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TECHNOLOGY

## THE WOMAN WHO MADE ONLINE DATING INTO A ‘SCIENCE’

Almost 20 years ago, Helen Fisher helped revolutionize dating. She has no regrets.

By Kaitlyn Tiffany

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THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AND FAMED LOVE EXPERT Helen Fisher seemed ready to dash into oncoming traffic. We were on a sidewalk in Manhattan, opposite the American Museum of Natural History, and nowhere near a safe place to cross the street. She wanted me to stare down the yellow cabs and charge off the curb, though she knew I wouldn't do it: I'd recently taken the personality questionnaire she wrote 17 years ago for a dating website, which produced the insight that I am a cautious, conventional rule follower. She, however, is an "explorer"—she has visited 111 countries, including North Korea—but also, being high in estrogen, a "negotiator" who will use the crosswalk for my benefit.

"I am horribly empathetic," she told me. "I cry at parades. I look into baby carriages and worry about their future with love." (Really high in estrogen.) This is how Fisher, the 77-year-old chief scientific adviser for Match.com and one of the best-known, most-often-quoted experts on romance and "mate choice," understands life: Personality is a cocktail of hormones; love comes from the buzz of mixing them just right. The human sex drive hasn't changed for millions of years, she argues, nor has the human capacity for long-term attachment. If, as a cautious, conventional technology journalist, I'm preoccupied with the question of how we live now, Fisher has spent her career exploring the story of how we've lived (and loved) always.

Her confidence in this reality—in the static nature of our coupling behaviors—makes Fisher a notable source of comfort in an era of constant worry about the state of romance. Dating on the internet, writers and therapists and mothers and comedians

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say, is both too easy and too hard. Our social skills are eroding; we are having far too much sex (or maybe far too little); we are suffering from a profound and modern alienation. Fisher is the woman to calm us with the news that *actually, we're fine*. Dating apps can't possibly kill romance, she argues, even if they do make us feel a bit uncomfortable by showing us so many options. "It's the same old brain," she told me, as she's told many other journalists looking to reassure their readers (or themselves) that smartphones haven't ruined us forever. "The brain hasn't changed in 300,000 years."

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At one point not too long ago, this was just what I needed to hear. In 2018, I called up Fisher to discuss a romantic problem that was, I thought, thoroughly contemporary: I'd spent a year on Tinder and felt that it had made me both frantic and obsessive. I was spending too much time surveilling my prospective dates' Twitter likes and Spotify activity and not enough doing the organic-seeming stuff of meeting people. In the resulting essay, I described her as nearly shouting at me not to worry. "Every single time a new technology comes into style, people are afraid," she said. Great! As I put it at the time: "It felt like I was being saved."

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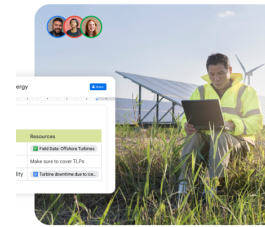
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Even saved, my next two years of app-enabled dating were so dark that I became an active misandrist, saying things like “It’s us against them.” “When I look at the face of a handsome and tolerable person, I just see a skull with skin over it,” I wrote one Valentine’s Day. Swiping through, at times, literally hundreds of profiles a day—and noting, naturally, a lot of recurring jokes, hobbies, occupations, and styles of glasses—it got easier and easier to imagine that most men were basically the same and exactly as uninteresting as one another. I was alarmed by how simple it was to become cruel and detached. The memory of this feeling has bothered me ever since.

Today, I am a Tinder success story. I met my boyfriend on the app the same day that the first coronavirus case was recorded in New York City; we moved in together this past summer. But this was the result of neither an attitude adjustment nor a renewed faith in Match Group’s suite of connection-oriented products (including OKCupid, Tinder, and Hinge). And it wasn’t the endpoint of a journey of self-improvement and commitment to empathy. It was sheer luck. Despite my good fortune, I am less convinced than ever of the case for dating on the internet. I’ve come to worry about how the apps apply the logics of markets, algorithms, data analysis, and hard sciences to the messy politics of falling in love. I’ve seen how that affected me; we all saw what it did to terrifying men on Reddit. Could the same thing be happening to ... I don’t know, nearly everyone?

So, this past summer, I thought it would make sense to talk with Helen Fisher again. She has been instrumental in making the case for online dating—movingly, on debate stages, on PBS, on Fox—and remains the scientist most publicly and consistently confident in its promise. She has never wavered, and she has done a lot of work. The last time we’d talked I thought I needed to be “saved.” Now I had put that neediness aside and wanted to hear her out. I thought that instead of just *reassuring* me, this time perhaps she could convince me.

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**F**ISHER HAS LIVED the life you would want an expert on love to live.

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She grew up in a beautiful glass house in Connecticut (a “party house,” when she was a teenager). She has an identical twin sister, a painter who lives in France. She went to NYU in the late 1960s and had an amazing time, then she was hired for a research project by the American Museum of Natural History, to write about a matrilineal society. (She chose the Navajo Nation, in Arizona, and drove there in a \$300 Chevrolet.) She got married at 23 and divorced at 24 because she was bored. She earned a Ph.D. in physical anthropology at the University of Colorado at Boulder in 1975. Then, for the longest time, she was a writer living in a walk-up apartment on 80th Street in Manhattan. At a steady pace, she published books for a general audience on the evolutionary history of love. Her star rose and rose, despite middling reviews; she had “several opportunities to marry other men,” she told me, before getting hitched, two years ago, to the former *New York Times* reporter John Tierney, whom she describes as being, like her, quite high in dopamine. He’s also got a lot of testosterone, she said. They balance each other out—a perfect match.

Fisher is a little like Candace Bushnell if Candace Bushnell had memorized the human fossil record. In other words, she is a New York City character to envy—a woman of rich experience who tells not one but two fantastic stories of romance gone wrong that involve Grand Central Station. She doesn’t ignore the anecdotal experience of her own life and of all the lives around her. She was young in the days of Helen Gurley Brown’s *Cosmopolitan* magazine, which promised—in the manner of a modern dating app—that dating was glamorous and that women had unlimited options (so long as they played their cards right), but also acknowledged that it could be painful, and that the pain was part of the process. Fisher is, as she says, empathetic, and she is fond of lowering her chin and voice and repeating a personal catchphrase: “Nobody gets out of love alive.”

Now approaching 80, she splits her time between her own apartment on the Upper East Side and Tierney’s home in the Bronx, an arrangement that suits her because she likes to go out during the week to meet her girlfriends, or to catch an off-Broadway play, or to walk around alone and stare at people for science. “I’m going feet first out of this town,” she said. She loves New York! When we met, she asked where I was from and then complimented me on no longer living there. “I’m glad you showed up” in the city, she said. “It’s probably much more interesting.”







She's famous for her science books: five volumes, published from 1982 to 2009 (plus a 2016 reissue of her most famous book, *Anatomy of Love*), that together lay out a theory of how partnership evolved and which parts of human biology are responsible for its particulars. "In short, romantic love is deeply embedded in the architecture and chemistry of the human brain," she wrote in 2004's *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*. That book may have been the one that brought her to the attention of Match.com, which had launched about a decade earlier as one of the first online-dating sites. (The Match Group, with its dozens of subsidiary dating apps, would develop later.) A representative of the company called Fisher two days before Christmas in 2004 and asked her to come in for a meeting, which turned out to be an audience with "everyone from the CEO on down." They were looking for insight, they told her. Why does anybody fall in love with one person and not another? *Well*, people tend to pair up based on where they live, and on having similar education levels and socioeconomic backgrounds, she explained. And as she was sitting there, it hit her that this was not very insightful. *You can walk into a room where everyone is of your background and you don't fall in love with all of them*, she thought. "It dawned on me in that moment," she told me: "Could we have evolved biological patterns so that we're naturally drawn to some people rather than others?"

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Other dating sites already said they were using *science* to calculate a couple's compatibility. One of Match's rivals, eHarmony, was offering a new and allegedly better way of finding people dates: Instead of pairing users according to, say, shared favorite foods or times of year, eHarmony promised to apply a "proprietary matching model" to make "scientifically proven" assessments of compatibility based on a personality test with hundreds of questions. The site even had its own relationship expert: Neil Clark Warren, a clinical psychologist and the author of a book called *Date or Soul Mate?*

Read: The 'dating market' is getting worse

Fisher thought she could come up with a better system, using what she knew about evolution and the human mind. (Match would market her system as being more inviting than the one offered by eHarmony, which was specifically built by its Christian evangelical founder to facilitate heterosexual relationships.) In *Why We Love*, she'd argued for the existence of "three primordial brain networks that evolved to direct mating and reproduction." The first was responsible for lust, the second for romantic love, and the third for a specific "male-female *attachment*" defined by "the feeling of calm, peace, and security one often has for a long term mate." But this wouldn't help with suggesting matches. She would have to look elsewhere in the brain.

Her first task, she told me, was to sit down with four sheets of paper, one each for the neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin and the hormones estrogen and testosterone. Then she listed personality traits that she thought were associated with each one, according to what she described to me as research from "hundreds of academic articles," thereby creating four personality styles. "Builders," high in serotonin, would be logical and traditional. "Explorers," high in dopamine, would be spontaneous and daring. "Negotiators," high in estrogen, would be empathetic and imaginative, and "directors," high in testosterone, would be decisive and competitive. Those categories soon became the basis for Chemistry.com, which was Match's first entry in the race to build an objective and empirical dating app. Users filled out a questionnaire written by Fisher and were assigned primary and secondary personality styles. These, in turn, were provided to users to help them sift through their matches and find the ones they were more likely to click with. According to Fisher's system,

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builders match well with other builders, explorers with explorers, and negotiators with directors.

When it launched in 2005, Chemistry.com competed with eHarmony and another site called PerfectMatch.com, based on the Myers-Briggs personality test. Later that year, Lori Gottlieb wrote about all three for *The Atlantic*, examining “the idea that long-term romantic compatibility can be predicted according to scientific principles.” Gottlieb landed in a place of tentative optimism: “At the very least, these dating sites and the relationships they spawn will help us to determine whether science has a place, and if so, how much of a place, in affairs of the heart.”

From the March 2006 issue: How do I love thee?

Among the earliest concerns about online dating was that it was only for losers—people who couldn’t make connections in the *normal* way. Now Fisher insisted that although science and technology might change the way that people dated, they could never change love. Dating sites were no less “natural” than any other way of meeting people. That idea was crucial in “eroding the stigma when it comes to dating online,” Amy Canaday, the director of public relations and marketing at Match, told me. “Helen really partnered with us to help normalize it, talk about it in a different way. Like, it’s just a different tool to do the same old thing we’ve done for millions and millions of years.”

**E**VEN AS THE NEW STYLE of online dating became popular, it had plenty of detractors. A few months after running Gottlieb’s story, *The Atlantic* published their complaints. In one letter to the editor, a psychologist wrote that Fisher’s theories of personality were “pseudoscientific” and no better than the ancient Greek theory that temperament was determined by concentrations of bile and phlegm. Another cited Fisher’s work and warned the magazine, “Trust is an essential part of any relationship. Any more articles like this and I’m afraid my long-lasting affair with *The Atlantic* will be over.”

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The very premise of sites like Chemistry.com—that people would benefit from being paired based on similarities or complementary traits—was challenged by psychologists. “Despite decades of continued interest in complementary personalities, empirical evidence that differences between partners benefit relationships has been even harder to come by than evidence for the benefits of similarity,” a research team led by Northwestern University’s Eli J. Finkel wrote in [a 2012 paper](#). (The team also cited a [2008 meta-analysis](#) of 313 studies that found the effect of similarity on relationship satisfaction to be “not significantly different from zero.”)

Scientific dating fell out of fashion in the years that followed, as dating migrated from complex desktop websites to mobile apps, where users presented themselves with little more than a set of photos and a pithy tagline. Today, Chemistry.com is still a website, but only literally. The bare-bones homepage discloses that Chemistry.com is now part of “People Media’s MarriageMinded Community,” which means that Chemistry.com profiles will also be shown on “MarriageMindedPeopleMeet.com.” (It also discourages daters from consuming any alcohol on dates.) eHarmony has weathered several scandals—including some related to its founder’s position on gay marriage, which he has [described](#) as “a violation to scripture.” It is still a successful site marketed as a premium option for serious daters, but [U.K. regulators](#) no longer allow it to advertise its approach as “scientifically proven.”

Despite this shift within the industry, Fisher remains confident in her approach. Taking the job with Match was “one of the smartest things I’ve ever done with my life,” she told me. “Fifteen million people have taken that questionnaire.” (The questionnaire was used first for Chemistry.com, then for Match’s flagship site.) Today, Fisher’s role at Match has more to do with data analysis and public relations than with designing dating products. She helps write Match’s annual “[Singles in America](#)” survey and represents the business when she talks with media outlets about the survey’s findings, as well as such topics as [Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck’s reunion](#), the “[Clooney Effect](#),” and a study about [how women](#) “can accurately establish a man’s masculinity and his affinity for children simply by looking at a picture of his face.” Independently of Match, she is working on new research about how brain chemistry can influence a person’s success in business, as well as whether antidepressants may “jeopardize” a person’s ability to fall in love.

[Read: The new first date](#)

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However you respond to these sorts of claims—whether you find them insightful, old-fashioned, intriguing, or, as the writer Michiko Kakutani has put it, “insistently Darwinian”—hardly matters at this point. Fisher has already succeeded in transforming online romance. She helped bring “science” to the industry, and thus remove the stigma of dating apps. At the same time, her influence has flowed the other way and sanitized the science. Fisher knows her work on gender differences and evolution has been controversial (and says a woman at a lecture once tried to throw something at her). She was present for the sociobiology wars of the ’70s, and recalls the argument that scientists who looked for biological explanations for certain behaviors were tiptoeing toward eugenics. “Nobody’s for eugenics,” she told me.

But maybe, I suggested, the growing prevalence of online dating has come to justify a methodical approach to human relationships grounded in what some would call biological essentialism. In other words, maybe some people on the dating apps have hardened their ideas about how men and women act, and why. Fisher disputes this characterization. The “patterns and predispositions” that she has identified won’t *make* anyone do anything, she said. If people take her science that way, they’re getting it wrong. I also asked her how the Darwinian worldview accounts for romantic partnerships that don’t result in reproduction, like those of homosexual couples—or, for that matter, like hers. She sees no contradiction here either. Reproduction may be why certain aspects of long-term attachment evolved, she argued, but attachment itself has many perks. “People who are in love are happy. They’re optimistic. They’re energetic ... So it’s a healthy way to live, in a partnership.” She says that the brain of anybody who’s in love would look the same in an fMRI. “It doesn’t matter if you’re gay, straight, pink, blue, green, brown, turquoise—you’re still going to be scared, you’re still gonna be angry, you’re still going to cry, and you’re still gonna love.”

Since Fisher got her start with Match in 2005, scientists have grown only more prominent within the dating industry. All major dating apps now have scientific advisers, though they’re more likely to be data scientists, or dating coaches who enthuse over data, than anthropologists. Users, too, have come to understand their dating lives in technical terms: The apps are tools that give them access to a dating

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“market,” through which they may adjust their inputs in order to achieve better outcomes. They may have qualms about commoditizing romance—and they may worry, as I do, that the process is making them more dishonest and flaky and crude—but they’ve also come to feel they have little choice but to proceed.

“It’s always been a numbers game,” Fisher told me, when I brought up a popular recent essay in *New York* magazine that had used that term sardonically to express how removed one may start to feel after spending years on the apps. “But it’s a game to win life’s greatest prize: a mating partner.” Later on, I emailed her a short quote from Nancy Jo Sales, the author of the memoir *Nothing Personal: My Secret Life in the Dating App Inferno*, in which Sales compares “Big Dating” to Big Pharma, arguing that both are more interested in producing addiction than actually helping people. “Utter nonsense,” Fisher replied. “She has no idea what she is talking about.”

While we were sitting in Central Park, I told Fisher about my own bad experience with dating apps—how clinical I had become, how mean I could be. I told her I got compulsive about swiping and did it all the time, for fear of missing out on the perfect profile. I swiped at work, at the gym, on the train; then I would go on dates and want to leave as soon as the person opened his mouth. I felt *angry* at my dates. “I’m sure that happens,” she told me. Those struggles are a result of “cognitive overload”: I was allowing myself too many options at one time. Online daters “binge,” as she put it. If I’d looked at only three Tinder profiles a day, she said, then I would have been “doing it the way our ancestors did, and that would be much better.” But she acknowledged that it is nearly impossible to make yourself do that. That is not the way anybody uses a dating app, so, again, what was there to do but empathize? She felt for me. Looking for love is horrible.

Fisher likes to tell a story about her early days as a researcher, when one of the peer reviewers assigned to her first paper told her that she shouldn’t try to study love, because love is supernatural. Fisher takes spirited offense to this. “Hang on here,” she’ll say. If anger is not supernatural and fear is not supernatural and depression is not supernatural, then why would *love* be supernatural? But in reading all of her work and spending many hours talking with her, I came to appreciate the role that metaphysics plays in her beliefs. Fisher may have brought science to love, but she evokes the mystical wisdom of the ages as often as she talks about brain chemistry. “When I lie and look at the sky and run my fingers through the grass I can almost feel all the love affairs that have been lost over the last 4 million years,” she wrote 22 years

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ago in an email to a friend, the anthropologist Laura Betzig, after a bad breakup. “So many tears.”

If, let’s say, you’re feeling sad one day—if you’re reeling from a love affair—then you can call up Helen Fisher and ask for her advice. You can tell her that you’re fed up with dating, and that you think the modern age has made it so much worse. I promise you that she’ll be empathetic, even as she challenges your argument with stories of our ancestors. Whenever things go wrong, they’re the ones who have the answer. Just do what they did, she’ll suggest—just do what you were programmed to do, and, eventually, you’ll be fine.

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