

The ABCs of dating

A primer on the perils and pitfalls of the search for the man of your dreams

Dating was never meant for the fainthearted. It requires skill, planning, perseverance and a high degree of self-knowledge—or their alcohol equivalent, about four beers.

This seemed to be the consensus of the more than 200 men who participated in the recent MenTalk discussions on gay dating. (MenTalk is an ongoing project bringing gay and bisexual men together to discuss various topics.)

Whether you are new to the scene or getting back out there following a spell away—after, say, a fleeting experience with Eternal Love—gay dating can be a daunting and intimidating experience. It's difficult for even the most handsome, bright, buffed-up guy—let alone the rest of us. So, from those many discussions throughout the Portland area, here are a few suggestions on how to get into the swing of things.

First there is the issue of where to actually meet men. There are, of course, the bars: jolly, fun-filled, well-lit places where men gather to socialize and to feel part of a warm and welcoming community of gay brothers. (Ha!)

Seriously, though, Portland is fortunate to have a number of gay bars. Yet bars were almost universally scorned in the discussion groups and were characterized as shallow, superficial "meat markets"—certainly not places to go to find Quality Men. On the other hand, nearly everyone admitted going to them. Go figure.

Next we come to helpful hints for navigating the bar scene. What, for example, does one wear? Anything with a Calvin Klein or Versace label. Be forewarned, however, these apparel items can be expensive since they are intentionally marketed for the supposedly fashion conscious (read: dupes like us). Buy within your budget. The true fashion queen will still be impressed.

Then there's the no-small-matter of one's body. If you're one of those men who is self-conscious about his physical appearance, you might want to visit a health club before venturing out to the bars.

And by the way, the gym itself is a great place to meet other guys—but be sure to choose a health club that is frequented predominantly by gay men (in other words, one that has lots and lots of mirrors). Let's say that you see that Cute Blond Guy at the Princeton. Think of innovative ways to get his attention. Casually position yourself next to him as he's pumping iron. Both of you are standing before the mirror, pressing weights, flexing muscles and studiously avoiding eye contact. Try a conversation-starter like, "Nice glutes." If this proves unsuccessful, fake a coronary. This has the added benefit of not only getting his sympathy but giving the two of you something to talk about later in the sauna.

Now that we've got the physical down, let's explore psychological techniques.

It's not necessary to drink when in the bars. It's also not necessary to receive an anesthetic when undergoing surgery, but it helps. However, there are other ways to bolster your self-esteem.

Practice affirmations: Look in the mirror and say to yourself, "You are a smart, attractive, and highly desirable man." Keep practicing this until you can say it with a straight face. As you enter the bars, repeat this affirmation over and over (try to do this silently or everyone will think you're really weird).

When you enter a bar, remember there are lots of lonely guys out there looking for someone just like you—of course, none whom you'd ever want to date. So it's important to know your boundaries and how to say no.

If approached, always be polite and thank him, even if you don't reciprocate his interest. Take his invitation as a compliment and use it to build your self-confidence. Say to yourself, "He recognizes the smart, attractive, and highly desirable man that I am"—not "Boy, is he desperate!"

Men can also explore alternatives to the bars. Choose a setting that's right for you, one where you are likely to find other men who share your interests—hiking, political action, gardening, classical music, fist fucking.

For example, there is the Metro Club "for men over 40 and those who appreciate them."

There are cooking groups for those who love to cook and for those who appreciate them. There are outdoor recreation groups for those who prefer REI and Eddie Bauer labels, and there are the Neighborhood MenTalk groups where gay men gather to talk about issues important to their lives, such as relationships, coming out, HIV, relationships, sex, growing older and relationships.

Personal ads are another way to meet a variety of interesting guys—as well as a chance to exercise your fiction-writing skills. A variation on the personals is the Chance Meetings or Just Maybe section, where

you can leave a message for that fellow you bumped into last weekend but were too shy to approach. It's a kind of second chance: You write hoping that he's checking the personals to see if you sent him a message.

And don't forget to appeal to your friends for help. Have them introduce you to potential dates.

And again, be kind to everyone who approaches you. Remember, they're just like you: lonely and looking—but maybe more desperate.

■ ALAN ROSE is a member of OutWord, a writing group for gay men. He is also manager of the HIV prevention and education programs at Cascade AIDS Project.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent those of CAP, OutWord, or even Alan Rose.

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