

Loneliness — the dating club syndrome

By Mitzi Simon

About 100 people gathered in various-sized groups are crowded into Castel du Roy, a restaurant-bar in Montreal. Some people drift from one group to another; others sit at tables near the walls. No one is sitting alone. That would be an admission of loneliness.

It may look like a big, happy family party, but George V's (not his real name) reason for attending is different.

"The first thing I learned in Kindergarten was one and one makes two," he says. "You don't need a matchmaker to tell you one is a lonely number. You find that out when your wife walks out, leaves the kids and takes the cat."

A medley of Beatles songs drifts over the hum of the conversation. Ironically you hear "Eleanor Rigby."

"All the lonely people — where do they all come from?"

The purpose of this singles club is to avoid loneliness by meeting many people, says Alex Davis, founder of Real People Club of Montreal.

But he stresses matchmaking is not the goal.

"This is like Club Med without the sand," he says. "I see it as a social life insurance with no risks attached for only \$50 a year. If you are interested in life, you can become a part of it. If you don't like the club, you get your money back."

Real People specializes in group meetings in a different bar or club every Wednesday evening. The club has about 300 members and is one of about 20 different dating services and singles clubs in the city.

While not everyone will meet the man or woman they want, many clubs are effective, says an official in the Better Business Bureau. "legitimate agencies that have been in business for many years generally do a good job" says Mark Soucy.

However, there has been a negative image of dating agencies in the past.

There are cases where agencies close after six months, and clients, reluctant to press charges, lose their money. Other agencies have been used as fronts for prostitution. Still others have been suspected of providing dinner dates and sexual activity for visiting out-of-town businessmen.

As a result, dating services now come under the scrutiny of

the fraud and morality squads, which carry out routine checks. There were more than 100 complaints last year in Montreal alone, says an official in the Consumer Protection Bureau.

Nevertheless, complaints don't stop the quest to assuage loneliness, the major factors for keeping dating services and singles clubs in business.

The cost for these services varies from \$30 a year for singles clubs to \$600 a year for one-to-one services.

Alter Ego, a registered dating service, costs \$585, and employs seven counsellors to help people with dating problems.

Registration begins with a personal interview where the applicant completes a questionnaire on physical characteristics, occupation, interests, education, religion, morality, hobbies, drinking and smoking habits. The new member explains what they are looking for and what he or she has to offer.

"This is like club med without the sand ..."



Most of Alter Ego's clients earn more than \$25,000 and are women. Women are more reserved, says co-director Michel Boisvert, and tend to avoid bars and discos. They don't like the pick-up idea and prefer pre-screened potential dates.

"It takes about 10 days for counsellors to match people in the files," says Boisvert. "We arrange the date, call the client and give him or her the choice of meeting. If the answer is yes, I call the interested party and tell him or her to get in touch."

Boisvert says if there are any complaints about a member if anyone has lied in the questionnaire, he returns the money and the contract is broken.

"I can't risk ruining my reputation with problem escorts"

And dating services for students are starting up on at least two Canadian campuses. Criminology student Byron McPherson started Intellectual Introductions this year at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont., and at Carleton University for the Ottawa area. Fees range from \$29 to \$49 per year and clients are guaranteed three dates every three months.

While the impersonality of large urban centres is commonly cited as a cause of loneliness, often a person's lack of self-confidence or a poor self-image may keep that person isolated and unhappy. Broken marriages, separations and death of spouses have all combined to send more people "looking for Mr. or Mrs. Right."

There are more than three million Canadians over the age of 20 that have never married, one million who are widowed and 660,000 divorced. One to two per cent of this number are actively searching for mates or partners in bars, discos, dating agencies, says Dr. Taylor Buckner, chairperson of the Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University.

Many psychologists and sociologists believe a large number of people are inhibited, insecure and inexperienced in social survival. They haven't learned how to communicate with the opposite sex.

Sociologist Michael Sullivan says it would help if people learned how to live alone and used that as a base to reach out whenever there was a need to be with people.

"Too many people feel incomplete without a partner, and this triggers an almost frenzied search through agencies and clubs," he says.

But the club experience does have its advantages, including a member.

"What you see is what you get. If you don't like it, you don't buy it," he says with a smile.

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