



# Don't Date Your Doppelgänger

Arthur C. Brooks | February 10, 2022

## Differences, not similarities, are what make romance great.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 126.9 million Americans are currently unmarried. If you are in the dating market, that might sound like good news. And yet most “daters”—people who are not in a committed relationship but would like to be, or people who date casually—are struggling. In a 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center, 67 percent said their dating life was not going well. Three-quarters said that finding someone to date was difficult.

Finding love might have always been a challenge, but evidence suggests that it has gotten harder in recent years. According to the General Social Survey, from 1989 to 2016 the proportion of married people in their 20s fell from 27 percent to 15 percent. And in case you think that's just a commentary on traditional marriage, the same survey shows that the percentage of 18-to-29-year-olds who had not had any sex in a year nearly tripled from 2008 to 2018, from 8 to 23 percent.

If all of this rings painfully and personally true, you might be tempted to conclude that the cause is hopeless, and that something is wrong with you. The evidence suggests a different explanation, however: The way people look for their perfect match is all wrong. Modern daters, and the tools they often use to find one another, rely excessively on making sure a potential mate is similar to them. By doing this, they ignore what matters more for romance: that the person has differences that complement them.

Here's an assertion that might seem indisputable: To find that special someone, you should look for a person with whom you have a lot in common. Social scientists call this “homophily,” and have shown that we rate those who share our views—especially our political views—as more appealing (socially and romantically) than those who don't.

Survey data on dating behavior support this assertion. According to the online-dating site OkCupid, 85 percent of Millennials say that how a potential date votes is “extremely or very important” to them. And among college students surveyed last year, 71 percent of Democrats and 31 percent of Republicans said that they would not go out on a date with someone who voted for the opposing presidential candidate.

The effects of homophily are even stronger when it comes to education. Researchers at Grand Canyon University found last year that educational attainment is the most important dating criterion for Millennials, exceeding earning potential, physical attributes, and political and religious affiliations. They also found that 43 percent of daters with a master's degree judge potential partners based on the college they attended. Some similarity is no doubt beneficial to a partnership, but sameness brings huge costs as well.

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Romantic love requires complementarity—that is, differences. A sociologist named Robert Francis Winch advanced this idea in the 1950s by interviewing couples and assessing the personality traits of those that were successful and those that weren't. He found that the happiest couples tended to round out each other's personality—an extrovert and an introvert, for example.

Newer research has found that strangers assigned to perform a task in pairs feel warmer toward each other when their personalities are complementary than when they're similar. In one study, people described their ideal romantic partners as similar to themselves, but their actual partners' personality traits were uncorrelated with their own. We may think we want partners like ourselves, but we wind up pursuing relationships with people who are different from us.

The attractive force of difference may have biological roots. Scientists have long known, for example, that children inherit a wider variety of immune defenses when their parents differ greatly in a group of genes called the major histocompatibility complex (MHC). None of us can look at a potential mate and decode her MHC at first sight, but there is evidence that we sense components of it through smell—though we don't realize it, because our olfactory neurons function below the level of consciousness—and that we're more attracted to people whose genes “smell” different from our own. In 1995, the Swiss zoologist Claus Wedekind and his colleagues asked women to sniff T-shirts worn by men they didn't know but who had worn the shirts for two straight days. The women preferred the smelly shirts worn by the men whose MHC genes were most different from their own. Later research on different populations found the same result.

Despite all of this evidence that we really shouldn't be searching for a version of ourselves to woo, the most common way that Americans find partners these days—websites and apps—are smorgasbords of sameness. Algorithms allow people to find dates like themselves with brutal efficiency. It might make for fewer disputes, but in searching for your doppelgänger, you might be overlooking the people who complement you, psychologically and even physically.

Now that you know what to look for in a mate, you need to change your dating process to find it. Maybe, on most of your first dates, you ask lots of questions in an attempt to find views and interests you share with your suitor. Instead, you should be looking for differences that will balance the two of you out. Here are three ways to get started:

### **1. Embrace diversity.**

Workplaces love to tout the benefits of diversity, and rightly so. Teams diverse in race, gender, worldview, and age perform better at work, broaden one another's perspectives, and generally make life more interesting. If you agree, then embrace more diversity in your personal life too. Look for people who think differently from you and be open to loving them as friends—and maybe more. Not only does this expand your dating pool; it also makes life more fun. This is exactly what I did three decades ago, and I fell in love with—and ultimately married—a woman with whom I didn't even share a common language, let alone political views.

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## 2. Focus on personality.

Exit the pool of people who say they would never date someone who disagrees with them politically. The peace forged by dating only your ideological twin is a Faustian bargain, because you may well be sacrificing complementarity and attraction. Try this: Make a deal with someone you plan to go out with that you will not discuss politics at all for at least the first three dates (if you get that far). This way, you will neither assume a match based on this weak criterion, nor rule someone out too early.

## 3. Let humans make your matches.

One of the most robust trends in meeting potential mates over the past three decades has been the move away from dates set up by friends. More than half of people ages 54–64 have had a “blind date” (a date set up by others, where the daters are unacquainted) in their life, according to DatingAdvice.com, versus only 20 percent of adults ages 18–24. On the surface, this makes some sense: Why waste a whole dinner out trying to meet a person on the basis of someone else’s recommendation when a closer match is just a few clicks away?

If you have read this far, you know the reason: Traditional blind dates are generally arranged by people who know you and have thought about whether your personality fits with your date’s. The less exclusively you rely on an internet-dating profile, the freer you can be from philosophical prejudices, and the more you might rely on more primitive mechanisms—like your nose.

This strategy only works, of course, when your friends know eligible matches with whom to set you up. If you ask your friends to help and they consistently come up dry, it may be evidence that you need to expand your social circle.

All of this advice relies on one very strong assumption: that you care more about finding love than you do about finding similarity in your relationships. If this is not the case, consider the source of your resistance to difference. Perhaps it is fear of the unknown, or family pressure to conform to a particular way of life. Once you identify the force that’s holding you back, ask yourself: Does it merit the price you are paying?

If dating has become a monotonous chore and love has eluded you, try thinking about your dating life the same way you think about visiting a new place or learning a new skill. The novelty is part of the excitement and fun. That person with the smelly T-shirt and weird ideas might just be the one you have been waiting for.

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