

The Shreveport Times

Archive News Story, published on Monday 2/12/2001.

Section: **Living**

Sometimes our ideas of the 'dream mate' are unrealistic

by Monica Carter

Dating can be a dream or a nightmare, depending on who is going out with whom. Some people meet their life mates right off with little effort and without looking.

Others search endlessly but always come up short. They spend their time with people they don't even like, sticking it out and hoping maybe something will change.

And with Valentine's Day -- the universal day for lovers -- only two days away, thoughts of romantic entanglements are natural. We assess our relationships, whether we're in long-term arrangements or in between flings.

If you find yourself always in a dead-end relationship, you've got to look at why that happens. Answers aren't always clear-cut because dating habits are complex, said Shreveport counselor James Childs, who helps people deal with personal, marital and sexual problems. Some people habitually date the wrong people on purpose, he said.

"People sabotage themselves and sabotage relationships over and over. In my view, it is to prevent intimacy."

That can happen when people have had traumatic events happen to them and they want to keep up barriers, Childs said. So they end up in miserable relationships over and over again.

Others choose dead-end circumstances because they are unsure of what they want, said Dallas-based relationship therapist Nina Atwood, author of *Be Your Own Dating Service*.

"One of the issues is choosing someone who is not emotionally available for a committed relationship," she said. "The person may treat you very well but is not available to be all the way in the relationship."

She has a name for that. "The person may be very attracted to you, but because of circumstances in their life, they don't want to make a commitment. That person is the dance-away lover. When they think you're going to leave, they are drawn back. But as soon as you get close to them, they pull away."

Juanelle Bradford, 24, is enjoying her single status. But she's been seeing a guy she

knows isn't ready to commit. "He came out of a bad relationship and wasn't ready to get into another," she said. "I knew it, but he didn't realize it. But when we got ready to get together, he backed down. Now I just keep my distance. I'm giving him his space."

James Tanner, 20, is seeing someone but stops shy of calling her his girlfriend. Furthermore, he doesn't know if he'll ever be able to do so -- he is unsure if they'll become an "official" couple because he doesn't know if her family would approve of the liaison.

Some people date mates they know from the onset are not right for them, Childs said.

Tanner has been in that position. "Tall girls intimidate me," he said. "There was this tall girl who kept pressuring me to ask her out. I did. But whenever I was around her, I was uncomfortable. We were together for a while even though I knew it wasn't right."

It took Bossier Parish Community College student Amanda Virgadamo, 18, a while to figure out her man wasn't *the* man. "I thought he was the right one. But I started to get to know him, and his personality kept getting worse."

She wanted someone she could talk to. Communicating with him was exasperating. She wanted someone who trusted her. Her guy was always suspicious of her moves. She wasn't ready to let it go, though. "I tried to stick it out and see if he would change. But he didn't. I left after a year."

Bartender Ivan de los Reyes, owner of Ivan's Pub in Shreveport, said people often hook up with different expectations. When that happens, he said, it's little wonder the matches don't work.

"You hear all these women talking about marriage material and what have you," he said. "You hear these guys talking about one-night stands. When you get those people together, you're not going to find lasting relationships."

But it's not only singles who find themselves searching but not finding, Childs said. Many couples divorce because the mates change or one realizes the other is not what he or she appeared to be.

"I joke that marriage is an institution which, in theory, won't work," Childs said. "The fact of the matter is that 54 percent of first marriages end in divorce. And, progressively, each marriage thereafter tends to increase in likelihood of divorce."

Finding a relationship you are happy in must start with oneself, Atwood said. "All roads lead back to the same place," she said. "Learn to love yourself better. Some people are lucky enough to grow up in homes where they are surrounded by love. For that person to love themselves is easy.

"It's like breathing," she said. "But for a lot of people, learning to love your self as an adult is a difficult task."

She said too some people go into dating with the wrong idea.

"The purpose of dating is to discover whether or not someone could be the right partner for you," said Atwood, who gives advice on her Web site www.singlescoach.com "Some people think dating is for diving in -- boom, you jump in. But you've got to have some

structure to your dating. Not everyone you date is going to be 'the one.' The person could turn into a friend or a business contact. You should think of it that way."

Joe Green, 27, found his mate when he wasn't really looking for the serious thing. He met her after dating what he calls "the looney bins."

"She was friends with my cousin," he said. "We started hanging out -- I was like, 'I'm not doing anything else, so why not?'" They've been together about three years now. He realized she could possibly be "the one" about a year ago.

Green said he is happy with his relationship, but knows dating can be hard, especially when you're not finding what you think you want. "You invest a lot of money in certain people and you get no return," he said.

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