

Dating Sober

In sobriety, the idea of dating can be both thrilling and terrifying, with many challenges and questions. We may wonder: How sober do I need to be to date? When is it ok to get closer or hold hands? As sex and porn addicts, we can apply the same spiritual principles to dating that guide us in our recovery.

First things first: we admit we are powerless over sex and pornography. We need to be honest about our acting-out behaviors with our sponsor and experienced, sober members. Maybe we're flirting with a coworker. Maybe we ghosted a date after we lost interest. And when they called us out on disappearing, we gaslit them by saying they were "being needy." We are not the type of people who can afford to keep secrets! By bringing our acting-out into the light of recovery, we begin to see the insanity of our behavior.

When questions and challenges arise, we turn to our higher power. Maybe we feel ready to date. That doesn't mean we are. Then there's the million-dollar question: when and how to disclose to a potential partner we're in recovery. If we reveal too much too soon, we risk driving them away before they have the chance to understand us. If we wait too long, they might feel betrayed.

The good news is that we don't have to figure out these questions alone. We keep it simple, seeking the guidance of our higher power, and listening to the suggestions of our sponsor and experienced, sober members.

When we're willing to listen, we begin to separate the true from the false. Maybe we are ready to date; maybe we realize rushing into dating is our self-will at work. Either way, we find that more time in recovery—working the steps—is exactly what we need. We aren't using SPAA or a higher power to get a partner; we're partnering with our higher power and SPAA to build with us a new way of being.

Before we start dating, many of us have found it useful to take a fearless moral inventory and identify our shortcomings. This Step may illuminate blind spots around intimacy. We might realize we've tried to manage situations—carefully curating our image on a first date or emotionally manipulating our partners to get what we want.

Or perhaps we realized we had transformed our romantic partners into our higher power. We may have been mesmerized by their looks, blinded by desire, or looked to them to make us feel validated and whole. "If this amazing, irresistible person wants me," we thought, "I must be pretty special!" By completing our inventory and sharing it with our sponsor and a few trusted fellows, we allow them to offer informed and helpful suggestions as we venture into the uncharted waters of sober dating.

As we wade into dating, many of us find it helpful to reach a place where sex becomes optional in our relationships. What does it mean for sex to be optional? It means we've reached a place where we can truly take it or leave it—a place of neutrality. How do we get there? We surrender.

With a more sober headspace, we can be free from the sexual craving and obsession of the hijacked brain. The hijacked brain clouds our judgment, leading us down paths of poor choices and painful consequences. With a clear head, we can approach dating with clarity and integrity. This is just one of the many miracles of recovery: we gain the clear-mindedness to make sober choices that align with the will of our higher power.

We must keep working the Steps like our sobriety depends on it. Because it does. This means continuing to take personal inventory. As we date, we might ask ourselves: Were we dishonest, fearful, inconsiderate, self-seeking, or selfish? Did we exaggerate, lie about our age, ignore a text, pressure or guilt someone into a date, or dominate a conversation? If so, we get honest with ourselves, discuss it with our sponsor and fellow members, and make amends when necessary.

When we go on a date, we show up with humility. Right-sized. We're no longer in the business of impression management, especially on a date. Nor are we self-conscious, desperate for approval and intimacy. We try to free ourselves from the obsession to control others' perceptions of us. We abandon this old behavior to our higher power.

We walk in with our heads high—shame and fear aren't our bodyguards. We do not take ourselves so seriously. Instead, we sit across from our date, look them in the eye, and let them see the real us—the one who snorts when laughing, cries at commercials, or can never get our hair to behave. We're just being our full selves.

But we must remember that dating in sobriety is still new territory. That's why it's vital to maintain persistent conscious contact with our higher power. When our thoughts race with uncertainty or addiction threatens to take over, we have to pause and get quiet. We ask for the next right thought or action. Perhaps a date invites us up to their place for "a drink," though we know where it will lead. Here, we ask our higher power: what is your will for me? What is the right action? We might not receive the answer we want, but we come to rely on the guidance of our higher power.

As we deepen our recovery, we begin to take ourselves less seriously. We relax into the chair across from our date, realizing we aren't here to pass a Big Book exam. The pressure's off. *It's okay to be excited.* And perhaps that is the greatest miracle: as we trust our higher power and work these Steps, we discover we can actually have fun dating. Yes, fun! We who once weighed every move and prayed for the "perfect" person, now find ourselves laughing and sharing in genuine connection.