
The Seven Habits of Highly Defective Dating

by Joshua Harris

When I was a kid, my mom taught me two rules of grocery shopping. First, never shop when you're hungry—everything will look good and you'll spend too much money. And second, make sure to pick a good cart.

I've got the first rule down, but I haven't had much success with that second rule. I seem to have a knack for picking rusty grocery carts that make clattering noises or ones with squeaky wheels that grate on your nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard.

But by far the worst kind of cart you could pick is the "swerver." Have you ever dealt with one of these? This kind of cart has a mind of its own. You want to go in a straight line, but the cart wants to swerve to the left and take out the cat food display. (And, much to our dismay and embarrassment, it too often succeeds!) The shopper who has chosen a swerving cart can have no peace. Every maneuver, from turning down the cereal aisle to gliding alongside the meat section, becomes a battle—the shopper's will pitted against the cart's.

Why am I talking to you about shopping carts when this book is about dating? Well, I recall my bad luck with grocery carts because many times I've experienced a similar "battle of wills" with dating. I'm not

talking about conflicts between me and the girls I've dated. I mean that I've struggled with the whole process. And based on my experiences and my exploration of God's Word, I've concluded that for Christians, dating is a swerver—a set of values and attitudes that wants to go in a direction different from the one God has mapped out for us. Let me tell you why.

Self-control Isn't Enough

I once heard a youth minister speak on the topic of love and sex. He told a heart-rending story about Eric and Jenny, two strong Christians who had actively participated in his youth group years earlier. Eric and Jenny's dating relationship had started out innocently—Friday nights at the movies and rounds of putt-putt golf. But as time went by, their physical relationship slowly began to accelerate, and they wound up sleeping together. Soon afterward they broke up, discouraged and hurt.

The pastor telling the story saw both of them years later at a high school reunion. Jenny was now married and had a child. Eric was still single. But both came to him separately and expressed emotional trauma and guilt over past memories.

"When I see him, I remember it all so vividly," Jenny cried.

Eric expressed similar feelings. "When I see her, the hurt comes back," he told his former youth pastor. "The wounds still haven't healed."

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When the youth minister had finished telling this story, you could have heard a pin drop. We all sat waiting for some sort of solution. We knew the reality of the story he told. Some of us had made the same mistake or watched it happen in the lives of our friends. We wanted something better. We wanted the pastor to tell us what we were supposed to do instead.

But he gave no alternative that afternoon. Evidently the pastor thought the couple's only mistake was giving in to temptation. He seemed to think that Eric

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and Jenny should have had more respect for each other and more self-control. Although this pastor encouraged a different outcome—saving sex for marriage—he didn't offer a different practice.

Is this the answer? Head out on the same course as those who have fallen and hope that in the critical moment you'll be able to stay in control? Giving young people this kind of advice is like giving a person a cart that swerves and sending him into a store stocked with the world's most expensive chinaware. Despite the narrow aisles and glass shelves laden with delicate dishes, this person is expected to navigate the rows with a cart known to go off course? I don't think so.

Yet this is exactly what we try in many of our relationships. We see the failed attempts around us, but we refuse to replace this "cart" called dating. We want to stay on the straight and narrow path and serve God, yet we continue a practice that often pulls us in the wrong direction.

Defective Dating

Dating has built-in problems, and if we continue to date according to the system as it is today, we'll more than likely swerve into trouble. Eric and Jenny probably had good intentions, but they founded their relationship on our culture's defective attitudes and patterns for romance. Unfortunately, even in their adulthood they continue to reap the consequences.

The following "seven habits of highly defective dating" are some of the "swerves" dating relationships often make. Perhaps you can relate to one or two of them. (I know I can!)

1. Dating leads to intimacy but not necessarily to commitment.

Jayne was a junior in high school; her boyfriend,

Troy, was a senior. Troy was everything Jayme ever wanted in a guy, and for eight months they were inseparable. But two months before Troy left for college, he abruptly announced that he didn't want to see Jayme anymore.

"When we broke up it was definitely the toughest thing that's ever happened to me," Jayme told me afterward. Even though they'd never physically gone beyond a kiss, Jayme had completely given her heart and emotions to Troy. Troy had enjoyed the intimacy while it served his needs but then rejected her when he was ready to move on.

Does Jayme's story sound familiar to you? Perhaps you've heard something similar from a friend, or maybe you've experienced it yourself. Like many dating relationships, Jayme and Troy's became intimate with little or no thought about commitment or how either of them would be affected when it ended. We can blame Troy for being a jerk, but let's ask ourselves a question. What's really the point of most dating relationships? Often dating encourages intimacy for the sake of intimacy—two people getting close to each other without any real intention of making a long-term commitment.

Deepening intimacy without defining a level of commitment is plainly dangerous. It's like going mountain climbing with a partner who isn't sure that she wants the responsibility of holding your rope. When you've climbed two thousand feet up a mountain face, you don't want to have a conversation about how she feels "tied down" by your relationship. In the same way, many people experience deep hurt when they open themselves up emotionally and physically only to be abandoned by others who proclaim they're not ready for "serious commitment."

An intimate relationship is a beautiful experience that God wants us to enjoy. But He had made the fulfillment of intimacy a byproduct of commitment-based love. You might say that intimacy between a man and a woman is the icing on the cake of a relationship headed toward marriage. And if we look at intimacy that way, then most dating relationships are pure icing. They usually lack a purpose or clear destination. In most cases, especially in high school, dating is short term, serving the needs of the moment. People date because they want to enjoy the emotional and even physical benefits of intimacy without the responsibility of real commitment.

In fact, that's what the original revolution of dating was all about. Dating hasn't been around forever. As I see it, dating is a product of our entertainment-driven, "disposable-everything" American culture. Long before *Seventeen* magazine ever gave teenagers tips on

dating, people did things very differently.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a guy and girl became romantically involved only if they planned to marry. If a young man spent time at a girl's home, family and friends assumed that he intended to propose to her. But shifting attitudes in culture and the arrival of the automobile brought radical changes. The new "rules" allowed people to indulge in all the thrills of romantic love without having any intention of marriage. Author Beth Bailey documents these changes in a book whose title, *From Front Porch to Backseat*, says everything about the difference in society's attitude when dating became the norm. Love and romance became things people could enjoy solely for their recreational value.

Though much has changed since the 1920s, the tendency of dating relationships to move toward intimacy without commitment remains very much the same.

For Christians this negative swerve is at the root of dating's problems. Intimacy without commitment awakens desires—emotional and physical—that neither person can justly meet. In 1 Thessalonians 4:6 (KJV) the Bible calls this "defrauding," ripping someone off by raising expectations but not delivering on the promise. Pastor Stephen Olford describes defrauding as "arousing a hunger we cannot righteously satisfy"—promising something we cannot or will not provide.

Intimacy without commitment, like icing without cake, can be sweet, but it ends up making us sick.

2. Dating tends to skip the "friendship" stage of a relationship.

Jack met Libby on a church-sponsored college retreat. Libby was a friendly girl with a reputation for taking her relationship with God seriously. Jack and Libby wound up chatting during a game of volleyball and seemed to really hit it off. Jack wasn't interested in an intense relationship, but he wanted to get to know Libby better. Two days after the retreat he called her up and asked if she'd like to go out to a movie the next weekend. She said yes.

Did Jack make the right move? Well, he did in terms of scoring a date, but if he really wanted to build a friendship, he more than likely struck out. One-on-one dating has the tendency to move a guy and girl beyond friendship and toward romance too quickly.

Have you ever known someone who worried about dating a long-time friend? If you have, you've probably heard that person say something like this: "He asked me out, but I'm just afraid that if we start actually *dating* it will change our friendship." What is this person really saying? People who make statements like

that, whether or not they realize it, recognize that dating encourages romantic expectations. In a true friendship you don't feel pressured by knowing you "like" the other person or that he or she "likes" you back. You feel free to be yourself and do things together without spending three hours in front of the mirror, making sure you look perfect.

C. S. Lewis describes friendship as two people walking side by side toward a common goal. Their mutual interest brings them together. Jack skipped this "commonality" stage by asking Libby out on a typical,

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no-brainer, dinner-and-movie date where their "coupleness" was the focus.

In dating, romantic attraction is often the relationship's cornerstone. The premise of dating is "I'm attracted to you; therefore, let's get to know each other." The premise of friendship, on the other hand, is "We're interested in the same things; let's enjoy these common interests together." If, after developing a friendship, romantic attraction forms, that's an added bonus.

Intimacy without commitment is defrauding. Intimacy without friendship is superficial. A relationship based only on physical attraction and romantic feelings will last only as long as the feelings last.

3. Dating often mistakes a physical relationship for love.

Dave and Heidi didn't mean to make out with each other on their first date. Really. Dave doesn't have "only one thing on his mind," and Heidi isn't "that kind of girl." It just happened. They had gone to a concert together and afterward watched a video at Heidi's house. During the movie, Heidi made a joke about Dave's attempt at dancing during the concert. He started tickling her. Their playful wrestling suddenly stopped when they found themselves staring into each other's eyes as Dave was leaning over her on the living room floor. They kissed. It was like something out of a movie. It felt so right.

It may have felt right, but the early introduction of physical affection to their relationship added confusion. Dave and Heidi hadn't really gotten to know each other, but suddenly they felt close. As the relationship

progressed, they found it difficult to remain objective. Whenever they'd try to evaluate the merits of their relationship, they'd immediately picture the intimacy and passion of their physical relationship. "It's so obvious we love each other," Heidi thought. But did they? Just because lips have met doesn't mean hearts have joined. And just because two bodies are drawn to each other doesn't mean two people are right for each other. A physical relationship doesn't equal love.

When we consider that our culture as a whole regards the words "love" and "sex" as interchangeable,

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able, we shouldn't be surprised that many dating relationships mistake physical attraction and sexual intimacy for true love. Sadly, many Christian dating relationships reflect this false mind-set.

When we examine the progression of most relationships, we can clearly see how dating encourages this substitution. First, as we pointed out, dating does not always lead to lifelong commitment. For this reason, many dating relationships begin with physical attraction; the underlying attitude is that a person's primary value comes from the way he or she looks and performs as a date. Even before a kiss has been given, the physical, sensual aspect of the relationship has taken priority.

Next, the relationship often steamrolls toward intimacy. Because dating doesn't require commitment, the two people involved allow the needs and passions of the moment to take center stage. The couple doesn't look at each other as possible life partners or weigh the responsibilities of marriage. Instead, they focus on the demands of the present. And with that mind-set, the couple's physical relationship can easily become the focus.

And if a guy and girl skip the friendship stage of their relationship, lust often becomes the common interest that brings the couple together. As a result, they gauge the seriousness of their relationship by the level of their physical involvement. Two people who date each other want to feel that they're special to each other, and they can concretely express this through physical intimacy. They begin to distinguish their "special relationship" through hand-holding, kissing, and everything else that follows. For this reason, most

people believe that going out with someone means physical involvement.

Focusing on the physical is plainly sinful. God demands sexual purity. And He does this for our own good. Physical involvement can distort two people's perspectives on each other and lead to unwise choices. God also knows we'll carry the memories of our past physical involvements into marriage. He doesn't want us to live with guilt and regret.

Physical involvement can make two people feel close. But if many people in dating relationships really examined the focus of their relationships, they'd probably discover that all they have in common is lust.

4. Dating often isolates a couple from other vital relationships.

While Garreth and Jenny were dating, they didn't need anyone else. Since it meant spending time with Jenny, Garreth had no problem giving up Wednesday night Bible study with the guys. Jenny didn't think twice about how little she talked to her younger sister and mother now that she was dating Garreth. Nor did she realize that when she did talk to them, she always started her sentences with "Garreth this..." and "Garreth said such and such..." Without intending to, both had foolishly and selfishly cut themselves off from other relationships.

By its very definition, dating is about two people focusing on each other. Unfortunately, in most cases the rest of the world fades into the background. If you've ever felt like a third wheel hanging out with two friends who are dating each other, you know how true this is.

Granted, of all dating's problems, this one is probably the easiest to fix. Yet Christians still need to take it seriously. Why? First, because when we allow one relationship to crowd out others, we lose perspective. In Proverbs 15:22 we read, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." If we make our decisions about life based solely on the influence of one relationship, we'll probably make poor judgments.

Of course we make this same mistake in any number of non-romantic relationships. But we face this problem more often in dating relationships because these relationships involve our hearts and emotions. And because dating focuses on the plans of a couple, major issues related to marriage, family, and faith are likely at stake.

And if two people haven't defined their level of commitment, they're particularly at risk. You put yourself in a precarious position if you isolate yourself from the people who love and support you because you dive wholeheartedly into a romantic relationship not

grounded in commitment. In *Passion and Purity*, Elisabeth Elliot states, "Unless a man is prepared to ask a woman to be his wife, what right has he to claim her exclusive attention? Unless she has been asked to marry him, why would a sensible woman promise any man her exclusive attention?" How many people end dating relationships only to find their ties to other friends severed?

When Garreth and Jenny mutually decided to stop dating, they were surprised to find their other friendships in disrepair. It's not that their other friends didn't like them; they hardly knew them anymore. Neither had invested any time or effort in maintaining these friendships while they concentrated on their dating relationship.

Perhaps you've done a similar thing. Or maybe you know the pain and frustration of being put on the back burner for the sake of a friend's boyfriend or girlfriend. The exclusive attention so often expected in dating relationships has a tendency to steal people's passion for serving in the church and to isolate them from the friends who love them most, family members who know them best, and, sadly, even God, whose will is far more important than any romantic interest.

5. Dating, in many cases, distracts young adults from their primary responsibility of preparing for the future.

We cannot live in the future, but neglecting our current obligations will disqualify us for tomorrow's responsibilities. Being distracted by love is not such a bad thing—unless God wants you to be doing something else.

One of the saddest tendencies of dating is to distract young adults from developing their God-given abilities and skills. Instead of equipping themselves with the character, education, and experience necessary to succeed in life, many allow themselves to be consumed by the present needs that dating emphasizes.

Christopher and Stephanie started dating when they were both fifteen years old. In many ways, they had the model dating relationship. They never got involved physically, and when they broke up two years later, their breakup was amicable. So what harm was done? Well, none in the sense that they didn't get into trouble. But we can begin to see some problems when we look at what Christopher and Stephanie could have been doing instead. Maintaining a relationship takes a lot of time and energy. Christopher and Stephanie spent countless hours talking, writing, thinking, and often worrying about their relationship. The energy they exerted stole from other pursuits. For

Christopher, the relationship drained his enthusiasm for his hobby of computer programming and his involvement with the church's worship band. Though Stephanie doesn't hold it against Christopher, she rejected several opportunities to go on short-term missions because she didn't want to be away from him. Their relationship swallowed up time both of them could have spent developing skills and exploring new opportunities.

Dating may help you practice being a good boyfriend or girlfriend, but what are these skills really

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worth? Even if you're going out with the person you will one day marry, a preoccupation with being the perfect boyfriend or girlfriend now can actually hinder you from being the future husband or wife that person will one day need.

6. Dating can cause discontentment with God's gift of singleness.

On my brother's third birthday, he received a beautiful blue bicycle. The miniature bike was brand-new, complete with training wheels, protective padding, and streamers. I thought he couldn't ask for a better first bike, and I couldn't wait to see his reaction.

But to my chagrin my brother didn't seem impressed with the present. When my dad pulled the bike out of its large cardboard box, my brother looked at it a moment, smiled, then began playing with the box. It took my family and me a few days to convince him that the real gift was the bike.

I can't help but think that God views our infatuation with short-term dating relationships much as I did my brother's love for a worthless box. A string of uncommitted dating relationships is not the gift! God gives us singleness—a season of our lives unmatched in its boundless opportunities for growth, learning, and service—and we view it as a chance to get bogged down in finding and keeping boyfriends and girlfriends. But we don't find the real beauty of singleness in pursuing romance with as many different people as we want. We find the real beauty in using our freedom

to serve God with abandon.

Dating causes dissatisfaction because it encourages a wrong use of this freedom. God has placed a desire in most men and women for marriage. Although we don't sin when we look forward to marriage, we might be guilty of poor stewardship of our singleness when we allow a desire for something God obviously doesn't have for us *yet* to rob our ability to enjoy and appreciate what He *has* given us. Dating plays a role in fostering this dissatisfaction because it gives single people just enough intimacy to make them wish they had more. Instead of enjoying the unique qualities of singleness, dating causes people to focus on what they don't have.

7. Dating creates an artificial environment for evaluating another person's character.

Although most dating relationships don't head toward marriage, some—especially those among older, college-age students—are motivated by marriage. People who sincerely want to find out if someone is potential marriage material need to understand that typical dating actually hinders that process. Dating creates an artificial environment for two people to interact. As a result, each person can easily convey an equally artificial image.

In the driveway of our house we have a basketball hoop that we can adjust to different heights. When I lower the hoop three feet from its normal setting, I can look like a pretty good basketball player. Dunking is no problem. I glide across the pavement and slam the ball down every time. But my "skill" exists only because I've lowered the standards—I'm not playing in a real environment. Put me on a court with a ten-foot hoop, and I'm back to being a white boy who can't jump.

In a similar way, dating creates an artificial environment that doesn't demand a person to accurately portray his or her positive and negative characteristics. On a date, a person can charm his or her way into a date's heart. He drives a nice car and pays for everything; she looks great. But who cares? Being fun on a

date doesn't say anything about a person's character or ability to be a good husband or wife.

Part of the reason dating is fun is that it gives us a break from real life. For this reason, when I'm married I plan to make a habit of dating my wife. In marriage, you *need* to take breaks from the stress of kids and

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work; you need to just get away for a bit. But two people weighing the possibility of marriage need to make sure they don't just interact within the fun, romantic settings of dating. Their priority shouldn't be to get away from real life; they need a strong dose of objective reality! They need to see each other in the real-life settings of family and friends. They need to watch each other serving and working. How does he interact with the people who know him best? How does she react when things don't go perfectly? When considering a potential mate, we need to find the answers to these kinds of questions—questions that dating won't answer.

Old Habits Die Hard

The seven habits of highly defective dating reveal that we can't fix many of dating's problems by merely "dating right." I believe that dating has dangerous tendencies that don't go away just because Christians do the steering. And even those Christians who can avoid the major pitfalls of premarital sex and traumatic breakups often spend much of their energy wrestling with temptation.

If you've dated, this probably sounds familiar to you. I think that for too long we've approached relationships using the world's mind-set and values, and if you've tried it, you might agree with me that it just doesn't work. Let's not waste any more time battling the swerving cart of dating. It's time for a new attitude.