

Dating for Dummies

By Ashley Villarreal, 2008

Note: This article was written and reported for a features seminar I took while in college. It was never published.

After a period of unsuccessful dabbling in online dating, Mamta Popat decided it was time to take a different route. She decided to ask a girl whom she had met, and thought interesting, out on a date. After calling to set one up, they arranged to meet after she got off work.

As the hours dragged on, Popat increasingly expected to hear the returning call from her date to finalize their outing. Suddenly, an all too familiar and sharp beeping sound alerted her she had a text. “Are we still getting together?” it read. “Wait a minute,” she thought, “I made the initial call to you, but you can’t call me back—you have to text me?”

Months earlier this never would have occurred to Popat, who works as a photojournalist at The Arizona Daily Star, but after encouragement from friends to join the Pima County Occasional Daters, it turned her off to respond to this digital screen confirming dates.

“I don’t communicate primarily via text. If you can text me, you can call me,” Kylie Walzak, an innovator of the Pima County Occasional Daters (PCOD), said. “Texting is just another way of chickening out.”

In April, PCOD officially came together with a general list of members –most of whom were fellow friends or graduate students at the University of Arizona. It also drafted a general set of loosely based spoken rules: No texting, no e-mailing date requests, and no chat-flirting. In addition to this, each member must fulfill a one-date-a-month quota.

Walzak, a UA graduate now studying law, became intrigued by the idea of starting PCOD after she and a friend, Mariana Padias, took a trip to visit her brother Colin in San Diego. Over spring break Colin introduced her to his chapter of North County Occasional Daters (NCOD).

NCOD had come together as a result of the twenty-something group of friends “having an equally hard time meeting people,” Walzak said. “That’s when they made the decision to bring dating back.”

When Walzak and Padias returned to the desert, Popat recalled, they spent part of the night at The District Tavern, a local bar on downtown’s Congress Street, bubbling with optimism about starting a similar club in Tucson. “It is such a novel idea to go on a date,” said Padias; a continuing graduate student in the Latin American Studies program and co-creator of PCOD. “I don’t see people getting to know each other on a romantic basis. Most people just try to pretend they’re friends for awhile.”

The thought that people don’t date anymore had been irking Andrea Pope, a UA graduate teaching assistant in the Spanish department. After living abroad in Cuernavaca, Mexico, for a semester she was getting comfortable dating again. With no trouble conjuring dates overseas, back here at home dates seemed almost nonexistent. That’s until PCOD stepped in.

“I think this certain group of people who are members either want to return to having dates they had in the past or want to start having dates their friends had or even that their parents had,” Pope surmised. “There’s just this desire to go on a ‘date’.” While some dates can be more traditional, Padias said, “Everyone’s’ definition of what a date is, is different.”

Admittedly, she said, some people just want to have a “hookup”, while others might want something more serious— but the point of PCOD is that you try harder to put yourself out there,

“It being so flexible is part of the beauty, and its also leaderless,” she said. “Its like anarchy but with dating.”

The idea that traditional dating has long since packed up its bags and gone home is not an altogether new concept. The argument over what stays or goes when it comes to sexual love or romance can often be boundless.

Pope knew this well when she linked a certain story to the blog she created two weeks after joining PCOD, called “Confessions of an Occasional Dater.” The essay, written by Joel Walkowski, a runner-up in “Modern Love: The College Essay Contest,” was part of an experiment conducted just before Valentine’s Day by staff at The New York Times. The idea was to get an aggregate view on what love means to students in the modern age.

Walkowski, a senior at the University of Southern California, addressed a view that is all too familiar to Pope and other PCOD: *“For my generation, friendship often morphs into a sexual encounter and then reverts to friendship the next day. And it’s easy as long as you don’t put yourself on the line or try too hard. Don’t have a prospect? Check Facebook. Afraid to call? Text.”*

Where many singles find no quibbles with going about things this way, PCOD does — a reason it stands in stark contrast to the recent phenomenon of online dating. “I think people are losing their ability to talk to strangers and relate to strangers, and with the more technology we have, the more isolation we have,” said Walzak. “At the same time, I think people think technology replaces that and helps them to come together, but it will never be a replacement for good old-fashioned human contact.”

Although PCOD holds the stance that text messages, e-mail and other electronic communication are inadequate ways of establishing dates, members weren’t always so ready to look for alternatives. Many had their own brushes with the Internet dating world. At the end of her streak, Padias recounted it was, “a lot of footwork for not very much outcome,” and it would still often take days or even weeks to “get up the guts” to actually ask people out. “The chemistry in e-mails can be different,” she said. “It’s easy to be smooth when you’re writing.”

At some point, members will disagree on how each of their experiences as PCOD may turn out, but one thing they all agree on is that asking someone out on a date is an ongoing learning process (and can still sometimes feel like rocket science). “People will be flattered that they were at least interesting enough to go up and talk to, and, a: it will either work out; or b: maybe they’re already dating someone and they will still be flattered,” Popat noted. “It’s very easy to say it and break it down, but when you actually have to go out and do it — it’s a little nerve-raking.”

But often, as is true for much in life, getting out there and forcing yourself to really try is often the only way to achieve real success. Dr. Chris Segrin, a UA professor who specializes in interpersonal relationships and teaches classes in communication and psychology, said specific types of people —especially those with high social anxiety who become comfortable only when in a less pressured online environment—feel this type of dating is a safer way to put themselves out there.

“It also appeals to people looking to get more information from people than they would on a first date right away,” Segrin explained. “Some people don’t want to mess around and this allows them to screen potential dating members.” But Segrin finds the interaction to be troublesome at times. When daters stay in the virtual realm too long, this can create the problem of “reality projection,” he said, which prohibits some people from seeing others as they really are and instead crafting them as they hoped they might be. One thing, Segrin notes, is that it’s a lot easier to tell if someone is lying when the person is in front of you.

Popat said although she knows online dating has had successes for many people she can sympathize with a deceptive experience of her own while scouring one of the now-popular dating sites. “I took this one girl out to sushi and within the first 10 minutes she blurted out ‘I have a son, but I’m not straight and I’m not bi’, and I was like, ‘you should have at least told me that!’.”

But this getting-to-know-people is just what PCOD has started to offer people with less than perfect dating records and, if nothing works out right away, at least a chance to build some self-empowerment. “Fake confidence is just as effective as real confidence,” Padias said. “Dates with real-life people don’t work out sometimes too, but I think there’s more to meeting people in real life.”

And besides allowing for a stronger sense of confidence, Segrin said, the result of meeting someone in person is not only beneficial to a person’s psyche but also altogether necessary. Research shows human beings are hard-wired to interact with other people on a face-to-face basis and are very sensitive to nonverbal communication, said Segrin. “When you’re just chatting over e-mail, it’s like driving a car that’s designed to be a race car, but you’re driving at an idle speed of 10mph in a parking lot.”

When people become used to only having to give the bare minimum in a different setting that might initially feel easier to handle, they fail to equip themselves for problems that might arise in what is “real life.” “It makes a lot of sense to come to a point where people need to just turn off their computers and TVs,” said Segrin.

Although PCOD is a tongue-in-cheek endeavor that members often laugh at, Walzak said, it has ultimately worked for some people. “We have started shifting our paradigms and can say, ‘gosh, if I want something in life I’m empowered to go out and get something!’” she said enthusiastically.

No matter what goals each member sets for themselves as PCOD or what each defines as success in their romantic love-lives, Padias reminds daters, the point of PCOD is to offer just that breadth of freedom. “I can’t stress enough the fact that no matter what it is to different people or what it is to us—it can be whatever you want it to be,” she said. “It’s fairly limitless.”