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Totally Relaxed Dating **By Sam R. Hamburg**

Sounds like an oxymoron doesn't it, like "dry rain" or "jumbo shrimp." But it is possible. In fact, you've taken several steps toward it already. I'm going to tell you about another step you can take: a new way of thinking about what dating is for--about the fundamental task of dating, which will enable you to meet new people and be totally relaxed from the get-go.

You are older now than the last time you were seriously dating. Some people consider that a disadvantage. I consider it an advantage because most of us do get wiser as we get older. The wisdom you've acquired has enabled you to make some important decisions about dating way before you begin. You've decided, for example, that you will tell a dating prospect about your kids right up front. You've also decided that if your relationship with this person progresses beyond the first few dates, you have him or her meet your kids, and you will carefully observe how your date reacts to your kids and how they react to your date. You've decided that if someone rejects you because you have kids, that's his or her problem. Most importantly, you've decided that if someone you're dating is not very positive about your kids, you will not let yourself feel very positive about that person, no matter how attractive he or she may be in other ways.

Having made all these decisions in advance, you've already eliminated a large source of dating anxiety and brought yourself that much closer to totally relaxed dating. However, you may well be experiencing another kind of anxiety, an old anxiety that's troubled most of us to one degree or another for as long as we can remember--the anxiety about being liked. I have good news for you on that, although it may not sound good at first: You can't make anybody like you. But that's OK because making someone else like you is not the task in interpersonal relations, whether romantic or nonromantic.

It took me until well into my adulthood to come to this realization. It was about 20 years ago, when I was starting out in private practice. In those good old days, before managed care, a medical doctor was free to refer patients directly to the psychologist of his or her choice--no 800 numbers, no precertification, no nothing. Accordingly, a psychologist just starting out in practice would make an effort to meet as many local doctors as possible, in the hope that some of them would make referrals. That's what I did. I met a lot of doctors, tried to impress them, tried to make them like me.

Most of them didn't like me. At least that's my guess, since they never referred anyone to me. But, truth be told, I wasn't impressed with most of them either. Every once in a while, though, I would meet a doctor I did like. I would be impressed by that doctor but not only that. There was a kind of click, a feeling of "chemistry" that was almost instant. And, lo and behold, whenever I felt that way about a doctor, the doctor felt that way about me.

Why did those particular doctors like me? Had I done a better job of making them like me than I had with the rest? Of course not. When a doctor and I liked each other it was simply because we already possessed the raw material for liking each other: a sense of similarity in outlook, and a sense of mutual understanding.

That raw material is either there between you and someone else or it isn't. And you can't create it between you if it wasn't there in the first place. If it's there you have a basis for forming a serious and lasting relationship, and if it isn't there you don't. Think of your closest friends. You didn't make them like you. The two of you just hit it off. That click was there.

Reflecting on my experience with the doctors, it finally dawned on me that the task in interpersonal relations, including dating, is not to make someone else like you, but rather to be curious about the other person--to find out if you like them. That feeling will be mutual one way or the other. (And if it turns out that you like the other but they don't like you, or vice versa, that means that whoever is doing the liking is kidding themselves about the presence of that click.)

If you really believe that the task for you in dating is simply to be curious about the other person so that you can determine if you like them--if you believe it deep in your bones, as I do--your dating will be totally relaxed. You will be secure in the understanding that when you meet someone new you don't have to act in any special way, you don't have to try to make any sort of "good impression." All you have to do is be you, which is the most natural and effortless thing in the world. Because you are not preoccupied with what the other person is thinking about you, you can focus your attention and mental energy on what you think of them. Sooner or later you'll experience that click with someone. In the meantime, on your dates between now and then, all you have to do is sit back, relax, and watch the show.