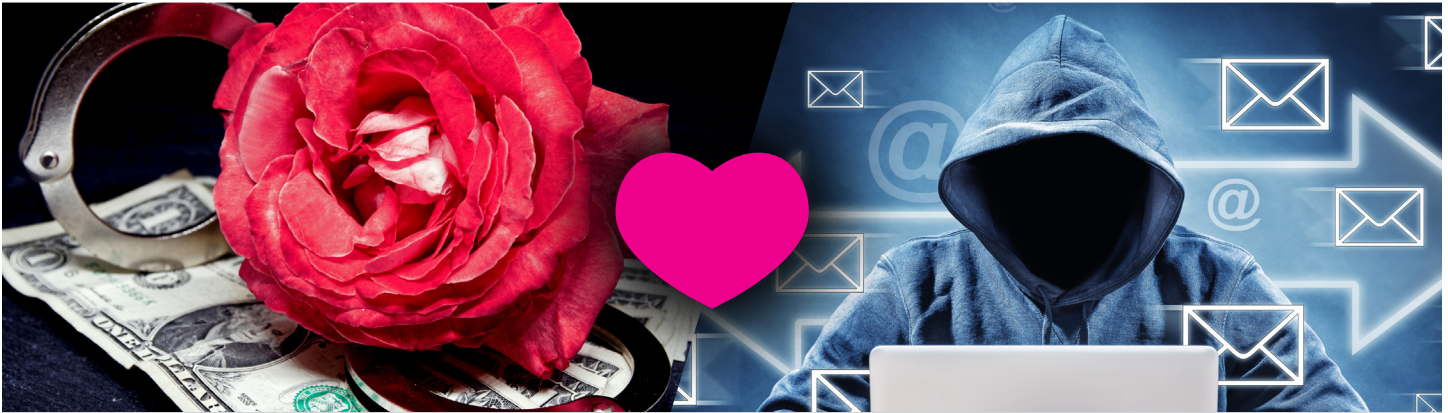




UNITED STATES POSTAL INSPECTION SERVICE

Stay Safe When Dating Online



It should be no surprise that so many are turning to online sites to connect with others. Many dating sites take steps to provide a safe forum for meeting online, but more can be done to prevent scams and provide safe access to online systems.

In the meantime, there are steps everyone can take to promote safe online relationships:

- First, with any Internet-based relationship, keep your personal details to yourself until you meet face to face.
- Next, do a quick Google search of the other person's name and the town they claim to be living in.
- From there, proceed slowly and look for inconsistencies in the other person's profile.
- Keep an eye out for signs the relationship is moving in a direction that it wouldn't otherwise go if meeting in real life.
- As you get to know the other person, gently apply the brakes if your new friend pushes to take the conversation to private email. Stay on the site's website until it's time to meet in person and you like what you see when in the same room.

Indications that someone may not be who they say they are:

- Their name and the name embedded in their email address does not match.
- Obvious spelling and grammar errors.
- The online profile suddenly disappears from the dating site.
- They pledged their love way too quickly.
- They asked you to send or receive money/packages on someone else's behalf.
- They need money right away due to a medical emergency, or they need a visa or air tickets.
- A business opportunity arose that was too good to turn down. Can you wire a loan?

People conducting online imposter scams frequently spin the same lines or tell the same backstory over and over again. That's where *Google search* can be especially helpful. If an online love interest starts making declarations of undying devotion and churning out love poems, search some of the lines on the Internet and see where they've been used before. The expressions and pet phrases that online catfishers use are frequently recycled.

Common tall tales include:

- *My child is being cared for by a nanny or guardian.*
- *You are my love or my darling.*
- *My wife or husband is dead.*
- *I cannot wait to be with you.*
- *My child is already calling you "mom" or "dad."*



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A legitimate love interest will understand if you ask for a little proof they are the real McCoy. Request a customized photo. Ask them to hold today's newspaper or a book you have both read in the photo. Next, conduct an online search of any photos they've already provided.

If using **Bing**, choose "Search by Image" by clicking the camera icon under the image search subsection. If using **Google**, do an image search. If the search results indicate something suspicious, it's time to lay the evidence on the table. Don't be surprised if they admit they are a scammer but "have fallen in love for real." That's just another tactic, and a heavily recycled one.

What to do next.

- As difficult as it may be, cease all communication.
- Block attempts to resume contact via email, text, or phone. Above all, resist the temptation to physically locate and confront the person you've been corresponding with. Turn over everything, including copies of correspondence, to law enforcement and let them pursue it.
- If you met on a dating site, contact the site administrator, and let them know.
- If you met on social media, lock down your account.
- New "friend requests" could be the same scammer or one of their associates.
- Screen incoming calls, and let the answering machine pick up any callers not immediately recognized.
- If possible, change your phone number and make it non-public.
- Let both the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center and the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection know.
- Go to the FBI's website at www.ic3.gov and contact the FTC at www.consumer.ftc.gov. Or, call **877-382-4357**.

Taking care of ourselves.

Too often, we tend to blame ourselves. Romance scams hit twice; first in the pocketbook, then in the heart.

Find someone to talk to. If you are unsure how family members will react, find a friend who can listen without judging. Members of the clergy or social services can point you in the direction of support groups and other community resources that can help.

If your bank or credit accounts were used, contact the bank and credit provider and the Social Security Administration. Put a credit alert or freeze on your accounts. Get a free copy of your credit report and look for accounts you don't recognize. The bank where you do business can help make sense of the credit report when it arrives.

Collective action.

- Demand online dating companies have policies and/or software for scam protections.
- Promote and protect public community spaces like libraries, recreational centers, etc. that reduce social isolation that can make people more susceptible to scams.
- Support and protect financial protection agencies that promote awareness around scams and help investigate cases.
- Educate and promote awareness about online romance scams, so people can spot scams and report them.
- Report and encourage others to report online romance scams. The more reports of these scams, the more resources will be dedicated to preventing them in the future.
- Demand bank protective software and bank training for online romance scams to increase scam detection.