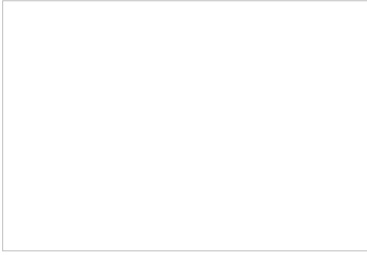


Tinder Turns Out To Be The Worst Thing For Dating

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Generation Swipe

Tinder promised it would revolutionize romance. So why are my peers lonelier and more sex-deprived than ever?



[SuzyWeiss](#)



The tunnel of love at a fun fair in Palisades Park, New Jersey. (Harvey Meston via Getty Images)

Every generation thinks they have it the hardest when it comes to finding love, but it's hard to look at mine and conclude that we don't have a good case. Never before have young people been having so little sex—at least not since we began counting such things. Never before have young people been lonelier. Never before have we been stalked so thoroughly by our past selves, every blunder cataloged in perpetuity.

I know about this and think about it a lot, because I'm smack in the middle of it. I'm a 27-year-old on all the apps. To be safe, I go into every bookstore, slide books off the shelves, and peek through the opening between *Normal People* and *Americanah* ready to lock eyes with my forever beau. But it seems all the would-be husbands have been left functionally castrated by [porn addictions](#), or slaving away at a 9-to-5 trying to pay for a tiny apartment, or too distracted by bio-hacking and Reddit boards to go on a date.

By the time my parents were my age, so [the meme](#) goes, they had a house and two kids. A lot of men in my generation aren't even having sex.

One of those men is Shane. Shane, 20, is a junior at Penn State studying economics. He comes from a happy family and says he's never had trouble making friends. And yet he can't seem to bring himself to create profiles on the dating apps he downloaded months ago. That's because he's never had sex.

"I want a relationship, I don't want to be a loner anymore," he told me. But Shane is convinced that he's not good enough. Specifically, he's not good enough on the measures that dating apps cull for. He's short, for one. So Shane's been calorie counting, protein tracking, and lifting compulsively for about two years in the hopes of achieving the ideal body type: lean and fit. He reads Reddit's relationship boards to get a sense of what women complain about—bad sex, manners, politics, hygiene, and overbearing in-laws, to name a few—to see how he can be the best date when he finally works up the courage.

"A lot of my anxiety ties back to the openness and honesty that people have on the internet," he says. "It shows me that there is a lot to be worried about. People aren't so forgiving all the time."

There have always been men who have had a hard time. The question right now is why there are so many men in Shane's predicament.

There's a lot of blame to go around. Among the culprits: Mark Zuckerberg and Steve Jobs and the sexual revolution and the pill and late empire and late capitalism and Tinder. But I'd like to start with parents and the concept of "snowplow parenting."

Helicopter parents were infamous in the early aughts for involving themselves in the minutiae of their children's lives, from diets free of GMOs to making sure they were first-chair violinists. But Dr. Michael Ungar, a Ph.D. in social work who specializes in what makes people resilient, says "snowplow parents" of the later millennials and Gen Zers are on a whole other level. They clear their children's boundless horizons of even the tiniest of obstacles—think dubious doctors' notes to get more time on the SAT.

That frictionless world our parents created has since spread from schools and playgrounds to every aspect of life via apps. We can order dinner, or a ride, or some help putting furniture together, and for the last ten years, at least in theory, get a date. But one consequence of all this ease is that it seems to be diminishing our ability to build resilience. According to Ungar, the challenges and pain of early relationships and breakups train us for mating as adults. "You don't simply learn resiliency as a concept," he says. "You learn it through interacting with others."

When you're raised in a world perpetually protected from skinned knees, you tend to be scared of running fast.

"What am I supposed to do, go up to someone at the grocery store and say, 'Oh, you're buying bananas too?' Really?" That's what Jeff, a 32-year-old assistant teacher from Orange County, California—who withheld his last name to protect his privacy—told me when I asked how he'd meet people if he got off the dating apps that he despises. His fear of approaching women in a grocery store isn't just fear of rejection, but of being perceived as creepy or dangerous.

"I've approached women in real life in the past, but I wouldn't do it these days," says Reid, a 42-year-old video editor in Los Angeles who has profiles on OKCupid, Hinge, and Tinder.

[A 2020 Pew Study](#) suggests that the #MeToo effect—the way that reckonings over sexual impropriety influences how normal Americans date and relate—has had an impact on men like Jeff and Reid. Sixty-five percent of Americans believe "It has become harder for men to know how to interact with someone they're on a date with"—let alone someone they're not even on a date with yet.

But according to Jean Twenge, the problem is generational. Twenge is a psychologist at San Diego State University and an expert on what she has termed iGen—those born around 1995. "One thing I was struck by with this generation was how interested they were in safety," she says. Her conclusions are based on the findings from surveys of eleven million of us. She says that many of my generation describe being single as "safer." For women, that might mean curbing the risk of being assaulted or harassed. For men, that might mean worries about being falsely accused of those things, or just accused of being a creep. And there's always the risk of being disappointed or having your heart broken.

Dating apps give users a sense of protection from such risks. They're portals to people you can tailor to your exact specifications, down to height and horoscope. OKCupid has twenty options in addition to "man" and "woman" when it comes to self-selecting your gender—and that's well before you've spelled out your TV preferences or sexual kinks.

But the fruits of this new technology and the freedom it promised don't taste so sweet.

The birthrate in the U.S. is at the lowest it's been in more than a century. From 2008 to 2018, the share of men under 30 who hadn't had sex in the past year nearly tripled, from about ten percent to about [28 percent](#). Marriage has [fallen out of favor](#), with many singles putting it off until their thirties, or else shacking up with a partner and shrugging off the legal part. "We are headed for a birth rate that looks more like Europe and Japan," Twenge says.

"I'm noticing a lot more that women, on their profiles, say they don't want children," says Jeff, the teacher. Other dealbreakers include religion, education level, ethnicity, politics, location, family plans, and substance preferences. "One of my friends decided he doesn't want a relationship, like, ever," adds Jeff. "It ends for him at the hook up." That friend told Jeff that he had a vasectomy at age 25.

Justin Clarke is a 23-year-old virgin living in Brooklyn. He told me he was around 12 when a video suggested by YouTube's algorithm opened the door to Reddit forums like r/ForeverAlone, which colored the next decade of his life. He had a tight knit group of friends, which included girls—but the red pill and incel sites he frequented put him off from dating because they "preached the dangers of being in relationships with women." (Incels—"involuntary celibates"—hate or resent women, and are endlessly envious of the men they see as superior, dubbed "Chads.")

Being on the incel sites felt fun, Justin said, "but in a misogynistic type of way." Now he says he regrets ever logging on in the first place. "I was a kid," he told me. "I didn't know any better."

Justin attended John Jay College of Criminal Justice, in New York, where he says he became jealous of the happy couples he saw walking around. He started jogging, and in November of last year, downloaded Bumble. "It was a disaster," he said. "Most of the women I matched with sent me their OnlyFans profile"—a platform where users can pay to access, among other things, personalized porn.

In the early aughts—those were the days!—online dating was more quaint. There was an endless stack of baseball cards. Now all the good people are in the online version of the owner's box. These are the Special Ones: the most desirable guys that you have to pay or apply to be able to talk to.

Some boutique apps are dedicated exclusively to Special Ones. For the famous, wannabees, and hotties, there's Raya, which will set you back \$7.99 a month. But mainstream apps, where anyone can join at any time, also allow the steerage to meet the upper caste for a fee: "Top Picks" through Tinder Plus (\$9.99) or "Standouts" on Hinge. To gain access to a Hinge Standout, you're required to pay to send them a "Rose", which will set you back about \$3.33 per digital stem.

Special Ones tend to have Ivy League degrees, vague job titles like "co-founder," crisp clothes, and correctly placed tattoos. They have hair. A lot of it. The feeling you get looking at their profile is: "You're welcome." These men are the cream of the data crop, and they make up a tiny percentage of singles. Raya says their acceptance rate is 8%, making it easier to get into than Columbia University, but harder than Cornell.

Then there are guys like Justin or Reid or Jeff. Jeff says that even if he manages to get a match, it doesn't really go anywhere. Frustrated with the lack of response online, he recently paid a matchmaker \$1,000 to set him up, and has gone on one lackluster date so far. "It's not uncommon for me to go days, weeks, or months without talking to anybody online. It makes me feel even more isolated than the pandemic has already made me feel," he says.

Twenge likens the phenomenon to income inequality. "These sites favor a certain type of person, and those are the winners, and everyone else loses."

Even if there's still a lid to every pot, the reality is that some are getting thrown into the discount bin, while others are being marked up and set on the highest shelf. And the discounted ones know who they are. "Everyone says 'Oh, a woman wants a tall guy,'" says Jeff, who is five-foot-four. "But I can't do anything about that. I can't make myself taller. It is what it is."

"I was recently nearly scammed," Justin tells me. A woman started flirting with him on Bumble. "She was saying, 'I want to be with you and spend the rest of my life with you.'" About five weeks in she asked for Justin's bank account information. He said he was skeptical from the beginning, but kept up the flirtation anyway. "I was just so lonely at the time that I really needed someone else to talk to."

Jeff calls the daily slog of swiping the apps and never getting any real results "kind of debilitating." He adds, "It affects my view of myself and how I'm connected to other people."

All of these men expressed interest in a relationship that made them feel both supported and supportive. "A 50/50 split," says Justin, who considers himself a reformed incel.

Over Zoom, I spoke with one man who identifies as an incel. He refused to be identified by his real name for this story, so I'll call him Phillip. Phillip is 26, and he tells me that he works in video game development—from bed, and in his parents' house, which is situated about an hour outside of London. Phillip rarely leaves his room and spends almost all of his time online. He obsesses over the ratios of his face and the proportions of his body and skull, measurements that he thinks determined his undesirability from birth. Recently he's been eating only 1,500 calories per day, attempting to whittle down his proportions to be closer to the so-called optimal ones. He describes the internet as simultaneously a lifeline and a noose.

"Between social media and porn and podcasts and video games, you can live a low quality simulation of what a fulfilling life would be," says Phillip. "You can get social interaction from social media, the feeling of problem solving or being productive from video games, and sexual fulfillment from porn."

In addition to skull and body measurements, Phillip also blames his incel status on porn, which he says he discovered at a young age. About three years ago, when he started falling deeper into incel internet forums, Phillip started needing more extreme content to masturbate to. He says he does it about five times per day.

"I'm assuming these things don't give you as much as a normal life would," he says, "but it stops people from hitting rock bottom. The lowest possible quality of life you can have, with the internet, is still kind of tolerable. It's not absolutely awful. You can sort of exist in that, and there's nothing to give you a kick up the butt because it's not the worst thing."

Phillip downloaded Tinder and paid for a Platinum membership, he says, "just to see what I would get." He set the distance to about 150 miles from his home. He got six matches the first week, two matches the next, and just one match since then. But when it came to meeting up in person, Phillip couldn't bring himself to initiate it. "I chickened out," he said.

Likewise, Shane—the junior at Penn State—says he's had a few female friends who wanted to take things to the next level. "I couldn't let myself get there. I pretended not to notice that they were interested," he said. Justin says the same thing happened to him in high school, where he turned a classmate who had a crush on him down.

According to Twenge, the next few years are a crucial time for Shane. "When they're not 18 anymore, and now they're 24, things start to change a little bit," she says. "They feel like they're being sorted into winners and losers, and they're playing video games in their mom's basement."

Sometime soon—or perhaps it's already happening—there will be a different kind of split. Some men will sink deeper into the online world: they'll take advantage of VR porn, and sex robots, and whatever other dark thrills that tech companies have queued up in the wings. Other men will swear off of it all: they'll get flip phones, and give up porn, and go Biblical.

One social scientist has already [launched a company](#) to arrange marriages for Zoomers; its website says, "We only ask for payment when we find you a spouse." There's also a new [study](#) out of the UK suggesting that Gen Z is more likely to pray than their older counterparts, though there's not clear data on whether traditional sexual mores are coming back with traditional worship.

But here's the thing. Until we settle on whatever the next-gen approach to dating happens to be, whether it's new-fangled or a return to ancient wisdom, we have to deal with the mess we're in now—and with those who have gotten caught on the wrong side of the grand dating experiment of the past ten years.

Last week, I got a text from Justin: "Can I ask you something?" Sure, I replied. "On a personal level do you think the dating scene is so far gone?"

"This shit," he continued—meaning dating, trying to convince someone to like you, to sleep with you, to be your girlfriend, and maybe, longer-term, to make a baby with you—"recently really fucked me up, but I'm hanging in there. I'm starting to go into strongman training that's kept my mind off of it."

He was going offline. "I've deleted all dating apps."