

# Chapter 86

## The Trouble With Tinder: Emerging Adults With Disabilities Dating Online

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### ABSTRACT

*Although research indicates that almost all emerging adults in the U.S. use the internet, little is known about the online dating experiences of persons with disabilities. Particularly in developed countries, online dating currently accounts for a substantial proportion of the initiation of romantic relationships and promises numerous advantages for persons with disabilities. Online dating includes a way to escape disability stigma, at least initially, access to a wide network of potential partners, and a convenient, private, and efficient method of meeting them. Online daters can be strategic in how they present both themselves and their disabilities, the manner in which they communicate with potential partners, and whether they join a large, popular dating site or a specialized disability-oriented one. The chapter discusses how the nine-step process of online dating might differ for or challenge emerging adults with various types of disabilities, sharing relevant research and media examples when available. The implications of popular mobile dating apps are also considered.*

### INTRODUCTION

*Being upfront about my disability on Tinder and other dating sites has liberated me (Ladau, 2017).*

According to the Census Bureau, in 2014 approximately 14.4% of Americans ages 18 to 24 had some type of disability and about 7.7% had a severe disability (Taylor, 2018). Although dating during emerging adulthood is an important part of building long-term relationships (Holmes, Brown, Shafer, & Stoddard, 2017), research suggests that emerging adults with disabilities may have more difficulty dating and finding romantic and sexual partners than do their peers without disabilities (Miller, Chen, Glover-Graf, & Kranz, 2009; Wiegerink, Roebroek, Donkervoort, Stam, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2006).

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This is distressing and unfortunately ironic because the quality of close relationships strongly contributes to physical health and longevity (Holt-Lunstad, Robles, & Sbarra, 2017; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017). College students in committed romantic relationships also experience fewer mental health problems (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010). Similarly, for a community sample of racially diverse sexual minority youth, initially ages 16 to 20, being in a romantic relationship promoted mental health for many participants over a five year period, especially those who were Black and/or gay (Whitton, Dyar, Newcomb, & Mustanski, 2018). Furthermore, emerging adults report spending more time with romantic partners than with friends, and they are significantly more likely than adolescents to consider their partner a source of influence and reference (Giordano, Longmore, Schroeder, & Seffrin, 2008).

The challenges forming longterm romantic relationship are demonstrated by low marriage rates among people with disabilities (PWDs). Overall, just 41% of U.S. adults with disabilities are married as compared to 52% of adults without disabilities. For persons between ages 18 and 34, the percent never married among those with disabilities is 74% as compared to 65% for their peers without disabilities (Schur, Kruse, & Blanck, 2013). The marriage rate for PWDs over the life span is lower as well. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, just 41% of U.S. adults ages 18 and older with disabilities are married as compared to 52% of U.S. adults without disabilities (Schur et al., 2013). Data over the last two decades indicate that this disparity in U.S. marriage rates by disability status has been increasing (Tumin, 2016).

Not all types of disabilities have a similar influence on people's chances of getting married. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, MacInnes (2011) found that among individuals between the ages of 24 and 32 in the U.S., 43% of individuals with learning disabilities, 37% of those with mental disabilities, and 21% of those with multiple disabilities reported having experienced a first marriage as compared to 53% of their peers with physical disabilities and 50% of those without disabilities. In the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, marriage rates eight years after high school graduation ranged from 1% for U.S. emerging adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or multiple disabilities to 11% for those with mental retardation, emotional disturbances, hearing impairment, or traumatic brain injury, 13% for those with speech/language impairment, and 15% for those with other health impairments and with learning disabilities (Newman et al., 2011).

PWDs in Western nations also are less likely than those without disabilities to socialize with friends, relatives, or neighbors (McDonald, 2010; Pfeiffer & Pinqart, 2011; Wiegerink et al., 2006). Disabled children and adolescents are less likely than their peers without disabilities to engage in developmentally appropriate social endeavors outside of school, such as dating and organized and informal peer group activities (Feragen, Stock, Sharratt, & Kvalem, 2016; Nosek, Howland, Rintala, Young, & Chanpong, 2001; Pinqart & Pfeiffer, 2012). These activities create opportunities for adolescents and emerging adults to feel socially accepted, to develop romantic relationships, and to learn helpful social skills, such as flirting (Feragen et al., 2016; Shuttleworth, 2000; Wiegerink, Roebroek, Van Der Slot, Stam, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2010). In addition, people without disabilities are often reluctant or unwilling to engage in a meaningful or intimate manner with PWDs and appear to hold negative attitudes and stereotypes, especially when the disability is severe or includes cognitive or psychiatric impairments (Miller, Chen, Glover-Graf, & Kranz, 2009).

Disabled women are much more likely to have problems finding and keeping partners than disabled men and women without disabilities (Gill, 1996; Howland & Rintala, 2001; Nosek et al., 2001). Gender and disability stereotypes interact in unique ways, especially when forming social judgments of women. According to traditional societal stereotypes, women with physical disabilities do not, and should not, engage in dating behavior, and they are typically considered asexual and ineligible for the attentions

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