WELLNESS

If You Feel Like You're Settling in Relationships, the Bubble Theory Could Explain Why

HAS INTENTIONAL DATING BECOME *TOO INTENTIONAL*?

BY SYDNEY MEISTER • PUBLISHED FEB 19, 2024

DASHA BUROBINA FOR PUREWOW

"*Fine*, I'll go out with you," you say after he's been asking for years. He looks at you puzzled. "Really?" He responds like a deer in the headlights. You pause. Why *did* you agree to go out with him? He's been courting you since high school—and you love him of course, but not in a sexual way. Maybe you just got your heart broken (again). Or maybe, you're just sick of the dating scene. In any case, you're lonely, and he's the only thing that feels like home. *He's been hiding in plain sight*, you convince yourself. But then, three years later, you wake up resentful. Kicking yourself for taking the easy way out. Settling for something your gut told you wasn't right.

This scenario is the best way I can depict an economic phenomenon that, I think, applies to dating: **the Bubble Theory**. See, I was raised by a Wall Street guy (read: Soonicorn), and I've long been fascinated by the volatility of the stock market. The hot and cold nature of trading is very similar to dating. One day, you're on top of the world, feeling high off of a successful deal—or a great first date—and the next, you're destitute. Reeling from a loss. It could be missing out on a six-figure contract or being stood up by someone you matched with on Hinge. Suddenly, there's a knee-jerk instinct to turn inward. You go back to what's comfortable—what's *safe*. Low risk, high reward. (It's economics 101.) So now, the same school of thought can be applied to dating. Singles have gotten so used to the disappointment, isolation and restriction that ensued during the pandemic, that they've decided to replace the apps with a dependable solution: Date who you already know.

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What Is the Bubble Theory?

Crash course: A bubble is the symptom of an economic cycle. Seemingly out of nowhere, the market value of an asset escalates rapidly. This incites a sudden inflation that is eventually followed by a shrinkage; a decrease in value that's known as a "bubble burst" (or for anyone from my generation, think 2008). Now for the dating theory: We're in a post-pandemic cycle that was triggered by the isolation singles underwent during lockdown. A rapid withdrawal of connection—and our survival instinct to self-protect—has led to a widespread fear of risk when it comes to dating today. As a result, singles have found a cushy, familiar solution in settling down with people from their social circles (as opposed to going out into the world and dating someone new).

What Caused the Dating Bubble?

Naturally, my first thought was how did we get here? Perhaps it had something to do with the intentional dating trend, which is another COVID-19 theme that forced us to *really* think about what we want in a partner. "Dating with intention provides emotional and psychological safety because it's more empowering than a random approach to dating," Francesca Hogi, dating expert and podcast host of *Dear Franny* tells me. In other words, it's become a mindful way for us to protect our emotions without investing too much time

and energy. “It weeds out those too impatient or noncommittal to get to know you,” Hogi explains.

In fact, a post-pandemic study of college students (ages 20-25) cited intentional dating as a universal trend—mostly caused by partner churn prior to lockdown. (Partner churn is basically just the formal term for situationship). Much like cyclical stocks that rise and fall with the economy, non-committal relationships are unpredictable in nature. This is why situationships tend to breed an addictive, tumultuous cycle that’s hard to break out of. You leave their apartment in the morning feeling euphoric—high off of attention and full from intimacy. But then, in the afternoon, insecurity and rejection set in. You’re suddenly dissecting everything he said, looking for clues, and fixating on what he meant by, *I don’t want to make promises I can’t keep*. “This was typical for young adults prior to COVID-19,” the study reports—adding that two-thirds of participants had been in a situationship before quarantine.

Now fast-forward to 2020. With stay-at-home orders in place, situationships started to mirror the collapse of Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers. Because the dynamic is sustained by sporadic reward, usually through sex, it became impossible to maintain without actually *seeing* each other (and wondering when you'll see each other next). This caused many twenty-somethings to leave lockdown with two takeaways: a) it’s best to cut ties with a partner who can’t give me what I want and b) it’s time to "choose myself" and prioritize autonomy, per the study.

The TL;DR? Singles learned to detach from situationships (or toxic relationships) during lockdown, which led to the rapid emergence of intentional dating. This brings us to the present bubble, where there’s an emphasis on minimal risk and self-preservation when it comes to dating.

How Has the Bubble Led to Settling?

Let’s use an example from the study. One respondent named Nadia, 25 started hooking up with an old acquaintance during lockdown. Per her interview, Nadia had broken things off with a partner from college after moving back home. “It was too much emotional baggage,” she explains. Her reasoning, which echoed many other respondents’, was simple: **Singles within our bubble are the best of what we’re working with post-pandemic.**

Of course, you can’t hear ‘pandemic dating’ without immediately thinking: dating apps. But this year, Gen Z is looking to unequivocally ditch the apps—despite having no idea where to meet people in-person. In turn, we’re left with a dangerous paradox: settling for convenience seems less daunting than meeting someone new. “The reliance on dating apps has caused many individuals to feel fatigued by a stream of constant online interaction…they’re longing for more authentic, offline connections,” Dr. Sanam Hafeez, neuropsychologist and director of Comprehend the Mind, tells me. “The competitive nature of the apps has created pressure to constantly present yourself in a favorable light; vying for attention among a large pool of users." She continues, "The uncertainty and disruption of the pandemic has shifted people's priorities. Stability, reliability and emotional support are taking precedence over superficial attributes and idealized notions of romance. Now, singles may be more inclined to settle for a partner who meets their fundamental emotional and practical needs—even if they do not fully align with their previous relationship criteria.”

To that end, the trauma of situationship culture—coupled with isolation from the pandemic—has caused us to second-guess what genuine connection feels like. “With limited opportunities to meet new people, many singles are placing greater importance on each potential romantic partner they encounter,” Hafeez warns. “This can lead to heightened expectations for compatibility and chemistry, which may not always be realistic or healthy. The prolonged periods of separation and limited socialization during the pandemic could have led to an increased desire for companionship. Because of the intense loneliness singles underwent, they may be more willing to compromise on their standards to alleviate feelings of isolation.”

Simply put, settling within our social circles has become the easiest, most risk-averse road to companionship. Not only is it an excuse to ditch the apps (since saying, "We met on Hinge" is like shouting *Macbeth* in the theatre), but it also allows us to craft the illusion that love has been under our noses all along. Suddenly, his SpongeBob ass tattoo doesn't seem like such a dealbreaker. Who cares if he asks to split the bill like he did when you were friends? Hafeez adds, "The pandemic has created a sense of urgency or pressure to find a partner, especially for those who experienced significant disruption in their social lives or relationships. This sense of urgency might be swaying singles to lower their standards or overlook potential red flags in their quest for companionship and connection."

What Happens When Dating Bubbles Bursts?

Naturally, women have long feared that they won't find love before their biological clocks stop ticking. Add to that the fact that, after we turn 30, society starts treating women like cartons of expiring milk. Between our uterus' dwindling egg count and the race toward marriage (honestly, the fear that we'll turn into Central Park bird ladies in general) settling…doesn't seem that bad.

Here's my rebuttal: Bubbles crash because they remain overvalued for an indeterminate amount of time. What's more, when they do crash, it often takes investors by surprise, leaving them flabbergasted by substantial losses. We've all heard the story of a woman picking up one day, *Kramer vs. Kramer* style, and leaving (what seemed to be) a perfect life behind. For men, this looks more like a mid-life crisis, usually involving an affair or a yellow Porsche. These crises of faith are stereotypes for a reason, however. They're rebellions against a lack of meaning or connection felt mid-life, typically brought on by years of avoidance.

"Being too risk-averse can result in missed connections with potential partners who could enrich your life," Hafeez points out. "By avoiding risks, individuals may miss out on the chance to build intimacy and trust in relationships, which requires vulnerability and openness." She also notes, "While it's important to prioritize emotional well-being, finding a balance between caution and openness can lead to more fulfilling dating experiences and deeper connections with others."

The Bottom Line? Settling down with a longtime friend and settling down for convenience are hardly one and the same. It goes without saying that every scenario has its own shade of grey—and friends-to-lovers often make for the strongest couples. (Watch: *When Harry Met Sally*). Thanks to the pandemic, however, I fear that we're in a dating bubble that's poised to burst. The last four years have been largely defined by retreat and self-security, nudging us towards relationships that feel safe and familiar. Yet, in ten (or 20…) years from now, when lockdown is decades past, will we regret shying away from risk in our love lives? They say you're supposed to end up with someone who feels like home… but what happens when there's no outside world to compare it to?

If you want my prerogative, being stood up by a Hinge date at 24 seems far less mortifying than waking up sad and stagnant at 52.

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