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How to look after your mental health when you're dating online

As St Valentine's Day approaches, *beyondblue* is encouraging Australians to look after their mental health.

Dating can be a trigger for some people with an anxiety condition, a fact *beyondblue's* Lead Clinical Adviser Dr Grant Blashki says might cause extra stress for some in the social media age.

"Although Valentine's Day is a romantic day for many couples, as a GP I have noticed such days can add fuel to the fire for people who are having trouble with relationships," Dr Blashki said.

"Some people who have mental health issues find that online dating really sets off their social anxieties, feelings of inadequacy and fear of rejection."

Anxiety affects one in four Australians – twice as many as depression – and research shows one in three people take a year or more before recognising their symptoms as anxiety.

Dr Blashki said the tone and nature of social media and online dating sites or apps caused understandable issues for some of his patients, especially those who experienced anxiety.

"Some people experiencing anxiety conditions avoid social situations or even dates because they find the experience brings on their anxiety," Dr Blashki said. "This can sometimes lead to social isolation which can further compromise a person's mental health.

"Social media often presents an idealised version of people's lives and relationships which can add fuel to the fire for people who have few social connections."

He said it could be useful to balance time spent socialising online with time spent socialising offline.

"In my experience, for some people there is an obsessive and addictive quality to some of their social media behaviour and this can manifest as frequent checking for likes and approval comments, when their time might be better spent going and meeting some people face to face," Dr Blashki said.

"Sometimes, we can lose perspective on the big picture and get caught up with the idea that everyone else's lives are so perfect based on social media posts. This can feed into an unhealthy comparative and unrealistic benchmark for their own life."

And if in doubt, you can always take a social media holiday.

"Online, people sometimes post harsh comments or behave cruelly in ways they never would face to face, so it can be a brutal medium for all of us, including those experiencing mental health issues," he said.

The recent [Safer Internet Day](#), a campaign from the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, reminds us that a better internet, where respect is shared, starts with you.

Dr Blashki offered some simple tips for looking after ourselves when using online dating sites or apps:

- Remember those profile pictures are people too – everyone deserves respect;
- If you don't like it, block the content or switch it off;
- There are other ways to meet people, for example by joining a sports club; and
- Simple ways to manage anxiety include: trying the [Anxiety Checklist](#); check out the [BRAVE Program](#) for the prevention and treatment of childhood and adolescent anxiety; or try these [10 strategies](#).

"If you do feel the need for more support you can always visit the *beyondblue* website for more information, visit your GP or see a psychologist," Dr Blashki said.

Mental health professionals are available at the *beyondblue* Support Service via phone 24/7 on **1300 22 4636** or via www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support for online chat (3PM – 12AM AEST or email responses within 24 hours).

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