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## Dating as an Occupation: Swipe Right for Occupational Therapy

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# Dating as an Occupation

## *Swipe Right for Occupational Therapy*



by Karen McCarthy



Occupational therapy can be the perfect resource for clients who want to address the occupation of dating and hone the performance skills involved in achieving their goals in this area.

### Men Seeking Women

**LONELY TRAVELLER**  
66, single male, 5' 9", 160 pounds, divorced 10 years. Searching for single female, 55–68, to travel with. Skilled cook, avid gardener, seeking someone with similar interests. Recently retired airline pilot with too much idle time and wanting to explore the world. Could you be my co-pilot?

### Men Seeking Men

**BATMAN**  
19, single male, 5' 11", athletic build, smoker. Avid comic lover, movie buff, and amateur DJ. Looking for someone to be my date to Comic Con. Nothing too serious or long term. Hope you could be the Robin to my Batman.

### Women Seeking Men

**GIRL NEXT DOOR**  
35, single female, 5' 5", slim build, Christian, mother of two boys. Dog lover, runner, and amazing mom, looking to find "the one." Searching for single male, with or without kids, single/separated/divorced ok, 35–45, living in local county. Looking for long-term relationship. Must be family oriented with strong faith, honest character, and a good sense of humor.

**A**t a first glance, these may look like personal ads you might in the past have found in any newspaper classified section, yet they could be mini occupational profiles that represent your clients. Each profile contains information about the client, their interests and passions, their values, and their goals and dreams for meeting a partner.

Personal ads, once so public for everyone who opened a newspaper to read, have now moved onto the vast and complicated world of online dating. The game has changed, with 15% of adults in the United States reporting they have used online dating sites or mobile dating applications (apps), and with more than 1,000 dating websites and apps, terms like Tinder, Grinder, OkCupid, Plenty of Fish, Bumble, CoffeeMeetsBagel, EHarmony, and JDate can sound like someone is speaking another language (Smith & Anderson, 2016). The occupation of dating has quickly evolved, with modern romance becoming a multibillion dollar industry and a priority occupation for many of our clients.

### Background

According to Ansari and Klinenberg (2015), if you were straight and married before the 1960s, statistically it was most likely you married someone who

lived within five blocks of you, you were age 20 for women and 23 for men, and you met through family or friends. You also more commonly would have had a "companionate marriage," where you married someone more for reasons of "security—financial, social, and personal ... creating conditions that made it possible to survive and reproduce" (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015, p. 22). Modern dating has changed in many ways. Between 2005 and 2012, more than one third of couples who got married in the United States met through online dating sites, which together account for more dating than meeting through work, school, and friends combined. People now frequently meet partners who are potentially much farther away, and the average age of marriage has increased to 27 for women and 29 for men.

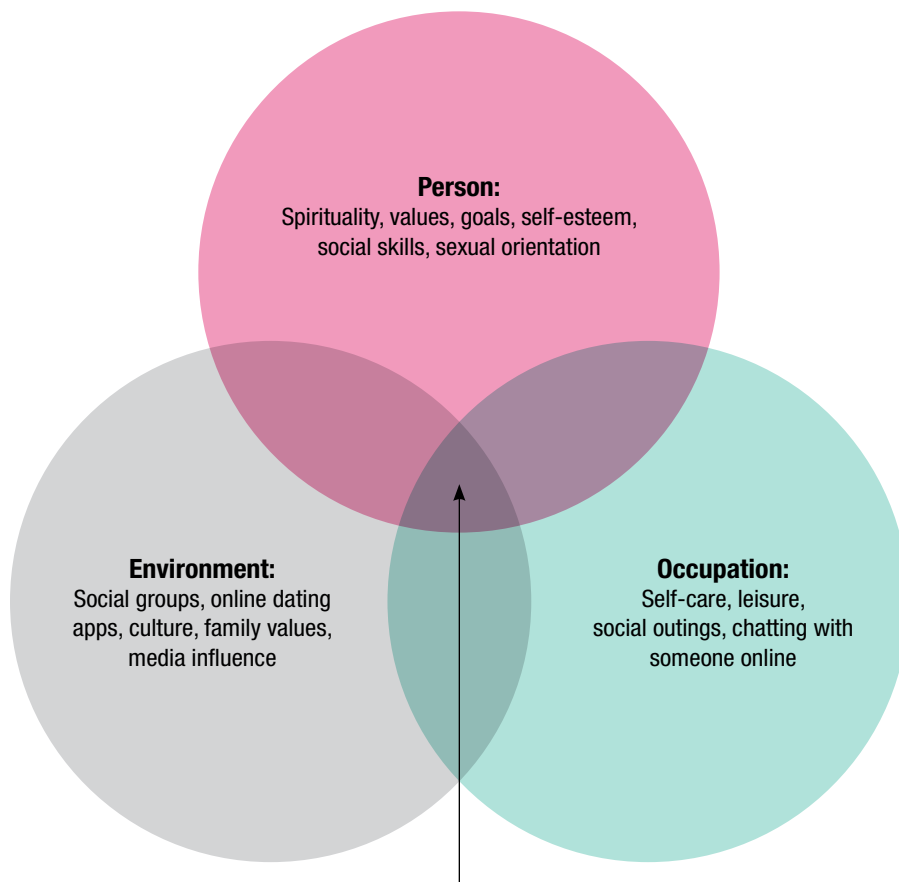
Options for those who self-identify outside the previously traditional heterosexual norm (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) have also been embraced more by popular culture and media.

Modern dating has evolved into a personal journey to find a soulmate who could live anywhere in the world and be any gender or sexual orientation, and there are millions of singles at one's fingertips to browse through, then after "swiping right," to message instantly (assuming it's a match).

Yet with increased choice and freedom, modern dating requires more skills than ever before to create a good match. Occupational therapy can be the perfect resource for clients who want to address the occupation of dating and hone the performance skills involved in achieving their goals in this area.

### Role of OT

Occupational therapy has a key role to play in addressing sexuality. Sexual activity is listed in the *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process* (3rd ed.; American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2014) under the occupations of ADLs and social participation. Sexuality has an "inherently occupational dimension, which can be expressed through a variety of meaningful occupations, such as dating, grooming, or having sex" (Sakellariou & Algado, 2006, p. 352). Dating involves performance skills, such as social interaction, and encompasses client factors, such as one's values, beliefs, and spirituality (AOTA, 2014). Despite research indicating the importance of addressing sexuality (Northcott & Chard, 2000; White, Rintala, Hart, Young, & Fuhrer, 1992), it is sometimes ignored in occupational therapy (Sakellariou & Algado, 2006). Occupational therapists are advised to use a PLISSIT Model as an approach to working with clients regarding sexual activity, which



**Figure 1. Occupational performance**

involves seeking P: permission from the client, LI: limited information provided by the therapist, SS: specific suggestions from the therapist, and IT: intensive therapy (Annon, 1976; Hattjar, 2017). Although helpful in some settings, this model fails to capture the myriad occupations outside of sexual activity that occupational therapy can provide intervention for, going beyond merely providing limited education or giving specific suggestions. If your client wants to participate in the occupation of dating, more intensive therapy might be needed. Ignoring this goal area as an occupation would not only constitute a failure to be holistic in practice, but it would also fail to be client centered.

## My Story

In my clinical career, I have addressed the occupation of dating in multiple practice areas, including older adults in the community, adults in mental health outpatient settings, college students who have registered as having disabilities, and private practice with a wellness population. It all started when I was an Occupational Therapist in the University

of Southern California Well Elderly Study II, and one senior man wanted to start meeting new partners. Together we created a SeniorMatch.com dating profile.

I then started working with women who were survivors of domestic violence, in a community mental health setting. These women wanted to start new relationships but were understandably anxious about doing so. I facilitated a group on healthy relationships, with these women creating vision boards for the type of relationship they wanted and sharing ideas on how to meet new people.

When I worked with college students, some were dating for the first time and were unsure about how to start conversations. We explored joining new campus clubs and leisure occupations to meet people. As I grew in my experience as an Occupational Therapist, I realized that dating and sexuality weren't just fringe topics; rather, they were central to many of my clients' life goals and sense of well-being. I determined there was a market for dating coaching, and I created a private practice coaching individuals around the occupation of dating.

## The OT Process

Whether you want to specialize in dating coaching or just address dating in your existing occupational therapy practice, you have to start with learning more about your client as a sexual being. Start with your initial evaluation: Do you ask questions about sexuality or sexual activity when you begin to work with a client? You might add in some open-ended questions that briefly determine whether this is an area they would like to work on and, if it is, you might follow up with more detailed questions about this area.

Initial questions might include: "Are you romantically involved with anyone or looking to be?" "Could you tell me a bit about any sexual activities you participate in that you find important?" Or my favorite: "How's your love life?"

Depending on the client's response, you might delve deeper into various client factors, such as their values, beliefs, and spirituality (AOTA, 2014).

Follow-up prompts might include:

- Tell me about a relationship you admire and why.
- What is your dating and/or relationship history?
- Tell me about your beliefs toward love and relationships.
- What type of dating strategies have you tried (e.g., going to bars, online dating, matchmaking, speed dating, self-help books, blind dates, set up by friends)? What did or didn't you like about each type of strategy?
- What social activities do you engage in? Are you a member of any groups or organizations? What are your favorite leisure interests?
- What do you want when it comes to dating or relationships? What do you think prevents you from reaching this goal? What strengths do you have to help you reach this goal?

## Theoretical Foundation

The Person-Environment-Occupation Model (PEO; Law, Baptiste, & Mills, 1996) can be a helpful guide when working with any client. The PEO model details the "transactive, dynamic relationships that occur when people engage in occupations within given environments over time" (Strong & Gruhl, 2011, p. 33). Occupational performance can be seen as the result of this dynamic interaction and "refers to



the ability to choose, organize, and satisfactorily perform meaningful occupations that are culturally defined and age appropriate" (Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, 1997, p. 30).

Figure 1 on page 14 details examples of how PEO can be used when working with a client on their dating occupations.

## Occupational Performance

When designing an intervention around dating, you will want to look at your client's occupations, strengths and skills, and environments. Your intervention should strive to be collaborative, client centered, and occupation based.

Because dating involves two people and the outcomes of their experience are outside your control, it would be best to help your client set action-based goals: "I will create an online profile this month," instead of "I will have a boyfriend in 1 month."

## Ideas for Dating Interventions

### Create an online profile with your client:

Have them make a list of what they would like to highlight about themselves and help them create a story that accentuates who they are and what they are looking for in a partner. Browse sample online profiles to see what they like and dislike about them.

**Have a photoshoot:** Brainstorm with your client about what type of pictures they would like to have in an online profile, highlighting some of their favorite interests and occupations. Browse old photos or take some new ones! I once had a session where I had my client bring a few changes of clothes and we went around town taking pictures at a coffee shop, outside the opera house, and at a history museum, all in line with his favorite occupations.

**Go on a mock date:** Practice role-playing conversation in a session and then take it out into the real world. Maybe meet at a coffee shop and practice social skills, getting their reflections after and giving feedback. Or have multiple clients create their own speed dating event.

**Google it:** Browse online social groups to join to expand their opportunities to meet people. Meetup.com can

be a great way to join groups based on activities ... how OT is that?!

**Living life to its fullest:** One way for your client to meet people is to live a life true to their interests and passions. Assist your client in determining what they are passionate about or even just curious about, and how to incorporate this into their life. Are there new or old hobbies to take up? Are they trying new things and taking healthy risks? Do they engage in activities that are social or related to their interests? By redesigning their life to include occupations that are meaningful and healthy, they become more engaged. This not only provides interesting stories to share in conversation, but it can also make them more satisfied and confident, while creating more opportunities to meet new people. As much as you can, discover ways with your client to include these interests in their dates. Instead of a typical coffee date, can your client suggest a bike ride, a cooking or painting class, or trying a rock climbing wall? Engaging in a meaningful occupation while doing something with the "just-right" challenge for both people can spark attraction.

## Conclusion

AOTA's *Vision 2025* urges practitioners to provide, among other things, "culturally responsive and customized services" (AOTA, 2017). To continue to fulfill this vision, occupational therapy practitioners must respond to how society and occupations are changing and evolving, including dating, which is an important occupation for many people and cannot be ignored in occupational therapy practice. 🍀

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## For More Information



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