

Dating Games

Joy Carroll, Ed.D., Psychologist, LifeLine Counseling Center

The unhealthy games people play during dating make it difficult for couples to establish a trusting, honest relationship. As with most games, it takes at least two people to play. In order to avoid or unhook from dating games, one must be able to identify and deal honestly with the real issues behind the games. Five of the most commonly played dating games are discussed below. Keep in mind that more than one game can be played at once or elements of several games may be used to make a different game.

The “Hard To Get” Game

The Players: The Commitaphobic (primary player) and another player

The Rules of the Game: The Commitaphobic often starts out being the pursuer, but when the other player reciprocates and begins to become invested in the relationship, the commitaphobic becomes distant and detached. If the second player then begins to distance, the Commitaphobic begins to actively pursue. If pressed to commit to the relationship (the big “C” word), the primary player gets panicky and backs off.

Underlying Issues of the Primary Player: Poor self-esteem and fear of emotional intimacy, usually as a result of emotional distance and lack of trust in the childhood family or other significant relationships.

Consequences of the Game: The relationship becomes a frustrating, emotional roller coaster of pursuing and distancing. As long as the Commitaphobic has a fear of intimacy and commitment, he or she will never have a close relationship. This game is particularly unhealthy when the Commitaphobic is paired with a relationship addict who frantically pursues when the Commitaphobic backs off.

The “Please Don’t Leave Me” Game

The Players: The Pleaser (primary player) and another player

The Rules of the Game: The Pleaser is often someone who believes he or she is not complete without a relationship. This player wants to keep everyone happy, avoiding conflict at all cost for fear of losing the relationship. The Pleaser usually feels responsible for the other player and tries to fix everything. The tolerance for pain and abuse is high and he or she may be addicted to the relationship. The Pleaser tends to attract and be attracted to persons who need a caretaker and rescuer such as alcoholics, chemical dependents, sex addicts, and other irresponsible or addictive personalities.

Underlying Issues of the Primary Player: Intense fear of abandonment rooted in the childhood family or other significant relationships; poor self-esteem; poor sense of identity; player may be a survivor of child abuse or an alcoholic family.

Consequences of the Game: The Pleaser loses his or her identity by merging it with the second player’s identity. Self-esteem is generally very low and the Pleaser is usually so involved in meeting the needs of the other player that few of his or her own needs are met. Pleasers are often very depressed due to repressed feelings of anger and hurt and a sense of powerlessness.

The “Control” Game

The Players: The Director and another player.

The Rules of the Game: The Director calls the shots in the game and becomes upset when he or she meets resistance from the other player. The Director must be right at all times and discounts the opinions and feelings of others. The primary player considers himself or herself more rational, smarter and stronger than anyone else. The Director blames others or explains away behavior in order to avoid taking responsibility for his or her own conduct. Jealousy can be a problem in this game and the Director may

get upset and angry whenever the partner gives any type of attention to someone else.

Underlying Issues of the Primary Player: Controlling and grandiose behavior is compensation for feelings of insecurity and poor self-esteem; may have an abusive or addictive family history.

Consequences of the Game: The Controlling game is fertile ground for emotional, physical or sexual abuse. The Director uses power as a means of controlling the relationship. Emotional closeness is impossible because the relationship is one-sided.

The “Love ‘Em And Leave ‘Em” Game

The Players: The Casual Lover (primary player, and any number of players)

The Rules of the Game: The Casual Lover acts very confident, smooth and charming. He or she tends to be a risk taker and has a casual attitude about life. The Casual Lover avoids emotional intimacy and prefers to have many casual relationships rather than a close relationship with one partner. Sex often becomes a priority and may be used as a means of medicating and avoiding relationship issues. The Casual Lover may have a history of short-term superficial relationships involving sex without emotional investment.

Underlying Issues of the Primary Player: Fear of emotional intimacy; lack of trust; insecurity and poor self-esteem

Consequences of the Game: Because the Casual Lover is initially so charming and approachable, it's easy for the second player to emotionally invest quickly. This leads to heartbreak for the second player when he or she discovers that the Casual Lover takes the relationship much less seriously. Sex addiction is common among Casual Lovers. Partners may believe they are the only other players in this game, when in fact there are many.

The “Poor Pitiful Me” Game

The Players: The Victim (primary player) and another player

The Rules of the Game: The Victim sees the world around him or her in a very negative light. This player feels used and abused by everyone he or she is involved with, particularly if confronted. Hurt feelings result when the behavior of others is interpreted as a negative reaction or rejection. The Victim generally blames personal problems and difficulties on the other player or others and fails to see how his or her behavior contributes to the situation. He or she is usually emotionally needy and keeps the other player hooked into the relationship through guilt and pity. Suicide threats and other types of manipulation are sometimes used in order to keep the other player from leaving the relationship.

Underlying Issues of the Primary Player: Poor self-esteem, fear of abandonment, insecurity. May have an abusive family history.

Consequences of the Game: The Victim seeks excessive amounts of attention and leaves the other player feeling exhausted. The Victim's partner often discovers that no matter what he or she does, it is not enough. The Victim doesn't know how to seek attention appropriately and uses victimization as a means of keeping the focus on him or her. This player confuses love and pity.