

Lovers in lockdown: How dating services want to keep us all swiping

Social distancing has hit dating scenes around the world hard. Tinder, OkCupid and other dating platforms are nevertheless doing their best to help love find a way. Has the pandemic hit pause on real-world dating – or just brought it online for a while?

“We don’t know who needs to hear this, but now is NOT the time to go out with your date to a bar. FaceTime, Skype, call, text, call, message on our app...all very romantic right now.”

Life has suddenly changed for us all and things are no different on the dating scene, as evidenced by numerous insights provided by digital dating app OkCupid on Twitter.

“A cool thing about our app is that you can social distance yourself AND flirt at the same time,” the company says, touting their service in spite of widespread lockdowns getting in the way of actual dates.

Countries worldwide are pushing people to keep their physical distance, but that doesn’t mean you can’t connect in other ways. That’s the word from digital dating apps that want to make sure that you keep on swiping, even if you might not be dating.

In practice, this means dating services trying to find ways to help keep apps alive indoors by shaping their services in line

with the times.

Tinder is telling users that just because they are isolating physically, that doesn't mean they have to stay home alone with their hoarded instant noodles. Instead, Tinder wants you to seek "solidarity matches" across the planet, a paid function that is now free of charge during the pandemic.

Tinder's "passport" feature allows users to connect with anyone anywhere. "They can check in on folks in their hometown, college town, or sister city, and find those across the world who are going through similar things," the company says.

The feature is available for free to all members in April, Tinder said, despite usually being reserved for premium users.

OkCupid is also encouraging its users to change their preferences to "anywhere" to help them meet up with singles in their country or around the world during this social distancing period, a company representative told dpa.

Bumble, a women's dating app developed in Berlin, meanwhile suggests users chat in the app for longer than usual, rather than linking up right away offline.

"Right now, we're committed to powering safe & equal *virtual* connections. That means staying safe – and, as much as possible, staying home (video chat is our new best friend!)," Bumble told its users.

Dating apps have also begun to issue more health guidance, too, and Tinder told dpa that it has been asking members to follow the recommendations of the World Health Organization.

"While we want you to continue having fun, protecting yourself from the coronavirus is more important," the site told in-app users, according to a report in TMZ, a digital news site. Tinder users should practice social distancing, carry hand

sanitiser and wash their hands frequently, Tinder says.

The dating app providers say their efforts are working. “In this challenging time, we see Tinder members finding new ways to connect. As an area becomes more affected by physically-isolating measures, we see new conversations happening there and those conversations last longer,” the company said in a statement.

“This epidemic is also changing the tenor of connection in the hardest hit places. More people are using Tinder bios to show their concern for others (‘how is everyone’) instead of their life motto,” Tinder added.

OkCupid’s chief executive Ariel Charytan said the company had noticed that activity had increased enormously using the app as people still wanted to meet and exchange, even if they couldn’t do so in person.

The platform is now sharing ideas for digital dating with its users, suggesting they meet for virtual drinks and dinners, play games or chat online.

And Maria Sullivan, vice president of Dating.com, found that 82% of the site’s singles turned to online dating during the coronavirus outbreak, according to a story in Bustle, a web site for women.

Other stories on its site advised users on how to hook up during Zoom meetings, for example, or the ins and outs of a digital one-night stand.

Has the virus taken love online at least for the time being? The hashtag #quarantineandchill trending on Twitter suggests it has, as users post songs, selfies and images of what they are doing.

For those with a free moment as they isolate and chill, here’s a question posted by OkCupid: “We need a new term for a long

distance relationship that's actually just someone quarantined in another apartment. Any ideas?"

Tal Rimon, a videographer based in Berlin, says in some ways, quarantine is helping dating.

"People are lonely right now. Everybody's online," she told dpa. "And people are talking for longer, it's like 15 years ago, they are taking the time to get to know each other."

In the past, she said, people used to just swipe out of boredom while they were doing other things, but now they are able to connect and find out more about each other before meeting up. "It's not just about looks anymore."

Other lovers are forging their own paths through the new landscape, combining digital connections with creative measures to meet.

"My friend is going on a first date tonight with a girl he's been talking to on Tinder," Dave Horwitz, an LA-based writer, shared on Twitter late in March.

"They're going to park next to each other at McDonald's and talk with the windows cracked while eating their own individual orders of fries. How's that for romance and longing, Jane Austin?" – dpa