Looking for love online

Alice,

I recently (about one month ago) met a guy on-line and we have been BF, GF for about three weeks now. Every one is worried about what will happen when we finally see each other for the first time. I just want to meet him. I feel as if I have known him for all my life. We talk all the time and he always tells me that he loves me. How can I be sure that what he says is what he really means?

Please answer me...

Lost in LOVE

Answer

Dear Lost in LOVE,

It seems like many people know at least one person who has met a new friend, activity partner, and yes, even a love interest online. In fact, according to Pew Research, one out of every ten Americans have used an online dating service or mobile app. While more and more people are starting a relationship online (some of which end up being long-term), the process is not without its risks. It sounds like you've made a connection with a person and are interested in exploring that connection further. By taking some precautions, you can meet your online boyfriend and start to get a better idea of how he really feels about you, and just as important, how you feel about him.

One factor to consider is that although you've communicated online and over the phone with your boyfriend, he is still in many respects a stranger. We may wish it weren't so, but people do lie about themselves online. As you decide whether or not to meet him, you may want to prepare yourself to deal with the possibility that he has not been truthful about his age, job, background, relationship status, or other important parts of his life.

Here are some tips for staying safe when meeting any online friend in person:

- **Take your time.** You don't have to meet right away. Getting to know someone through email, messaging, and the phone will help you understand who they are and how interested you are in meeting.
- **Meet in a public place, and bring a friend along.** For example, you could meet at a shopping center and have your friend nearby. Not only can your friend help get you out
of any sticky situations, s/he can also debrief with you later about what you think of your new friend.

- **Do not meet someone alone.** If s/he insists on meeting alone, there should be big, flashing warning lights going off in your mind. Someone who is truly interested in you will be happy to meet in public.

- **Tell others where you're going and why.** Consider giving what contact information you have for this person to a trusted friend. Some people also ask a friend to call them with an "emergency," so they will have an excuse to leave if the meeting isn't going well.

- **Continue to meet in public for awhile.** Don't go home with this person until you know her/him well (knowing someone well includes knowing some of their friends, and having had some of your friends or family meet her/him, knowing their living situation, and being able to speak openly with her/him about what you are and are not comfortable with).

As you can see, the main emphasis when meeting someone new is to let people who care about you know where you will be and who you will be with. Telling a friend or family member has the added benefit of creating a supportive network of people who will be able to discuss your feelings with you before and after you meet your online acquaintance.

Moving on to your question about if your online boyfriend "really means" when he says he loves you? no one can determine this except for you and him. It may help to ask yourself some questions, such as:

- How do I feel about him telling me he loves me so often? Do I really think that it's possible for him to know he loves me so soon, without meeting in person?
- How do I feel about him, based on our conversations so far? Am I interested in knowing him better?
- You mention that your friends and family are concerned. Why is that? Are they concerned for your safety? Are they afraid you will be disappointed when you meet your boyfriend?

If you do meet him, a few different results are possible: you may find out you have been deceived and feel disappointed, sad, confused or upset; you may find out he was truthful, but also realize that you are not really interested in having a romantic relationship with him; or you may meet him and continue to be interested in dating him. Even after meeting him (if you decide to), it may still take some time to understand his true feelings; this is simply the nature of getting to know someone? it takes time.

It's clear from your question that you have made a connection with someone you feel understands you. These types of connections are important to have, and can turn into friendships and/or romantic relationships. However, remind yourself as often as you need to that there is no hurry; taking time to get to know someone is the best way to figure out your true feelings, as well as theirs.

Best of luck and be safe,

Alice!

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