

How dating became an extreme sport for men

From 'the ick' to boyfriend shaming, modern romance is now a minefield. Are impossible standards and a toxic mistrust leaving blokes behind?

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Tristan Cressingham didn't expect his relationship of seven months to end in quite as spectacular a fashion as it did.

At the start of November 2025, the 23-year-old photographer received a message from his then girlfriend who, he says, detailed the reasons why she wanted to be single and the things about him which gave her what she called "[the ick](#)".

He says it featured a wide-ranging critique about everything from the length of his shorts (too short, apparently) to his keenness to reply to messages.

"Basically, she said she thought I was a bit 'cringe'," Tristan says.

Around the same time, a Vogue feature by Chanté Joseph headlined "Is Having A Boyfriend Embarrassing Now?" went viral. The piece, published in October 2025, didn't decry the appearances of men, but questioned the entire concept of having a heterosexual relationship.

"That someone is inherently 'embarrassed' of being with you is a hurtful thing to hear, especially from someone you thought accepted you, and yet the term is bandied about pretty casually now," says Tristan. "It feels like the inference is that men are inferior to women. I can't imagine a man writing a piece positing that girlfriends are embarrassing would go down well."

And yet, Joseph's story was viewed millions of times, with women on social media voicing both communion and outrage. It ignited a global conversation about the state of modern relationships and shone a light on so-called "heteropessimism," a term coined by writer Asa Seresin to describe the often public expression of "regret, embarrassment or hopelessness" by straight people – particularly women – regarding heterosexual dating and relationships.

"I believe a lot of us are paying the price for [bad male behaviour](#) dating back through the generations," says 29-year-old single graphic designer Josh, who lives in Lancashire. "Sexist tropes, being a bit useless, expecting to be looked after by your girlfriend or wife who also works. Probably a lot of young guys these days don't expect that kind of treatment but there's a lot of content out there featuring women talking about their hopeless partners and I get why dating that man would be a no. Not all men are like that, but it's hard to show that if you're not even meeting women."

Christian, a 40-year-old physiotherapist and recent [divorcee](#) from Surrey, concurs. "Dating in 2026 feels like walking a tightrope which it wasn't the last time I was single, 20 years ago. I find myself second guessing my behaviour constantly. I want to be seen as respectful yet not boring, someone to have fun with but not a 'himbo' [a male bimbo], keen to speak but not desperate. I want to be in a committed relationship but not be claustrophobic. I need to prove I don't ascribe to [the manosphere](#).

"Women definitely call the shots – emotionally, physically – in modern relationships, and a lot of them bring with them some pretty bad previous romantic experiences involving violence or issues with coercive control, so [dating is tough](#)."

Credit: Tim Enthoven

There has never been a harder time to be single. According to data from the non-profit [Pew Research Center in the US in 2020](#), most people on the dating market – men and women, of all ages and who live in both rural and urban settings – said their romantic life was not going well. It is hard to find people to date, they claimed, with the sexes giving differing

reasons for that. Men said it was difficult for them to approach people, while the majority of women said it was hard to find someone looking for the same type of relationship as them and “who meets their expectations”. More recent [research by Manchester Metropolitan University](#) (MMU) also found that while singledom for women has been “rebranded” in a positive and empowering way, single men who had chosen to be solo “did not feel they could embrace this positivity”. Instead, they felt “polarised by [harmful masculine ideals](#) that misrepresent single men as either carefree bachelors or socially dysfunctional incels ([involuntary celibates](#))”, according to MMU sociology and criminology lecturer Alicia Denby. Data analyst Simon, 51, from the West Midlands, says he matches with women a couple of times a month on Tinder, but when he messages them he rarely hears back. “If I do, conversation almost exclusively goes nowhere,” he laments. “I’m done tying myself up in knots trying to work out where I’m going wrong. It seems single men of my age have been demonised rather – it’s like we are all incels rarely allowed out of our mother’s basement.

“I’ve had relationships, of course, my longest one lasted nine years when I was in my 20s and early 30s. We met in real life at work but in recent years on apps, my dating luck has gone the way of my hairline and disappeared. I would love to meet the right person and I haven’t quite given up, but I literally have no idea how to any more. I don’t know what women want and their standards seem impossibly high.”

Lee Chambers is a psychologist and runs an organisation called Male Allies UK, which helps both to engage men in the workplace and also works with boys in schools. Chambers explains that the transition to [online dating](#) in particular has made looking for love feel transactional. “A lot of young men feel the juice isn’t worth the squeeze any more when it comes to dating,” he says.

Part of the problem is that men and boys usually have what he terms “shallower” friendships, which can lead to [isolation](#). This can lead into maladaptation issues with romantic relationships, something he says he is

particularly seeing with the increasing interest in [AI companions](#) from young men.

Relationship coach Rachel New sees this becoming an even bigger problem when men don't have female friends. "It's even easier to lump women together as 'mysterious', 'inconsistent', 'demanding', 'intimidating' or whatever, especially when this is the narrative they might get from social media," she says.

Chambers says that there is a growing feeling amongst boys and men that when it comes to dating, "women have more choice" – a theory propagated by the early manosphere 10-15 years ago. "This belief centres around the idea of a tacit hierarchy where women hold all the power and status because of how they look," he says. "While a small group of beautiful women have most of the choice, the hierarchy dictates that even women who are conventionally less attractive have more choice than regular men. Coupled with that, men believe a small group of prized males get all the girls because women have incredibly high standards."

Credit: Tim Enthoven

These theories push the idea that "Western women are entitled and only want to date a wealthy finance bro with thick thighs... and there's no hope for anyone else," Chambers says.

Dating coach Hayley Quinn specialises in real-world in-person coaching, either in workshops or working one-to-one with clients in a social setting in both London and New York. She says that throughout history, there have always been men – and women – who struggle with dating and meeting people, but the internet and [social media](#) have made things harder.

"The manosphere has made men feel isolated or like there is some big conspiracy as to women's power or why they can't get a date. When men put those feelings out on the internet and what is directed at them is the manosphere movement, it allows men to get into a victim mindset which

spreads a feeling that women are against them and makes the whole situation worse.”

That being said, Quinn believes that men feel they are highly socially constrained, especially in a culture like England’s, where we are quite reserved and guarded around our personal space. Researchers in a 2024 study by the University of Toronto found that men feared they struggled to navigate the expectations of modern masculinity in relationships.

“There’s the notion that to really ‘be a man’, you must be the type that ‘gets girls’ – it’s a sign of status,” says Elaine Hoan, part of the team at the University of Toronto. “But in the early stages of dating, men typically have a more difficult time obtaining a partner and therefore accessing sex.”

“A lot of men I work with have what we call ‘approach anxiety’,” says Quinn. “They don’t want to interrupt a woman when she’s with a friend, they worry that someone will call the police if they feel they’re being ‘harassed’, they fear social impropriety. They have thoughts like ‘If I start talking to a woman at my run club and she doesn’t want me to, I could get banned from a place I really enjoy, so therefore I won’t talk to her,’ or ‘If I speak to a colleague I like at work and it goes wrong I could get fired’. This means the only way they feel able to meet people is online – which is challenging. Then again, any organic social interaction feels too heavily loaded.”

“I want to be in a relationship but, as I skew anxious anyhow as a person, I am actually genuinely quite scared of the politics of dating now,” says George, 31, a chef from [Dorset](#). “I don’t want to lay it at the door of women per se, but it really does feel like men and women no longer meet each other on an even footing in the dating world. I frequently feel like women’s standards are impossibly high and even before we meet, I am trying to convince someone of my worth. It’s like I must answer for the sins of all men that have come before me who may have treated womankind poorly. Plus, there are so many voices in the dating world giving conflicting advice on how a man should behave, how a woman

should behave... All of this has just amped up the awkwardness and unknowns about the whole process of meeting someone.”

Credit: Tim Enthoven

George says he feels even the most basic of interactions have been politicised and imbued with all manner of meanings, he’s now unsure of what is appropriate behaviour. “On one date recently, the lady I was with was offended that I [paid for the round](#) of drinks when she was in the toilet. Offering to get someone home safely is also a minefield – I feel like a creep. Then just imagine the next stage of dating or physical intimacy. It baffles me that previous generations found dating exciting or fun. It’s a means to an end, but to me it just feels hideous.”

George is right about carrying the baggage of people’s past negative dating experiences. “A majority of women (as well as 35 per cent of men) said they’ve experienced some kind of [harassing](#) behaviour from someone they were dating or on a date with, ranging from receiving an unwanted sexually explicit image to being pressured for sex or having someone share a sexually explicit image of them without their consent,” says Anna Brown of the Pew Research Center. Perhaps it’s no wonder women are guarded.

I speak to an 18-year-old man I’ll call Christopher during Easter break from his first year at university. Christopher tells me that from around age 15, the time he started going to house parties where alcohol and drugs could be present, he and his (male) friends were encouraged by their parents to have the other party’s written consent via text message, so concerned were they to protect against any future sexual assault complaints.

“Many of us know people who have had something happen on a night out which they later say they didn’t want to happen – and that’s both men and women – so I get that it’s a good idea to have that written permission, but as someone can change their mind at any time, it’s not all that useful as a form of protection from a complaint later,” he says.

“I would never do anything with anyone who had expressed a wish not to – or who was not able to express their wish to do so – but also considering getting a contract texted to you before you start kissing someone or whatever is a bit off-putting. Maybe that’s the idea!” he jokes.

Christopher says he and his friends have started to see teenage relationships as “kind of scary and a bit of a hassle, especially against a backdrop of social media where the tiniest thing can be made public and subject you to ridicule. Even when you do meet someone and you think it’s going well, it’s liable to just fizzle out with no explanation”.

The answer, says Quinn, is teaching men of all ages a more balanced and nuanced approach to communication and increasing levels of social intelligence to enable better conversation and understanding in real life. New says she would love there to be “a relationships GCSE – because there are some basic skills that would make a big difference to how we can develop a healthy relationship once we meet someone right for us.”

“I’d say we are at the precipice of a change,” says Chambers. “A slight reversion back to how things were. We’re already seeing a revival of singles evenings and people attempting to make connections in real life, which is encouraging. Hopefully bridging that divide will enable men and women to find common ground once again.”

