those in your care. Each article looks at a different aspect of dating and gives you a platform to talk to those who are looking to you for wisdom.

Having raised two daughters and having mentored several other young women, I would have loved this resource. It would have given me some tools to discuss this all-important decision beyond "Have you prayed about it?" and "Do you think it's God's will?"

I encourage you to keep this download handy and use it repeatedly as you encourage young women to make



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Guiding Those in Your Care

good, sound decisions that will bring them joy rather than sorrow in their futures.

Blessings,

JoHannah Reardon

Contributing Editor for GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM

Leader's Guide

How to use this download for a group study



This download can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

- 1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
- 2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
- 3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
- 4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
- 5. When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
- 6. End the session in prayer.**

5 Questions to Ask Before You Date



Ever wish you could predict ahead of time whether or not a relationship will work out? These questions help.

By Diane Eble

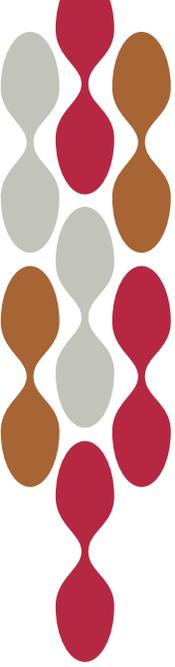
It would save a lot of headaches and heartache if you could predict ahead of time whether or not a dating relationship will work out. You can't predict the future, but you can make choices that will help guide you to relationships that will be satisfying to you and honoring to God.

As you think through potential dates, ask yourself these questions:

I. What's my first impression?

"Don't judge a book by its cover," the old saying goes. True, first impressions aren't totally accurate. But until you get to know a person, you must depend on first impressions.

Who does he hang around with? What kind of activities does he participate in? What kind of media is he filling his



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

5 Questions to Ask Before You Date

mind with? Does he have any persistent bad habits or addictions? This kind of "first impression" information is very helpful as you think about whom you will or won't consider dating.

2. How well do I know him?

It always makes sense to go out with someone you've known for a while rather than a stranger. If it is a stranger, slow down and take time to get to know him, and ask those who do know him well what he is like. Listen to their answers and pay attention to anything negative they say.

3. Does he treat others with respect?

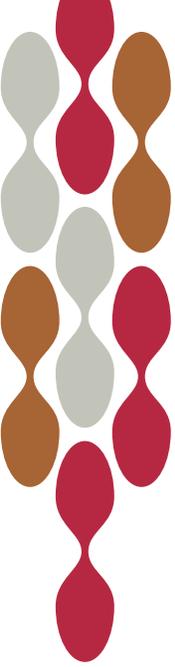
If the guy you are interested in puts others down, brags about conquests, or treats others coldly, it tells a great deal about him. He may not do those things to you if he is interested in securing your affections, but you can be sure it will filter down to you eventually as he grows more comfortable and familiar with you.

4. Do your values clash?

Are the things most important to you also important to him? Are you headed in the same general direction in life? Is he a committed, growing Christian who seeks to live what he believes? You may be thinking, *But, hey, I've heard opposites attract!* However, that's not a good dating rule to live by, especially when it comes to values, moral standards, and personal beliefs.

5. Does he keep his promises?

If he has been in a serious dating relationship before, did he flirt with others or cheat on the person he was dating? It's good to keep in mind that a promise breaker can quickly become a heartbreaker, too.



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

5 Questions to Ask Before You Date

No relationship is perfect. But good relationships seek to put God first. They're encouraging. They're supportive. They build up instead of tear down. And both partners in a good relationship try their best to demonstrate Christ-like love.

If your relationship is already established, it might be time to ask some questions about getting serious.

This article was adapted from one that first appeared on
IGNITEYOURFAITH.COM

Reflect

- *After answering all of these questions, do you feel confident that the one you are interested in is a good person to date? If not, what are the red flags?*
- *Spend time thinking about any red flags that have come up. Ask those who know him well if these are things you should be concerned about or not.*
- *If you've come up with no red flags, consider asking those who know him well if they can see any problems that you have not identified.*

Advice from Gary Thomas

What does the Christian culture get wrong when it comes to dating and relationships? We asked a bestselling Christian marriage and relationship expert.

By Daniel Darling



Gary Thomas is writer in residence at Second Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, and an adjunct faculty member teaching on spiritual formation at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of over a dozen books, including Sacred Marriage, Sacred Pathways, Pure Pleasure, Sacred Parenting, and the Gold Medallion Award-winning Authentic Faith. Gary's latest work is The Sacred Search, What If It's Not About Who You Marry, but Why?

Today we chat with Gary about Christian dating, why pleasure is okay, and the challenge of articulating a biblical view of marriage in the 21st century.

Earlier this year you released The Sacred Search, a Christian guidebook of sorts for dating relationships. What makes this book different than what you typically find on this subject in the Christian bookstore?

Most pre-marital/dating books focus on finding "the who." I



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

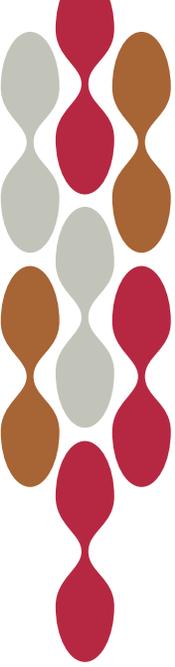
Advice from Gary Thomas

suggest it's important to ask "why" first (thus the subtitle: What If It's Not About Who You Marry, but Why?). It's not that the "who" doesn't matter—in fact, it matters very much. It's just that asking the "why" question first helps lead you to the right who. I present neurological evidence for how we can responsibly understand and handle infatuation. I make the biblical case that the notion of there being just "one right person" finds its origin in Plato, not Scripture, and that this false notion has led more people into poor choices than wise ones; I've worked hard to present a compelling biblical case for what you want to look for in a marriage partner, and why. If singles looking for a spouse don't know the biblical realities (and limitations) of marriage, they can't intentionally make a wise choice about who to marry. People who have attended the Sacred Search talks and early readers of the book have been kind in suggesting that this material seems very fresh and helpful.

What does the Christian culture get wrong when it comes to dating and relationships? How can pastors and church leaders help guide young singles?

Though we have worked hard to prepare Christians to face sexual temptation, we have not adequately prepared them to face romantic infatuation. Singles need to understand how powerful it is, and they need tools to manage it. Infatuation isn't evil—it's there by God's design. But it makes a very poor "god" and shouldn't be treated as one.

Secondly, the myth of the "one," which we've Christianized into this pious sounding, "God created one person just for me and He will bring the right person at the right time if I just wait" needs to be re-examined in light of Scripture. I make the case that Scripture suggests the choice of whether we marry and who



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Advice from Gary Thomas

we marry is up to us, and our choice is to be made on the basis of wisdom and righteousness (I explain in detail what that means), not trying to second guess "destiny" or even providence. When someone realizes they could have a fulfilling God-honoring marriage with perhaps dozens of different people, it changes the nature of their pursuit considerably.

Finally, I want to create a vision for how wonderful and fulfilling a marriage based on Matthew 6:33 can be. If couples will intentionally join around a shared life of worship, service, and mission, they're going to be blessed immeasurably. It may not be an easy life, but it will be rich and eternally significant.

A few years ago you wrote a book, *Pure Pleasure in which you encouraged believers to "not feel bad about feeling good."* Today there is a surge in books that emphasize radical discipleship—which can seem on the surface like feeling bad about feeling good. Is there an imbalance in current Christian teaching?

The message of *Pure Pleasure* helps us live out a life of radical discipleship, which should be based in worship. God's not just our redeemer; He's our creator, and the good gifts He has given us help us to live a life of service and purpose. I liken God-ordained pleasures to water-stop aid stations along a marathon route. There's a lot of work between those stations, but the refreshment is essential to keep us working along the way. If we skip too many of those aid stations, we're liable to break down, quit running, or turn in a sub-par performance. If we don't view our lives as a marathon, we're liable to run ourselves into the ground. It takes humility to realize we can't run without what God designed us to experience (appropriate pleasure). Those who arrogantly think they can do without often crash and burn, and bring much of their



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Advice from Gary Thomas

ministry down with them. I applaud the call to service; I just hope we recognize our vulnerability, our need for humility, and God's call to celebrate as we sacrifice. It doesn't have to be either/or. The complete Christian life is both/and.

In your best-selling book, Sacred Marriage, you encourage Christians to rethink their view of marriage in terms of being "holy not happy." I'm guessing this has relevance for today's debate about the definition of the institution itself.

One of the problems the church has gotten itself into is that for a generation we tried to tell the world that if they would just live by a few Christian principles, we could "one up" the secular vision of marriage: we could provide marriages that would be more fulfilling, more fun (thus the teaching of date nights), more sexually fulfilled (thus we'll have an eight week series on sex), less financial hassles (so we'll bring in the best teaching on financial management) and happier kids (so we'll hire the best youth worker we can find). Instead of confronting the selfishness in our thirst regarding marriage, we fed it!

And so, faced with contemporary arguments: "Doesn't God want us to be happy?" we find ourselves at a loss for words. In the end, it comes down to this: I am married to a woman for life because that's what God created me to be and what God has called me to do. It's how I worship Him, and serve Him. I personally believe it's the happiest life I could ever know, but that's not why I'm in it. I'm in it as a desire to worship God and to participate in the world as He designed it. Any view of marriage that counteracts God's creational design mocks Him rather than worships Him, and I want no part of that.



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Advice from Gary Thomas

How can church leaders communicate that model of marriage in a winsome way?

First, of course, we need to "communicate it" through our lives. The consequences of pastoral failure in marriage can be severe; I'm seen entire youth groups turned away from (or at least grown significantly colder toward) God as a result of a pastor's fall. Second, we have to show the joys of spiritual partnership. Selfishness gets boring, so trying to build marriages on self-centered ends won't work; it's a short-term fix.

Creating a sense of spiritual purpose, partnership, and connecting marriage more closely to worship should become a part of who we are and what we do before it's something we say and talk about. But once we are living it out, let's be bold. I tell young people, "How does Hugh Hefner know that sleeping with hundreds of women is more fulfilling than sleeping with one woman thousands of times? He's never done it God's way and doesn't know what he's talking about! Instead, he gets in a pathetic, selfish relationship with a woman who could be his great-granddaughter, and I'm so supposed to listen to him about the pleasures of eros? No thank you!"

I think young people respect it when we push back and say that, in the end, God's way is the best way. We don't have to be ashamed, because God's way really *is* the best way! Sadly, many Christians *do* punt on their long-term sexual intimacy in marriage, and it shows. We need to cultivate relationships of worship and delight so that we can speak boldly out of worship and delight.

This article first appeared on LEADERSHIP/PARSE.



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Advice from Gary Thomas

Reflect

- *Are you focused on the "who" or the "why"? What is the difference and significance?*
- *Gary Thomas says, "Though we have worked hard to prepare Christians to face sexual temptation, we have not adequately prepared them to face romantic infatuation." If so, how can you begin to think through this problem?*
- *Do you agree with Gary Thomas's problem with the concept of "one"? If so, why or why not? What trouble might that cause as you consider who to date?*

How Far Is Too Far?

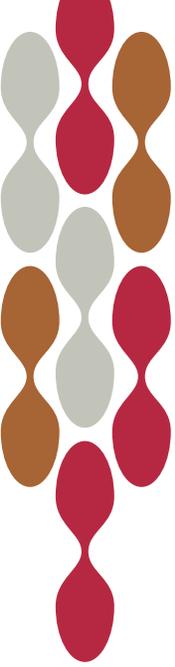
Setting boundaries on intimacy

By Juli Slattery



This age-old question is not only one teens are asking, but also women in their 20s, 30s, and beyond. With marriage often delayed in today's culture, and second marriages becoming more common, women of all ages are finding themselves wondering about physical boundaries in dating.

If you are asking this question, good for you! More and more women no longer care about saving sex for marriage, even if they acknowledge it as God's best plan for them. Waiting just seems to be "too hard" for them. Giving the sexual relationship a "test drive" sounds like a good idea (even though research solidly debunks this thinking!). They fear losing the guy if they don't "put out." Or they may not even remember what they are supposed to be waiting for. God's call to purity isn't just for teenagers. It's for men and women of all ages—married, divorced, and single. Yes,



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

How Far Is Too Far?

purity looks different at various stages of life, but the call to holiness doesn't change as you age. So what does it look like to date at 25, 38, 42, or 60? How far is too far?

The reason women ask this question is because the answer can be very complicated. The simplest answer is the "bikini rule": If you were wearing a fairly modest bikini, don't touch anywhere the bathing suit would cover. Yet that answer is unsatisfactory because it doesn't take into account variables like age, how long you've been dating, what causes your sexual engines to rev, or how pure your mind is even if you aren't touching.

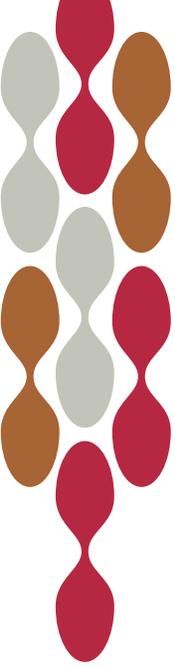
Balancing emotional, spiritual, and physical intimacy

A helpful way to think of sexual intimacy is to put it on a spectrum with other forms of intimacy. Every dating relationship has varying degrees of physical, emotional, and spiritual closeness. In healthy relationships, each level of intimacy progresses equally. In other words, sexual expression shouldn't go any farther than trust, shared histories, seeking God together, and other aspects of intimacy. As a relationship slowly progresses, the couple becomes steadily more intimate in all areas.

The ultimate boundary of all intimacy is the marriage covenant. Marriage means making a lifelong promise of faithfulness. The wedding vows are meant to ensure that you will not be rejected or discarded by the one you share your body, your heart, and your soul with. Only marriage provides the "all systems go" assurance of safety and fidelity.

The problems I most commonly see in dating are these:

First, physical intimacy sometimes quickly races forward, bypassing other aspects of intimacy. A couple begins making



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

How Far Is Too Far?

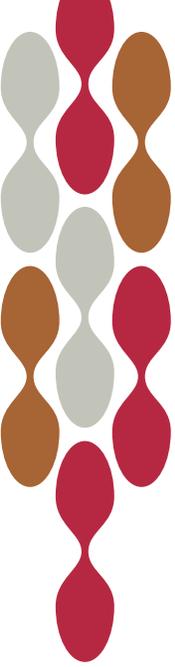
out, touching intimately, and so on without any history, commitment, or connection. The ecstasy of physical touch becomes the center of their relationship. Regardless of whether they have crossed some subjective line of "going too far" sexually, they've given away and taken more than they should have. Their relationship isn't based on mutual respect, but on mutual self-gratification. Even if they haven't had sex, the woman probably feels used, dirty, and defiled. For instance, have you ever felt "cheap" or "violated" just by kissing someone you hardly knew?

Second, Christian couples sometimes become hypersensitive to physical boundaries, but pay no attention to emotional and spiritual boundaries. A couple that has been dating for three months might act like they are married. They cut off other friendships and spend time together exclusively. They have "pet names" for each other, and celebrate an anniversary each month. They share their deepest secrets and temptations, including sexual failures. They plan their futures together, promising never to break up.

Please understand this: These boundary violations are just as dangerous as being sexually intimate! In many cases, sharing deeply on the spiritual and emotional level make staying sexually pure almost impossible. Just as a couple needs to "pace themselves" sexually, they also need to be careful about how quickly they progress in emotional and spiritual intimacy.

You may never have considered that you can be too spiritually or emotionally intimate in a dating relationship. In the sexual arena, you can see how far you've progressed. It is a little more complicated to assess intimacy emotionally and spiritually—plus, no one talks about it being a danger.

For example, I'm not sure it is appropriate early in a relationship for a man and woman to pray or study the Bible together



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

How Far Is Too Far?

alone. One older woman who had her heart broken in a relationship made the commitment that she would never make a meal for a man she wasn't married to. Why? Because to her it symbolized the intimacy and nurture of a marriage commitment.

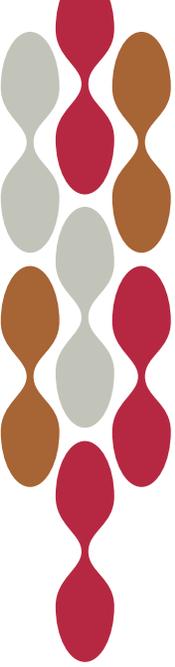
These are very personal decisions based on the truth that giving away too much of your heart can be as painful as giving away too much of your body. Have you ever thought through "how far is too far" in these areas?

Making a game plan

I'll admit that I'm the uptight-planner type. For better or for worse, I think through everything. When my husband, Mike, and I were dating, I was hypersensitive to boundaries because I was afraid of making a mistake. I didn't want my hormones to hijack my reasoning. One day, Mike playfully kissed me all over my face. Instead of delighting in this romantic gesture, I stopped him by saying, "What do those kisses mean? They don't mean anything!" Yes, it's a miracle that the guy ended up marrying me!

Fortunately for my teenage boys, I've mellowed just a bit. I understand the fun of dating and the thrill of romance. However, I also recognize how powerful passions and drives can lead to disaster if not managed responsibly. You don't have to be as unromantic as I was, but you do need to be proactive about setting your boundaries. Here's what I suggest:

Make a graph to chart your relationship on levels of intimacy. Where do you think it is appropriate to be at this stage of your relationship? What area of intimacy seems to be speeding ahead of the others? Realistically, how long would it be before there is the potential of marriage? Are you setting yourself up



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

How Far Is Too Far?

for trouble by the "pacing" of intimacy in your relationship?

Proverbs reminds us that "in a multitude of counselors there is safety." No one is beyond this principle. You are never too old, too experienced, or too wise to need godly counsel, especially in the area of romantic relationships. Be sure you have a few friends and mentors who will ask you hard questions, give advice, and pray with you as you make decisions about boundaries in all areas of your relationship.

*Juli Slattery is a widely known clinical psychologist, author, speaker, and broadcast media professional. She co-founded Authentic Intimacy (www.authenticintimacy.com) and is the co-author of *Passion Pursuit: What Kind of Love Are You Making?* This article first appeared on TODAYSCHRISTIANWOMAN.COM.*

Reflect

- *The author says, "A helpful way to think of sexual intimacy is to put it on a spectrum with other forms of intimacy. Every dating relationship has varying degrees of physical, emotional, and spiritual closeness. In healthy relationships, each level of intimacy progresses equally. In other words, sexual expression shouldn't go any farther than trust, shared histories, seeking God together, and other aspects of intimacy." Why is that so important?*
- *The article says a problem occurs when a "relationship isn't based on mutual respect, but on mutual self-gratification." How can you know when a relationship has stepped over that line?*
- *According to the author, how can violating emotional boundaries be just as dangerous as violating sexual boundaries?*
- *"Make a graph to chart your relationship on levels of intimacy. Where do you think it is appropriate to be at this stage of your relationship? What area of intimacy seems to be speeding ahead of the others? Realistically, how long would it be before there is the potential of marriage? Are you setting yourself up for trouble by the 'pacing' of intimacy in your relationship?"*

We're Just Not That into Him

Are Christians too quick to judge their friends' relationships?

By Leilani Mueller



You're dating who?

I've said it—and thought it much more. It's been said to me and thought about me. After all, living among a group of primarily 20-something, evangelical women, we all have our opinions about each other's relationships.

With genuine motivations, these opinions lead to beneficial discussions, clarity over troubled relationships, and insight into loving better the men we date. But sometimes motivations aren't so pure, and our own opinions come out disguised as guidance and direction. *You're dating who?*

Recently, my husband told me about a mutual friend of ours who had another dating relationship end. His girlfriend's friends convinced her to break it off. While these women may have known something I didn't, I know that many of us judge the men our friends date hastily. Maybe he's not the kind of guy we pictured her with. Maybe he's not



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

We're Just Not That into Him

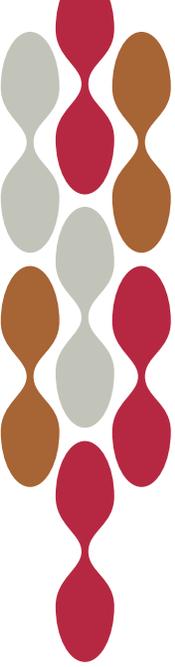
the kind of guy we'd choose for ourselves to date. Whatever the reason, I've unnecessarily spoken up against a friend's boyfriend before, and I've seen it happen countless times.

In *Emma*, Jane Austen's meddling heroine believes her friend, Harriet, makes a grave mistake by enjoying the courtship of a poor farmer and convinces her friend to look elsewhere. Emma shows how we have the ability to sway our friend's opinions, and we are often tempted to use it. Even when, like Emma, we are wrong.

Especially in a church setting, we see speaking into our friends' lives as a way of "iron sharpening iron" (Prov. 27:17). As Christians living within community, we recognize the need to keep our community healthy. We want to use our influence to help our friends make wise decisions concerning their relationships. We know that with dating comes the future hope of marriage and the weighty consideration of entering a lifelong, covenantal relationship with another person. We want our brothers and sisters to find the right people, especially when the divorce rates are high, **even among Christians**.

However, in our haste to protect our friends, we may speak out of personal preference, offer up an opinion for the sake of having an opinion, rather than actually sharing necessary counsel. Christians can hide behind a guise of protecting our friends even when our motivations for persuasion aren't always so just. The advice we give—or choose not to give—should be consciously motivated by a principle that looks for the good of both in a relationship. (In other words, that boyfriend you're harping on is a person, too.)

C. S. Lewis reminds us in his essay "Weight of Glory" that our everyday interactions are with eternal souls. He argues that our daily activities and words push souls either towards or away



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

We're Just Not That into Him

from God. Lewis says our capacity for affecting eternal relationships is "a load so heavy that only humility can carry it."

Accordingly, it seems humility needs to be applied to the advice we give our friends. In the case of dating relationships, particularly when the man a friend is dating is a professed Christian, we have the responsibility to love them both—as our brother and sister—and be mindful how our words affect both parties on their walk towards God.

However, this responsibility doesn't always mean silence—particularly in clear cases of emotional or physical abuse, or when a friend seeks out our advice. But before speaking up, prayerful consideration, along with thoughtful evaluation of our motivations, should be a must. Humility seems to make that demand.

We should be cautious over our unsolicited commentary and make sure we speak in charity. While there may be many motivations that are less than pure, I've found the following three easy to excuse in ourselves.

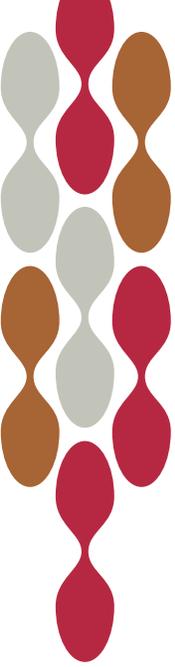
1. My Friend Needs a Man Who _____

Like Emma, we may have a list of traits we deem necessary for a friend's partner. While this may be a more prevalent among family members, friends also can be guilty. We think we know better than she what would make her happy.

2. I Dated a Man Like That, and I Couldn't Trust Him

Another motivation to critique our friends' boyfriends comes from personal experience. After all, if we have had painful relationships, we want to spare our friends that hurt.

Unfortunately, projecting our experience onto friends' relationships can sometimes prove unfair to both the friend and the man she is dating.



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

We're Just Not That into Him

3. He's Not Good For You (Because He's Good For Me)

Sadly, we live in a fallen world and we have the tendency toward envy and comparison. I once told a friend that a guy interested in her was "not good for you." I said that because I secretly wanted to be with him. It led to a strain in our friendship, and I wish I'd wrestled before God with my feelings instead of trying to influence the relationship. The subtle sister of envy is comparison. Our insecurities in our own relationship or our own walk with God may prompt us to selfishly speak against a friend's healthy, happy relationship.

Ultimately, we are called, in humility, to love one another. When we bite our tongues and look at our motivations, before using our powers to persuade to influence our friend's relationships, we practice humble love for both the friend and the man she is dating.

In doing so, we will practice a charitable and humble love that seeks to rightly move our friends and the men they date to deeper relationships with God and others.

Leilani Mueller spends her time teaching for a classical high school program, writing both fiction and essays, investing in her community, and attempting to live and think well about her life as a Christian woman. This article first appeared on HER.MENEUTICS.



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

We're Just Not That into Him

Reflect

- ◉ *If your friends don't like the man you are dating, do you think their reasons are valid? Why or why not?*
- ◉ *Do your friends know you well enough to know what you need?*
- ◉ *Can you learn from another friend's mistake, or is her situation completely different from yours? Explain.*
- ◉ *What do you think is the motivation behind your friend's advice?*

Is There a Christian Formula for Online Dating?



Trusting God after listing, praying, and searching the web for my Mr. Right.

By Anna Broadway

As Amy Webb tells it, finding her husband was as easy as **making a list**.

"You'll know your list is finished when the person you've described suddenly feels real and tangible," she writes in the appendix to her memoir-cum-online-dating-advice book *Data: A Love Story*. "In my case, I could literally see [my husband] in my mind's eye before we'd even met. This isn't spiritual hoo-ha or some kind of 'visualize your destiny and it will appear' [baloney]. It's about digging deep and writing a really thorough character profile so that you can use it to find that person in real life."

In her case, that profile began as a 72-point description of her ideal man, a set of attributes she later culled down to 10 essentials and 15 pretty important traits.

Now, I've made my share of lists. **Who hasn't?** But in the



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Is There a Christian Formula for Online Dating?

early days, I frequently drew them up at the same time I was nurturing a crush, which meant each list bore a suspicious resemblance to the current man of my dreams.

Webb started hers the night after a devastating date. Through further analysis and charting (let's just say she's a tiny bit obsessed with spreadsheets), she resolved to use her list as a rubric for dates. Thereafter, she would only date men who met a minimum eligibility threshold, based on the traits she deemed most important.

In some respects, Webb's basic approach seems wise. In fact, I used a similar method to navigate some early geographic decisions, creating a rubric that very helpfully distinguished between places I'd merely liked visiting and those where I'd really thrive. Whenever I wasn't sure about a city, I'd run it through my list, rating each quality on a 1-5 scale, then calculate the sub scores' average. As crude as it was, the system quantified my good but not great 12 years in Phoenix and predicted my very rich four in New York.

But Webb's starting point for her 72-part profile was the question, "What will make me happy?" She urges readers to do the same: "If you want true love and a long-lasting marriage, you need to start by figuring out what makes you happy."

For Christians, that premise won't hold. Marriage was created for something much bigger than the mere securement of two people's mutual happiness. It's a covenantal relationship that helps bear the triune God's image in the world, a picture of Jesus' relationship with the church, and the bond from which new life is meant to spill over in joyous overflow.

As writers like Gary Thomas (in *Sacred Marriage*) and Tim and Kathy Keller (in *The Meaning of Marriage*) have noted, that sometimes means marriage will produce a discomfort quite at



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Is There a Christian Formula for Online Dating?

odds with the happiness ideal. That's not to say the ideal marriage produces more misery than bliss, but anyone whom God uses to help us become who we were made to be is bound to fulfill that role through at least some friction with traits we blindly deem part of our true selves.

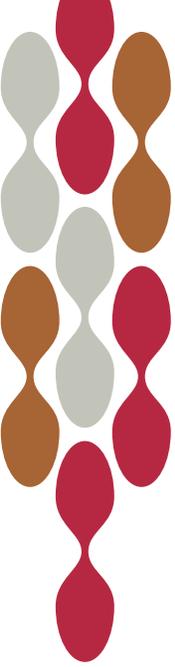
Yet, precisely because I'm probably most blind to the areas where I most need change, I may grossly misidentify the sort of partner best for me. That's my biggest hesitation with using a list like Webb's to turn down dates: what if I drew up criteria that actually excluded the kind of person best for me?

My informal list has evolved over the years from its early emphasis on preferences and interests to character traits. *Loves Jesus. Active in his church. History of submitting to God even when it's uncomfortable. Honest. Emotionally healthy. Someone I could respect. Passionate about the arts. Able to laugh at himself.*

Actually, I *could* accept or decline dates based on a list like that. Where then does one find such men? For Webb that involved the Internet, but also, determining what kind of woman/online profile would appeal to her Mr. Perfect. She then "advertised" herself with him in mind.

On one level, the notion of having to advertise repulses me. Then again, when I used to go swing dancing, I picked outfits very carefully, using shoes and hair to let potential partners know I was not just a clumsy first-timer. That, too, was a kind of advertising, I suppose; I just didn't have to write words to do it.

Putting oneself "out there" is only part of online dating, however. One must also peruse the seemingly unlimited ranks of potential dates. I struggle with that, too. Never mind who says "hi" first; how much time do I invest in searching, vs. just



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Is There a Christian Formula for Online Dating?

answering those who contact me? In other parts of life, I try to carefully guard that scarce resource. If one spent just an hour a night on a dating site (and you easily could!), that's at least five hours a week I'm not using to read, write, catch up with friends, attend a concert, and so on.

And yet, Daniel Slater in *Love in the Time of Algorithms* cites a 2010 report that roughly 20 percent of "committed relationships" began online. Anecdotally, two of the three weddings I expect to attend this year are couples that met online. Can you find love *without* being online? **What is God's role in all of this?**

The older I get, the easier and more tempting it is to panic that waiting and spending my life doing something besides seeking love will leave me an elderly spinster who could have married if only she hadn't left things up to God. Is he a matchmaker, as Derek Prince wrote, or should I pursue the course of Abraham's servant, who combined trust in God's sovereignty with a plan to choose a bride for his aging master's son? Abraham's servant went back to his master's hometown. But online daters face dozens of options.

I'm still not sure I want an Internet yenta, but for those looking to put their best foot forward online, Webb's book provides some practical tips, plus several funny bad-date stories and a well-argued case for George Michael.

This article first appeared on HER.MENEUTICS.



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Is There a Christian Formula for Online Dating?

Reflect

- *Would you consider an online dating service? Why or why not?*
- *What might be some problems with this approach?*
- *If you would like to use an online dating service, what cautions should you put in place?*

Why Living Together Isn't a Test-Run for Marriage



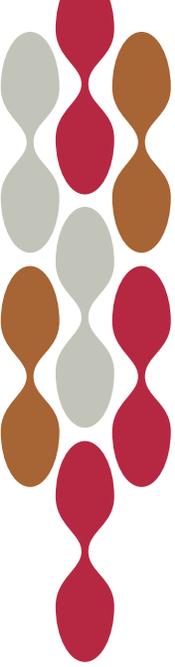
Research shows how cohabitation sabotages lifelong intimacy.

By Dr. Juli Slattery

Getting married is one of the biggest decisions you will ever make. If marriage is a lifetime commitment, then why not have a "trial run" before making it official?

More than **50 percent** of couples do exactly that. In fact, living together before marriage is becoming increasingly common, even among Christian couples. The reason is that living together before marriage just makes sense. This is particularly a strong argument for those who are hesitant about a lifetime commitment. Having witnessed the pain divorce creates in many families, they know that a fairy tale wedding in a packed church doesn't guarantee a happily-ever-after ending.

But if your goal is to someday have a loving, stable relationship, living together before marriage is far more



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Why Living Together Isn't a Test-Run for Marriage

likely to sabotage life-long intimacy than be a stepping stone for it. Here are a few reasons why cohabitation isn't the wisest decision.

What the research says

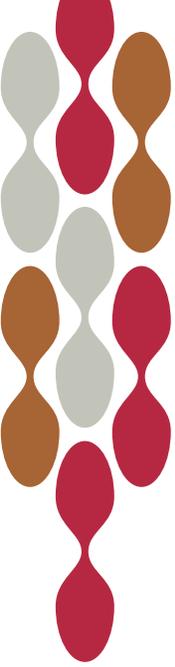
In spite of those who say cohabitation is a wise test drive, the research indicates that living together before marriage may actually increase your risk for divorce in the future. Many experts believe that the "squishy" approach toward commitment represented by cohabitation sets a couple up for bailing on marriage when things get difficult. Holding sexual fidelity and the marriage covenant as sacred before God impacts your willingness to work through the challenges of life together.

Research also indicates that couples living together are more likely to experience sexual unfaithfulness, domestic violence, and higher levels of relational unhappiness. If you are living with your boyfriend with the hope to avoid heartbreak, you are likely setting yourself up for failure.

Cohabitation is intimacy on a man's terms.

Glenn Stanton, author of *The Ring Makes All the Difference* believes strongly that the growing trend toward cohabitation is putting women at risk. While women have great power in the marriage relationship, they have relatively little leverage as a live-in. Stanton argues that cohabitation puts men in the driver's seat. They get what they want (sex and companionship) without giving what they fear (commitment).

While this may be painting with a broad brush, I think Stanton is hitting on a fundamental truth. To a large degree, men commit to marriage because they long for companionship and a sexual partner. When a woman makes marriage the



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Why Living Together Isn't a Test-Run for Marriage

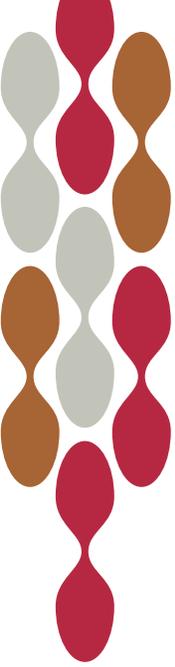
condition for giving herself to a man, she may lose a guy who has no interest in commitment, but she will challenge a "good man" to take the step of a marriage covenant. Feminists tout that cohabitation gives women freedom and independence rather than being tied to a man. However, women are far more likely to flourish economically and emotionally within the stability of marriage.

Cohabitation is taking yourself out of God's will.

There is nothing I fear more than being out of God's will. I've seen enough pain and devastation in this world to know that I need God—every hour of every day, I need his wisdom and comfort. As my husband, Mike, and I navigate the challenges of raising three boys and 20 years of marriage, we know that on our own, it's not enough. No amount of psychological training, self-help books, or willpower can adequately equip me for life on earth.

I find tremendous comfort knowing that I can cry out to God and trust him to give me wisdom no matter what comes our way. Even when I don't *feel* his presence, I know he is there. Why? Because he has promised me that he will draw near to me when I draw near to him. Access to God's wisdom and comfort is largely dependent upon our willingness to *abide* in him—to walk in obedience. "So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin," 1 John 1:6–7 says.

By choosing to ignore God's teaching on marriage and sexuality, you are electing to walk in darkness and to do life on



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Why Living Together Isn't a Test-Run for Marriage

your own terms. You can't claim the rich promises of God while living in stubborn rebellion against his expressed will for you. By living with your boyfriend, you are rejecting the fellowship of God. Romance, marriage, sex, family—these are complicated and dangerous aspects of life. Don't reject the Counselor who can give you the wisdom and strength to navigate them well.

Now what?

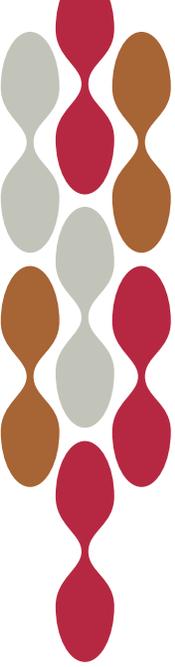
Maybe you are convinced that a "test run" is a bad idea, but you're reading this article snuggled up against your live-in boyfriend. Now what? Pressing the issue of marriage or moving out now would be complicated.

The good news is that God is a master at working out messes when we bring them to him, for Jesus said to the adulterous woman in **John 8**, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more" (NASB).

Taking a stand to be sexually pure when you've already crossed that line takes a step of faith. Frankly, it means that you might lose your boyfriend. It means that you may have to temporarily create an earthquake in your life. The ground that seemed steady will shift.

I'm not just talking to the 25-year-old college grad. This message is the same for the 55-year-old who doesn't want to give up the financial benefits of alimony or life insurance by getting married. Sexual purity isn't just for young adults. All who claim to be disciples of Jesus are told to be set apart as holy.

Jesus told a **story of two homes**—one built on the sand and the other on the rock. Both houses looked great when the weather was calm. But when the storms came, the house on the sand crumbled while the one built on the rock stood.



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Why Living Together Isn't a Test-Run for Marriage

Please consider that you are building a house. The decorations and the style are negotiable. But the foundation you choose is absolutely critical. "Playing married" without the sacred commitment of marriage is choosing to build a house on an unstable and volatile foundation. I urge you to bring your "mess" before Jesus and ask him to show you how to rebuild on the truth of his unchanging Word.

*Juli Slattery is a widely known clinical psychologist, author, speaker, and broadcast media professional. She co-founded Authentic Intimacy (www.authenticintimacy.com) and is the co-author of *Passion Pursuit: What Kind of Love Are You Making?* This article first appeared on TODAYSCHRISTIANWOMAN.COM.*

Reflect

- *How might cohabitation be more to the man's benefit than the woman's?*
- *If you aren't sure about what the Bible says about marriage, do a word study using a concordance or an online tool such as Biblegateway.com.*
- *If you are already living with someone you are not married to, how can you begin to talk to him about what you should do next? Who can help you think through this?*

Additional Resources

Articles, books, and Bible studies to help you further



Articles

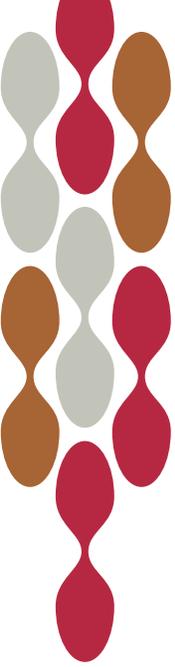
Finding a Great Husband Doesn't Just "Happen"—5 things I wish my mom had told me about dating and preparing for marriage. By Lisa Anderson, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com.

Is Online Dating for Christians?—An anthropologist, a writer, and a ministry leader consider Christian dating websites. By Jenell Williams Paris, Leslie Ludy, and Dennis Franck, available on ChristianityToday.com.

How Do I Know He's "The One"?—Three questions to consider. By Juli Slattery, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com.

Books

The Sacred Search, by Gary Thomas (David C. Cook, 2012). From the award-winning author of *Sacred Marriage* comes a fresh look at dating—and how to make a covenant relationship



Help Young Women Navigate Dating

Additional Resources

spectacular before it starts! Encouraging singles to abandon the idea of a "soul mate" and trade it for the notion of a "sole mate," a partnership dedicated to Christ, Thomas contends that a good marriage is something you make.

Boundaries in Dating, by Dr. Henry Cloud, Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2000). Dating scene got you down? Try a new approach! Discover how to take responsibility for your life, behavior, and values as God intended. Organized by principles such as honesty, freedom, and respect, this guide helps you develop self-control and intimacy in healthy dating relationships so you're better able to find and commit to a marriage partner.

Online Resources

The Case for Early Marriage—This Bible study based on a *Christianity Today* article looks at why the church must release the stigma and teach young couples how to tie the knot.

Available from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**.

Living Single—Receive encouragement from these eight studies on how to navigate the single life. Available from

ChristianBibleStudies.com.

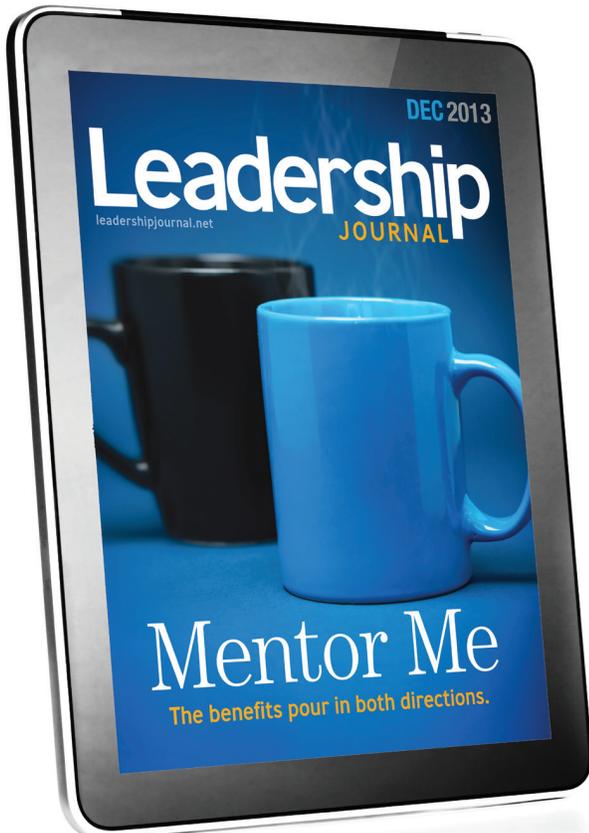
Trying Love Again—Dating again requires thought, courage, and a sense of adventure. This Bible study can help you think through it. Available from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this download are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, ©2007. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.



Click To
Start Your
Free Trial
Today!

Find Out Why Women Read *Leadership Journal*



"Leadership Journal stretches me further into God and into my own leadership."

— Mindy Caliguire
Founder, Soul Care
Willow Creek
Association



to start your free trial, go to:
www.OrderLJ.com/GFL