



RELATING

Murky mixed signals of modern dating

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Stacey Shelton has been on some questionable dates recently. A few months ago, she and a male friend of hers began instant messaging and chatting on the phone. Afraid to jinx a budding romance, she referred to him as "boy" to her friends. But his behavior was unpredictable. He'd call her every day one week, then not at all the next.

"I'm not one of those girls who thinks every guy is interested in her, but I could tell that there was interest there," added the 26-year-old from Alexandria, Va. The two never went on what she would term an "official" date.

Earlier this year, another man who seemed like he was interested in Shelton invited her to a concert. She thought it was a date. When she got there, she found out he had brought another woman along, a woman who is now his girlfriend.

Welcome to modern dating. Between the tendency of singles to hang out in groups of friends, to the mixed signals between co-workers who spend a lot of time together, to the frequency of hook-ups, it's hard to tell exactly what makes a date anymore.

"It is truly confusing in today's world," said Nina Atwood, a relationship coach based in Dallas and the author of "Soul Talk: Powerful Positive Communication For A Loving Partnership." She defines a date as a "structured event for two people for the purpose of exploring the possibility of a romantic relationship."

While there are no hard-and-fast rules, women still prefer to be asked out and men still prefer to do the asking, Atwood said. "If the woman is smart, she'll ask once and sit back and see what he does next," Atwood said. "If he does nothing, the message is clear: He's not that interested. The [woman needs] to just move on and look for a guy who wants to put his heart into it."

Society's changing rules have made the dating game more complicated but there are still some factors that can pretty clearly indicate it's a date. It's usually a date regardless of whether the woman or man asks the other person out. It's also typically a date if a couple goes out and splits the bill, although whoever asks for the date should offer and expect to pay, Atwood said.

And for many people, even something as casual as getting together for coffee can be considered a date.

Planning ahead is another sign that it's a date. "It says, if you want a date with me, fill in my dance card," Atwood said, adding that making arrangements ahead is evidence of the ability to form a commitment.

But, of course, there are many examples of what's not a date. Toni Coleman, a relationship coach in McLean, Va., who runs www.consum-mate.com, defines "hooking up" as getting together for sex without a formal date; "friends with benefits," when friends have sex but aren't dating; and "booty call," when one person asks another to come over for sex.

But "very often, one of the people is falling for the other person," Coleman added. "It's hard to be involved without having feelings."

Casey Hanewall, a 30-year-old living in Syracuse, N.Y., defined a non-date as a date that for some specific reason--such as geography or the fact that one or both people are already involved with someone else --precludes two people from being involved in a relationship.

Atwood advises singles to think of friendship and romance as two different ladders. People can't just jump from one to the other, but need to go down the first before they go up the second, she said. And friends need to have an honest conversation about what they'll do if dating doesn't work out.

"Never date just to have something to do," Atwood said. "There's too much at stake."

As for "boy," Shelton has decided that he's not dating material. "I've decided to be friends with this guy because he doesn't know what he wants," she said. "If it was going to happen, it would have [happened] by now."