

relate
the relationship people



Men's Heads and Hearts

A male perspective on dating
and relationships in the UK today



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Foreword

Aidan Jones

Relate CEO



“ As we emerge from what has been an extraordinary 18 months, we wanted to explore specifically how men are feeling about dating and relationships. From previous research¹ and from our own experiences supporting couples and individuals with their relationships and wellbeing, we know that men often find it harder than women to ask for and seek help.

We also know that gender stereotypes still exist within our society and we wanted to investigate whether this continues to affect views when it comes to dating and also within roles in relationships.

Our findings are varied and interesting. 60% of single men surveyed have felt insecure when dating with the fear of rejection being a main contributing factor. And our poll found that almost one in four men think that the #MeToo movement has had an impact on their approach to dating.

One in five men state that they feel comfortable showing their vulnerability in a romantic relationship. It feels that a step-change here is needed especially as one in seven men report to be currently suffering from poor mental health² but only one in ten men surveyed would consider counselling as an option.

We know from our previous research³ that men often feel able to talk more openly where there's a certain degree of anonymity. When the pandemic hit we adapted how we operate – quickly moving all of our relationship support services online.

Our phone counselling, WebChat and Message a Counsellor services are therefore options which men may wish to give particular consideration to. Webcam counselling also has the benefit of being convenient and anecdotally our counsellors tell us clients have been quicker to open up about their feelings when in the comfort of their own home.

If you're affected by any of the issues raised in this report, please see the final page for a list of services and resources available. We'd like to thank eharmony for making this research possible. ”

"From previous research and from our own experiences supporting couples and individuals with their relationships and wellbeing, we know that men often find it harder than women to ask for and seek help."

1 <https://www.relate.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication-see-it-my-way-2013.pdf>

2 This finding combines respondents who said 'very poor' and 'poor'.

3 <https://www.relate.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication-see-it-my-way-2013.pdf>

Foreword

Romain Bertrand

UK Managing Director, eharmony



“ The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the very fabric of our society and the way we interact with family, friends and potential love interests. The dating scene has seen a monumental shift – in particular – with video and virtual dating mitigating feelings of disconnect.

And though our methods of communication may have changed, the complexities of dating remain. Our report, examining the way in which men date, has shone a spotlight on some endemic issues they face, notably feeling insecure when it comes to finding love.

It would be implausible to say with absolute certainty where these insecurities are rooted, due to the dynamism of every individual, but our research gives us valuable insight.

Interestingly, the research we’ve uncovered with Relate suggests men and women share many of the same commonalities when it comes to their romantic insecurities. Men confess they struggle with a fear of rejection and worries about their appearance, which echoes what our female users have been telling us for years.

But where the genders potentially diverge is around their attitudes to modern dating etiquette. For instance, according to our report, many men have felt the impact of the #MeToo movement, with the onus inevitably on them to anticipate appropriate romantic conduct, including more subtle behavioural cues such as who should initially pay the bill. Whereas, for women, this is hopefully a relatively more empowering era.

There are indications that discussing their mental health is becoming less stigmatised for men, with around a fifth saying they could talk openly to their partner about such issues.

This openness in communication is core to both those in relationships, and those searching for love. Real love isn’t neat or tidy, there are problems and challenges to face. Which is why highly compatible couples fare better, because they usually share the right conflict resolution skills.

Above all, as experts in dating, we know that clear communication helps intimacy flourish, and eharmony’s unique Compatibility Matching System is designed with this in mind. Connecting singles who will feel confident enough to open up to one another about their insecurities is fertile territory for a secure and loving partnership.

We’d like to thank Relate for their invaluable access to working practice counsellors who made this research all the more authentic.

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Methodology

Relate and eharmony conducted a focus group with four practising Relate counsellors to understand the challenges men face when dating. They also spoke to a small selection of men and some quotes are included in the report.

Censuswide conducted supplementary UK research in September 2021, among a nationally representative sample of 2,009 UK consumers. This was then boosted to include 1,031 single respondents, and 201 respondents in Northern Ireland for a total of 2,531 respondents surveyed.

This report focuses predominantly on exploring men's attitudes to dating, relationships and their mental health and wellbeing.

The report does not cover the needs of specific groups of men nor does it look at differences in responses from men of different ethnicities nor those from differing income brackets (although men from all communities took part in the research).

We briefly cover responses from males from the LGBTQ+ community⁴ where the poll size was large enough to share a specific response for this group. For the purposes of this report the term 'men' and 'male' are used for all individuals who have self-identified as such.

Why is this report focusing predominantly on men and those identifying as male?

We know from previous research undertaken by Relate and the Men's Health Forum that men are less likely to seek help, both with health and wellbeing problems and with their relationships.⁵

We want to explore how men are really feeling in 2021. We want to unpack the realities of dating as a modern man and ask men in relationships what's important to them. Also we want to understand how men are feeling about their mental health and their openness to seeking support such as counselling as we emerge from what has been a challenging time for us all. By shining a light on how men are actually feeling, we hope to challenge some of the gender stereotypes still prevalent in today's society and at the same time continue to raise the importance of seeking help and support.

⁴ This includes men self-identifying as gay, bisexual, asexual or other.

⁵ <https://www.relate.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication-see-it-my-way-2013.pdf>

Dating – what men are looking for in a partner

With gender stereotypes often shaping expectations as to what men and women are looking for in a partner, we wanted to explore the reality of what men are actually seeking when it comes to dating.

Our research shows one in four single, male respondents are looking for companionship from their romantic life, with one in five looking to find real love. Just over one in ten of this same group (11%) said that they were looking for no strings sex and over one in five were looking for someone to share their hobbies and interests with (22%). This response was supported by what Relate is seeing in its counselling sessions:

“Men are traditionally thought of as seeking sex, not relationships. I think this is changing and I’m seeing more men looking for relationships but some aren’t sure how to go about making it happen.”

– Peter Saddington, Relate Counsellor

When asked what qualities are considered to be the most important in a romantic

partner, the top three responses from men were honesty (47%), being trustworthy (47%) and having a good sense of humour (42%).

“The pandemic massively decreased social contact and so at the moment it feels like we are making up for lost time. It’s great to be able to go on dates again and meet like-minded individuals.”

– Single male

22%

of men were looking for someone to share their hobbies and interests with



Men feeling insecure when dating

Women are often thought of as feeling insecure when it comes to dating and our poll confirmed this with 78% of the single women we questioned agreeing that they had felt insecure when dating new people. What is perhaps more surprising is that 60% of single men surveyed have also felt insecure when dating new people.⁶

When we looked into this further we found that a fear of being rejected (27%) was the main contributing factor, closely followed by their age (24%) and their overall appearance (24%).

“As counsellors we often see that men have the same concerns and insecurities around dating as women do but sometimes they find it harder to admit. Whilst almost two thirds of men surveyed admit to feeling insecure, I wonder if this number is actually even higher but that some men are still struggling to be honest because of real or perceived expectations placed on them.”

– Gurpreet Singh, Relate Counsellor

The perceived importance of appearance when it comes to dating certainly seems to

be on the rise. Mind’s recent *Get it off your chest* report found that the number of men who are worried about their appearance has increased from 18% in 2009 to 23% in 2019, with worries being the greatest amongst 18-24 year old males at 39%.⁷

Our research supports these concerns – 12% of single men surveyed feel that they don’t have the ‘Love Island’ aesthetic which is popular right now and that this is contributing to feelings of insecurity. This is further backed up by the finding mentioned earlier about overall appearance being a top reason for men’s dating insecurities.

Relate Counsellor Josh Smith is seeing individuals with the same concerns around appearance in many counselling sessions:

“Admissions to eating disorder clinics have rocketed during the pandemic. While women are more likely to suffer from disordered eating, we know that it is underreported in the male population, who are less likely to seek help. General anxiety around appearance, and body dysmorphia specifically, is influenced by the portrayal of ‘perfect’ bodies on programmes such as Love Island and on social media.”

Further factors driving dating insecurities for men include prior bad experiences (19%), plus the feeling that they’re ‘out of practice’ after coming out of a long-term relationship (13%). When it comes to dating new people in the LGBTQ+ community, feelings of insecurity are even more prevalent with almost three quarters of men surveyed (74%) stating that they have felt insecure about dating new people.

⁶ This statistic combines ‘Yes – Sometimes’ & ‘Yes – Always’ answer options.

⁷ https://www.mind.org.uk/media/6771/get-it-off-your-chest_a4_final.pdf

Impact of the #MeToo movement

There's no denying the positive and widespread impact of #MeToo - the social movement against sexual abuse and sexual harassment. 39% of men surveyed overall think that their approach to dating has been affected by #MeToo.

This increases significantly for men aged 25–34 with 66% of those surveyed feeling the impact; this figure greatly reduces to only 20% of men over the age of 55.

For some men the movement has opened their eyes to feeling more informed about the importance of consent (14%). For others it has made them consider how they are perceived by women (13%). And one in ten male respondents (10%) feel ashamed about how they have previously treated women, with 8% saying it made them recognise their past behaviour was unacceptable.

But there's clearly some way to go – for example research in 2021 by the All Party Parliamentary Group for UN Women found that more than four fifths (86%)

of UK women aged 18–24 report having been harassed in public spaces.⁸

According to our survey almost a quarter (24%) of men said they'd not really heard of the #MeToo movement and more than one in ten (11%) think #MeToo is exaggerated. In addition, one in ten (10%) said they are now more confused than ever around how to behave.

“Sexual abuse and harassment is never acceptable and the damage caused by this is something we regularly see in counselling sessions. Whilst four in ten men across all age groups report having changed their behaviour as a result of #MeToo, it is encouraging that the number is higher amongst younger men surveyed.”

– Josh Smith, Relate Counsellor



⁸ https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women-Sexual-Harassment-Report_Updated.pdf

Confusion around dating etiquette

The pandemic has meant that we've needed to adapt how we behave in society and social norms that were once taken for granted, such as how we may greet someone for example, have become more confused.

So it's no surprise that this has also carried over into the dating world. More than one in ten (11%) men feel confused by modern dating.

Furthermore one in ten men (10%) feel scared that they are going to say or do something wrong when on a date and one in seven (13%) men think it's harder for them to date than it was 10 years ago.

The feelings of insecurity and confusion around dating expectations seem prevalent across both genders with our poll finding that almost one in five men (19%) think that they should pay the bill on a date. Interestingly less than one in



ten women (9%) agree that men should be the ones to pay. Just under 3 in 10 women surveyed think that you should split the bill on a date (29%) compared to 17% of men. It seems that a degree of gender stereotyping is still at play here although

fascinatingly our findings show that more men think that the onus falls on them to pay whereas more women are challenging this approach and think that splitting the bill is the way forwards.

The role of patriarchy in dating

Whilst there is more awareness of gender stereotyping in recent years there's no denying that preconceived views about men and women still exist in many facets of our society.



Relate counsellor Josh Smith thinks it can sometimes be traced back to seeing our parents' relationships:

"I see many clients who are quite shocked by how 'old-fashioned' their relationships have become. They find themselves repeating the patterns set by their parents, who in turn were influenced by their parents. So despite often ascribing to modern values around gender equality and the division of labour, men in particular often find themselves falling back into the patriarchal behaviours that they observed as children. This creates unhappiness within intimate relationships, especially for women, because expectations aren't met by reality."

This is supported by our survey findings with 14% of men recognising that some of

their views on dating and relationships are now outdated.

When asked specifically about patriarchy in today's society and if it's still a problem, 13% of men thought that it was compared to 21% of women. Over one in ten men (11%) felt that they still need to be the stronger partner and a similar number (11%) thought that it was harder for men than women to meet and date new people in 2021 with only one in twenty women (5%) agreeing with this.

eharmony relationship expert Rachael Lloyd thinks that often men are fighting against the stereotype of 'being the strong partner':

"The way for men to navigate modern relationships is to listen, be willing to make changes and to communicate more. However men often have to deal with a bias of feeling 'I'm strong; I'm right' and this may be partly due to their perception of how a man should be. There's often a fear of emasculation and humiliation which comes with allowing yourself to be vulnerable and maybe even reassessing your view of the world."

Men in relationships – do set gender roles still exist?

Relate counsellors are seeing the impact of the pandemic on relationships with more people being based at home either because of job losses or because they are still working from home. This has often led to changes in roles and responsibilities for couples, with some struggling to adjust.



“For many men going to work is a refuge. An increase in domestic and childcare responsibilities have been a source of stress for many relationships over the past 18 months.”

– Josh Smith, Relate Counsellor

For some men, however, being able to work from home has positively improved their work-life balance.

“Having the ability to work from home has meant that I’ve engaged more with my partner and been able to do the school run more frequently, which I’ve really enjoyed. This has led to a stronger relationship with my daughter and a feeling that I’m playing a more active role in day-to-day family life.”

– Andy

Our survey found that over a third of men (38%) feel that household chores should be divided equally between partners with this rising to almost half of women surveyed (49%). In total 12% of men surveyed thought that women should look after the domestic needs of the family whilst men should work and provide for the family.

Is communicating critical?

There's much research and advice out there about the importance of communication in relationships and it's a fundamental part of Relate's work supporting couples, yet only 41% of male respondents think that communication is key to a successful relationship compared to 56% of women. In the LGBTQ+ community just over a third of men polled (36%) think that communication is key to a successful relationship.

Relate Counsellor Peter Saddington thinks some of the problem stems from men struggling to know how to open up:

"I find that men often do want to talk to their partners and discuss their problems, they just don't know how to start the conversation and make it actually happen."

Our poll found that 20% of male respondents feel comfortable showing their vulnerability in a romantic relationship. Whilst this is encouraging and starts to dispel some of the myths around 'real men not showing their sensitive side' it also shows that there is more work to do on removing the stigma of men being able to have open and honest conversations and seek support.

"Men want to open up and be able to be honest and vulnerable but often need encouragement or the right environment to do this. It's positive that more men are feeling able to talk to their partners and accessing counselling support can also offer a safe space."

– Simone Bose, Relate Counsellor

Only
41%

of men think that communication is key to a successful relationship compared to 56% of women



Being open about mental health

Our poll found that 16% of men surveyed would describe their current mental health as poor compared to 21% of women. This increases to one in four millennials (26% of all respondents aged 16-24).⁹



One in five men (20%) can talk openly to their partner with 17% feeling able to talk openly to friends and family about how they're feeling.

And 18% of male respondents think that they are better talking about their mental health than they used to be. Whilst this shows that some men feel comfortable opening up, it also shows that more needs to be done to help the five in six men who are still struggling to be able to discuss their mental health and wellbeing.

16%

of men described their mental health as poor



The Samaritans' report *Men, Suicide and Society* found that the way men are taught through childhood to 'be manly' does not emphasise social and emotional skills.¹⁰

And the government's recent stance on making the teaching of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) compulsory in schools in England highlights the importance for all children of starting the conversation about healthy relationships at an early age.

"The now-mandatory focus on Relationships Education in primary schools and Relationships and Sex Education in all secondary schools is warmly welcomed by Relate. Starting to educate children and young people from an early age creates the building blocks of positive relationships and will work towards challenging gender stereotypes and providing a channel to open up conversations about sex, relationships and wellbeing."

– Aidan Jones, CEO of Relate

⁹ This finding combines respondents who said 'very poor' and 'poor'.

¹⁰ https://media.samaritans.org/documents/Samaritans_MenSuicideSociety_ResearchReport2012.pdf

The role of the media

It feels that over the last few years there has been a substantial and much-needed shift in the conversations about mental health. High-profile individuals opening up about their own struggles alongside the media communicating that ‘it’s okay not to be okay,’ has helped to begin to change perceptions. This is also being reflected in counselling sessions:

“The media is now helping to reinforce the message that you don’t always have to be macho and it’s okay to value a relationship has helped men to come to sessions and be more honest. That if a relationship breaks down, there are going to be issues and things to work through and that’s normal.”

– Peter Saddington, Relate Counsellor



Men’s mental health in the LGBTQ+ community

Mind’s recent research has found that gay, bisexual and trans (GBT) men are more likely to report poor mental health with more than two in five GBT men (46%) experiencing depression in the last year.¹¹ Whilst the reasons for this are complex and varied many people attribute it at least partly to stigma and discrimination related to sexuality or gender identity.

Our survey found that over one in five (22%) male respondents in the LGBTQ+ community¹² felt that their mental health was currently poor.¹³

22% ↓↓↓↓↓

of GBT men felt their mental health was currently poor

¹¹ https://www.mind.org.uk/media/6771/get-it-off-your-chest_a4_final.pdf

¹² This includes men self-identifying as gay, bisexual, asexual or other.

¹³ This finding combines respondents who said ‘very poor’ and ‘poor’.

What are the barriers to accessing help?

Recent research has found that men are three times more likely to see a therapist when worried than in 2009¹⁴ which certainly feels like progress.

However our poll found that only one in ten men surveyed (10%) would consider counselling if they were experiencing relationship issues and only 13% have accessed counselling in the past.

In 2011, 44% of Relate's clients were men and we know that they are more likely to exit earlier from the counselling process.¹⁵ In 2020-21 the number of men accessing Relate's services was the same as ten years earlier (44%).¹⁶ Whilst it feels that the conversation around accessing support is beginning to open up, there's clearly still work to do in encouraging men to seek help.

Relate's *Try to see it my way* report found that men are more likely to seek support



if they can access it remotely.¹⁷ Feedback has shown that making the process as anonymous as possible also helps to break down some of the barriers in place.

Relate offers a variety of counselling and support options. These include WebChat, the Message A Counsellor email service and phone counselling which all offer a certain degree of anonymity. Webcam counselling is also hugely popular.

You can access any of Relate's services individually or as a couple.

¹⁴ https://www.mind.org.uk/media/6771/get-it-off-your-chest_a4_final.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.relate.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication-see-it-my-way-2013.pdf>

¹⁶ Percentage of total Relate clients broken down by gender with appointments between 1 September 2020 and 31 August 2021

¹⁷ <https://www.relate.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication-see-it-my-way-2013.pdf>

eHarmony relationship expert Rachael Lloyd's tips for men who are dating



Be honest about what you're looking for (short-term versus long-term relationship). This will help you find someone who aligns with your core values.



Manage your expectations: dates are opportunities to get to know different singles, one of whom eventually might be a good match. Don't expect instant results.



Avoid bare-chested pics on your dating profile. eHarmony data suggests this leads to considerably lower engagement from female matches.



Post pictures which depict you enjoying leisurely activities. Research shows that this helps increase singles' match ranges.



Make a video date your new first date. This is a great way of establishing that initial rapport and can fit into anyone's schedule.



Avoid 'dating burnout' by ensuring that you don't match too many people at once. Prioritise quality over quantity.



Own your dating mistakes. Keep going for the same type of compelling but high drama partners? Time to stop. Still dwelling on your ex? It's time to move on.



Give chemistry time to grow. Not everyone feels it on the first date, and choosing to meet only the most photogenic matches means you might miss out on 'the one'.



Allow yourself to be vulnerable and communicate. Most potential partners love a sensitive, enlightened modern male.



Relate's tips for men in relationships



Communication is key. Think (and talk) about what you want from your relationship. You can do this with help from Relate if it's hard to do by yourself.



Consider your views around roles in your relationship. Are your views in line with your partner's? If not, how can you better align these to make sure you're both on the same page?



Help to break down some of the stigma around mental health and ask your male friends how they are. And commit to listening to them if they want to talk.



Commit to seeking help if you need it whether that's with a partner or on your own.



Be honest with yourself about what you want and be prepared to give time and energy to your relationship if things need working on.



Think about trying a new hobby or interest together. It's fun to learn something new and will give you something to talk about.



Make time for each other. Lockdown has been hard for many couples. Spending quality time together as a couple can be a great way of reminding yourself why you chose to be together in the first place.



Accessing support



About Relate

We could all use some extra support sometimes. Relate has a range of services including individual counselling, relationship counselling for couples, mediation and sex therapy. Currently these are provided online, usually via webcam. Counselling is also available over the phone.

In addition WebChat offers 30 minute sessions with a trained counsellor and Message a Counsellor is an email service where you get a bespoke reply to a specific issue.

To find out more visit: relate.org.uk



About eharmony

eharmony launched in 2000, and now forms part of the ParshipMeet Group the international market leader in matchmaking. Real love remains at the heart of everything we do. In an increasingly fast-paced dating culture, we take a more bespoke and supportive approach to creating relationships. Our unique Compatibility Matching System brings together like-minded singles who share core values and personality traits, which are key indicators of relationship success.

We are constantly evolving our matching system, designed by psychologists, which measures each member's profile across 32 dimensions of compatibility – factoring in traits such as kindness, openness, and communication style. The results speak for themselves – every 14 minutes someone finds love on eharmony.

Take our virtual tour at eharmony.co.uk