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Getting to know each other on the first date

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More than wearing the right perfume or choosing the right outfit or even picking the perfect restaurant, the first date is a time to discover the fine line between conversing and listening.

"You can't approach it as 'tonight, I'm going to meet my soul mate,' says Brian Vonderbrink, 34, "I just think that most people have lost the art of communication."

The primary purpose of the initial date in a relationship is to create a connection author Nina Atwood says in her book, "Date Lines" (Henry Holt and Co.; \$9.95). "Secondarily, it is to get to know someone, explore the possibility of a friendship or romance and to practice relationship skills."

Who pays?

Here's a real test for the good impressions of a first date: Who picks up the check? According to a survey by online dating service Metrodate.com, 44.2 percent say the man should pay, 23.2 percent say it should be paid by whoever initiated the date and 17.1 percent say the man should pay, but the woman should at least offer to pay the bill.

On this subject, the singles have a lot of different views.

"I think a good impression for a first date is for the man to pay," says Vonderbrink, of Cincinnati. "But, at the same time, if a woman feels uncomfortable with that, she can buy me dinner anytime."

Sarah Hawkins, 30, also of Cincinnati, says it depends on who asked whom for a date.

"I think whoever asks for a date should graciously pay for that date," says Hawkins. "Whenever I ask a guy out, I pay. I know he's a good person, and a good man, if on the second date he whips out his wallet before I even have a chance to see the bill.

"My best friends and I take turns treating each other to small things — movies, a lunch or dinner," she says. "It's fun, rewarding and completely reciprocated. Dating should be the same way."

Marta Trujillo, 25, agrees but says "if this first date is a 'set-up' by a mutual friend, then it would be appropriate to go dutch."

An important thing to remember about first dates: If there's not a connection, you've still had the experience of meeting someone new.

As Trujillo says, "If you have no luck with a mate, then you can at least meet a new friend."

Dating tips

Dos and don't on the first date

Conversation guidelines:

- Keep the talk fairly light.
- Listen more than you speak.
- Use questions sparingly.
- Avoid analyzing and judging as you listen.

Good topics:

- The essence of who you are.
- People and events that have given you inspiration.
- Your background.
- Your hobbies, interests, what you love to do when you're not working and why you love to do those things.
- Current positive events in your life and what excites you about them.
- Your hopes and dreams for the future.
- What kind of relationship you're looking for.
- What you've learned from your relationships without being negative about your partners.
- How you've benefited from knowing your past partners without gushing about them, even if you had a negative experience in the relationship.
- How many times you've been married; give just an overview why it didn't work and talk a little about what you've done to understand your marital failures.

Topics to avoid:

- Negative talk about your former lovers or spouses.
- Sweeping negative generalizations about the opposite gender.
- Villainous past partners.
- Intimate details of your sex life.
- A gushing report on a former partner's good qualities.
- Complaints (your boss, your children, your health problems, your circumstances.)
- Intimate details of your therapy, your 12-step program.
- Religious experiences.
- Your success, wealth or connections with influential people.

Source: "Date Lines" by Nina Atwood (Henry Holt and Co., \$9.95)

Common mistakes on the first date

Made by women

- Appearing desperate to get married or to be in a relationship.
- Expressing negativity about yourself.
- Talking excessively.
- Being controlling or argumentative.
- Looking for a "father figure" to take care of you.
- Discussing psychological, medical or personal problems.
- Not paying attention to your date.
- Dressing in too sexy a manner, or not sexily enough.
- Having an "attitude."
- Being too flirtatious.
- Grilling your date on his intimate past or his financial status.
- Using sex or the promise of sex to control the relationship.

- Expressing very possessive or needy feelings.
- Failing to recognize the difference between a “fantasy land” date and a real date.
- Talking about previous dates.
- Having sex on the first date.

Made by men

- Expecting your date to have sex with you on the first date.
- Staring at your date’s body parts.
- Expecting your date to fall in love with you immediately.
- Talking endlessly about sports, cars and electronics.
- Being selfish or cheap.
- Ignoring your date while checking out other women.
- Talking about previous girlfriends.
- Looking for a “mother figure” to take care of you.
- Exaggerating your good points to impress your date or get her into bed.
- Trying to control the date.
- Wearing inappropriate clothes.
- Having preconceived expectations about your partner and about how this date will go.
- Taking yourself too seriously ... and not taking your date seriously enough.
- Poor hygiene.
- Treating your date like a “buddy.”
- Not watching your manners.

Source: “The Date Doctor’s Guide to Dating” by Bart Ellis (Warner Books; \$6.50).

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