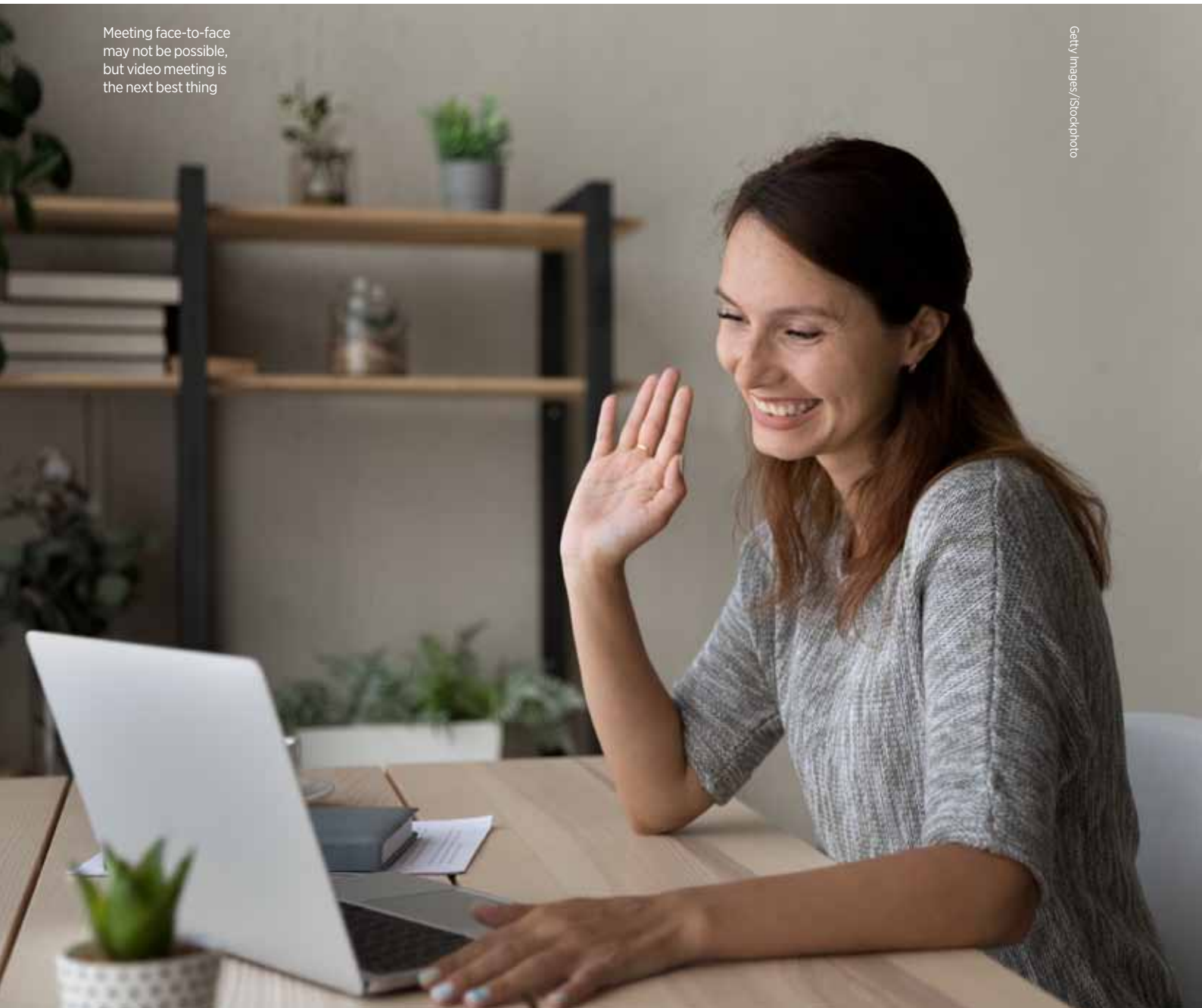


Finding love in lockdown

Brigid Hayward, of Norfolk-based Catalyst Matchmaking, talks about how the pandemic has affected the search for love

Meeting face-to-face may not be possible, but video meeting is the next best thing

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Brigid, how has the pandemic affected dating?

Everything has changed for everyone; this time is defined by a mixture of worry, gratitude and vulnerability, combining with a huge collective loneliness. We will all come out of this pandemic older, wiser and more thoughtful. People have been reminded how vulnerable life can be, whether they find themselves living on their own or are happily married. To be on your own is especially lonely in scary times such as these; if ever you need people around you, it's now. The focus on finding a supportive relationship has understandably sharpened, especially when our lives are so restricted.

At the moment we have more time for dating, but it's harder to meet in person; in Tier 4 it's impossible. Different considerations have come into play now with dating: the ability to use technology, the way you talk to a camera and writing well are all coming into play. Obviously the face-to-face aspects such as body language, pheromones and chemistry are not as important now, which is a shame.

Virtual dates are becoming the only way forward and I have started setting them up for my clients. For example, you could both go for a walk at the same time in real life with your phones on and talk to each other as you go. Or you could both book a restaurant takeaway, light candles, get some fresh flowers and have a virtual date. It's a good idea to take the time before a date to think about things you can talk about,

such as favourite films, music and books. There are always plenty of things you can chat about.

Has anything good come out of the pandemic?

Yes! A surprising amount, considering the situation. There's an increased sense of empathy and gratitude in every area of everybody's lives. We all have a focus, and we feel the power of connection of going through a shared crisis. We are noticing people around us, being kinder, contacting people we wouldn't normally and learning to accept and even enjoy our own company rather than being constantly distracted.

There has been coverage in the press suggesting that people meeting online are emailing each other much more than they would normally. I feel there is often a 'sweetie jar' mentality with online dating: everyone is always wondering if there is a better sweet in the next jar and taking 'one more swipe' instead of giving the person they are talking to a proper chance. We have more time to focus on people and think more clearly instead of dashing everywhere thinking of a dozen other things.

I think many people are also turning inwards and listening to themselves, finding a quieter

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and more grounded place. People are also cooking, gardening and walking more, and appreciating the calming qualities of nature and the outside world. All these things make us calmer, more intuitive and more able to live in the moment, which are great qualities to bring to a relationship. Myself and my colleague James Preece (a relationship expert with 17 years' experience) encourage all these healthy habits, because we know that they build your emotional intelligence. This in turn makes you a better and stronger potential partner, and therefore much more likely to meet – and keep! – a great match.

Do you think that dating will return to 'normal' or has there been a fundamental shift?

Humans are social beings; we need to feel we belong, and to have the support and acceptance of a relationship. Life returned to normal after the 1918 pandemic and it will do so again. Dating will return and so will parties, dinners and festivals. I miss the excited energy my dinner dating events often created. I would be floating the next day on a huge wave of positive energy and feedback.

For some of the diners, even if there was no one there they were interested in, they would feel boosted just on human energy and connection with other single people. That energy and potential is what is missing now. I am confident it will come back when things calm down.

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ABOUT BRIGID HAYWARD

I met my husband online, but it took years and was really hard work alongside my photography career. It really got me down, and I'm not easily dispirited. Back when I was single in the 1990s, I held singles dinner parties through which three couples got married. I dabbled with matchmaking and dinner dating again during the noughties, but it was only after a breast cancer diagnosis a few years ago that I changed my course.

After coming through chemotherapy and finally being given the all-clear, I became so much more adventurous and fearless! I decided to start putting on dinner-dating events again,

more for enjoyment than for financial gain.

After three years of that, I decided to throw caution to the wind and go flat out to build my own matchmaking company from scratch. I completed the Mutual Attraction matchmaking course in 2019, and have spent 2020 grappling with the ongoing challenges of coronavirus in both my personal life and for my new business.

I live with my husband and our 18-year-old son, as well as my father and brother. As well as trying to make matches, I grow a lot of vegetables organically, and enjoy reading, cooking and photography.

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fundamental shift of more kindness and empathy especially with online dating; hopefully, it will last for years. There also might be a shift in relationships already formed: a lot have improved, but some will have found it has strained things. I suspect some people will find that being single is something they enjoy once they get used to it and feel more comfortable with their own company when at home.

I also think that after this pandemic there may a huge shift away from computers, screens, apps and online communications and the value of meeting people in real life will be so much more appealing. I think there will actually be more parties, gatherings and events in real life, as people realise quite how much they've missed being with others.

What would you say to a single person looking for a relationship right now?

Use this time wisely: focus on yourself and find out who you are and what you like. Life doesn't normally give us much time to do this. If things aren't working out in your dating search, reconsider what you need and what you are looking for; are you repeatedly making the same mistakes? Get support in the form of family, friends or a matchmaker: it's so valuable to have another opinion on such an important decision.

Single people often have a 'type'. I often have to challenge this, as it shuts off so many really great potential suitors. I think there are many potential partners out there for everyone; with a considerate and loving partner, their faults will be acceptable, as will yours be to them.

What would be your top three tips?

Finding a great partner should be the top consideration in your life, even above a career. It will affect every aspect of your life, your family, your friends and your career. It will also mean you can relax properly, which is what you want to do most in a relationship.

Make space in your life for new energies and new interests. Be brave: don't be afraid to change career or environment if you have been in the same place for too long. Sit quietly and think where



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ABOVE: Dating in lockdown can be difficult in person, though there's always a way...

would be a good place to find a partner you would have lot in common with? Go with an open mind. Smile and give eye contact; be approachable. Take off your sunglasses and put your phone away. If you can do this regularly and say 'hello' to 10 different people each time, it will open you up and make you much more confident in your social skills.

Look for kindness, respect and trust: if even one of these is missing it's much harder to love fully and freely. Take more pride in the little things, and do them mindfully and consciously: eat well, sleep well and move well. Live in the moment and don't forget that it's okay to be sad!

You started Catalyst Matchmaking last year; how is it going?

I was ready to launch in early March last year, and just as I was to spread my wings, Covid-19 hit us with a full-on lockdown! I can't headhunt for my memberships and clients can't meet at the moment other than through video calls and virtual dates.

New people are getting in touch regularly, though, and as they do I always have my existing

members in mind. I'm constantly turning permutations over in my head, and wondering who would match well with whom.

My signed-up members will always be my primary focus, but I still need 'visitors'; if you're thinking of dipping your toe into the water, for only £20 you can fill in a profile which we will go over and check with you. In particular, matchmakers are often short of men and it would certainly pay for men especially to consider using a matchmaker. Men often make little mistakes that tend to go against them, and these can so easily be remedied.

Valentine's Day can be a really hard day for single people, an annoying reminder that so many people are happily coupled up. However, I can assure you that couples often find it hard too! A partnership that has been going for more than 10 years has often gravitated towards a less romantic but more comfortable place.

As a happily married person, I can tell you that as much as I love a meal out with my husband, sitting amongst a sea of often much younger couples in a crowded restaurant and having roses forced on me is not as romantic as single people imagine! When I was only 20 I was going out with a lovely man, and on Valentine's Day he looked me in the eyes and said wistfully "thank you for the Valentine's card"... I hadn't sent him one! ♦

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