

# Are 36 questions enough to find the love of your life?

Give or take a month either side, I've been single for three years. One thousand and ninety five days of doing whatever I damn well please and shaving only when common decency demands it. If my relationship status were a child, it would be wearing big boy pants by now.

It's not for want of trying. There have been Tinder dates – many, many Tinder dates – some good, some bad, some as interminable as double maths on a Friday afternoon. There have been colleagues. Friends of friends. Holiday romances. The guy I met at a house party. The guy I met at a bar. The guy I met at a bus stop. As it turns out, how you meet is really neither here nor there; they all ghost you in the end.

So when an email dropped into my inbox, inviting me to participate in a “social experiment” that promised true love in return for divulging some highly personal information to a complete stranger before gazing into his eyes for the duration of your average pop song, I thought: *What do I have to lose?*

The experiment would be based on a [study](#) conducted by Arthur Aron, a professor of psychology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, which explored whether intimacy could be established between two people over a period of 90 minutes during which they ask each other a series of increasingly probing questions, then wash it all down with a pint of 100% proof eye contact. The study is some 20 years old but came to prominence in 2015 via an essay written by Mandy Len Catron for *The New York Times*' Modern Love column, entitled “[To Fall In Love With Anyone, Do This](#)”. In the essay, Catron recounts how she and a loose acquaintance spent an evening asking one another those same questions – and subsequently fell in love.

Despite Catron's endorsement, I'm sceptical. Perhaps it's that very British fear of discussing anything of any consequence with someone you've known inside of five minutes but I find it difficult to believe that enforced (over)sharing can be a substitute for those first tentative weeks of a relationship, where you delicately brush away each other's layers of self-preservation like archaeologists on a dig. Nor can I silence

the inner voice that whispers, *What if they pair you with someone awful?* At most, I hope to come away from the evening with a hilarious anecdote and my dignity intact.



The day of the experiment rolls around and after checking in ("Just like at the airport!" trills the host, somewhat unromantically) I grab a large glass of wine and hover awkwardly in a corner, awaiting kickoff. A half-hour wait stretches into an hour, by which point the bar is littered with single people staring at their phones while simultaneously scanning the room out of the corners of their eyes.

It's time to begin. We line up and everyone is given a number – mine is 42 – and instructed to find the table with the corresponding number, where their partner will be waiting. (I should mention here that the only information I provided on signing up was my age, sexual orientation, and what I was looking for romantically – a casual fling, dating, a long-term relationship.) Bracing myself, I stride confidently into the room. The man sitting at my table is – thank you Jesus – really rather handsome. We shake hands, introduce ourselves and get down to business.

There are 36 questions, divided into three sets, each set designed to be more probing than the last. [The questions are available online](#) but I resist the temptation to look them up in advance.


Question one: Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest? I hate this question. I want

to say my friends but I'm pretty sure that's not allowed so I find myself embarking on a tortuous (and, frankly, unoriginal) argument that you should never meet your heroes so the wise choice would be to invite someone you detest and before I know it, Katie Hopkins is coming round for Sunday lunch. My partner (let's call him Mr X) looks confused. This has not started well.

Question three: Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? "Yes, all the time, because I'm deeply socially awkward and find silence over the phone even more excruciating than silence IRL." Question seven: Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die? "Sleep paralysis. Or a sinkhole." Question 11: Take four minutes and tell your partner your life story in as much detail as possible.

In her aforementioned essay, Catron makes this remark: "We all have a narrative of ourselves that we offer up to strangers and acquaintances, but Dr. Aron's questions make it impossible to rely on that narrative." I beg to differ. Mr X answers this question first and, when it reaches my turn, I follow his lead and talk about my upbringing, school, my parents' divorce, university, travelling and work. I leave out anything to do with previous relationships. For the first time in the evening, I am editing my response, revising and redacting before I speak. This is where Mr X and I discover we have a surprising amount in common: we went to the same university, we both spent a year in France, we have a similar family dynamic. But I can't help feeling that I haven't been entirely honest. Then again, Mr X didn't mention his romantic history either.

We're into the second set now and it's getting rocky. A precedent has been set and from this point on my answers veer from astonishingly frank to not-telling-the-whole-story. Question 18: What is your most terrible memory?

A close-up, slightly out-of-focus shot of a hand reaching upwards with fingers spread, set against a clear blue sky. The hand is positioned centrally, with the fingers pointing towards the top of the frame. Overlaid on this image is a quote in a white, serif font.

“When did you last  
cry in front of  
another person?”

By the time we turn the corner into the final 12 questions, I've had three glasses of wine and am feeling chuffed with how this whole social experiment is going. For question 30, we have to share when we last cried in front of another person. I answer honestly that it was at the cinema with a close friend, although, again, I can't help feeling that a truer answer would have been, "In front of a guy I met on Tinder last year; I was a little bit in love with him but all he wanted from me was sex."

And so we come to the four minutes of eye contact. I'm ashamed to say that Mr X and I agree we don't want to do it, which technically means we don't complete the experiment. By this point, though, Mr X has moved his chair to sit beside me and we've swapped numbers.

*Fall In Love With A Stranger took place at Hoxton Square Bar and Kitchen.*