

Margins of Error

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The Mysterious Disappearance of Love, Sex and Romance



Speakers Bridgerton Experience Queen, Harry Enten, Bridgerton Experience attendee, Duke in "Bridgerton", Love is Blind clip, Sexy Beasts clip, Adriana Herrera, Sleepless in Seattle clip, Pride and Prejudice move clip, Monica O'Neal, Zach Stafford, Bella DePaulo

00:00:02

Bridgerton Experience Queen Wonderful.

00:00:04

Harry Enten

This is the most bizarre thing I have ever been to. People in period gowns and a few men wearing period suits. I don't even know what the word is. They're all walking up and doing this, bowing on like a red carpet out of the Oscars. Let me rewind for a bit. I just took the train down to Washington, D.C. for the Queen's Ball, a Bridgerton experience. It's an event where fans of the Netflix series "Bridgerton" come together in 19th century attire and melt into a world of grand gestures, choreographed dances and declarations of love. I watch this, I guess it's a queen or a leader. Yeah, I guess it's a queen sitting on a throne in a wig and they're going up and bowing in front of her. And the truth of the matter is, as someone who's as yankee as they come, despite hating the Yankees, that to me is weird.

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Bridgerton Experience Queen Take your time. Don't fall.

00:01:09

Harry Enten

Like I said, this ain't my scene. Not going to kiss the queen's hand and take part in old timey dancing. Instead, I'm here because of a startling statistic I came across a few months ago, and I think die hard fans of romance shows can help me get to the bottom of it. According to the 2021 General Social Survey, 55% of Americans ages 25 to 54 had sex less than once a week over the past year. That's a record for so little sex since the question was first asked in 1989. Now, I know you might be quick to blame the pandemic, but it's actually part of a long term trend. And it's not just about less sex, it's about relationships, too. The number of adults ages 25 to 54 without a steady partner is up from 20% to 30% since 1986, according to the same general social survey. That's a 50% increase, folks, 50%. But not only are more Americans single than ever. Many of those who are in a relationship aren't always the most romantic. For example, a 2022 poll found that fewer Americans celebrated Valentine's Day this year than in 2009. Love can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people sex partnership, thoughtful gestures. But on all these fronts, it seems to me that love is declining here in the good old USA. So is love dead? And if so, who killed it. Today, call me Sherlock. Harry. This is Margins of Error.

00:02:55

Harry Enten We'll start off very simply. Why do you love "Bridgerton"?

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Bridgerton Experience attendee The first season was the sex. No.

00:03:01

Bridgerton Experience attendee I think it's just like the fantasy.

00:03:07
Harry Enten Let me ask you, what's the most romantic thing that happens in "Bridgerton"?

00:03:12
Bridgerton Experience attendee Oh, gosh. The most romantic?

00:03:14
Harry Enten One of them, you know. So this is not "Jeopardy".

00:03:18
Bridgerton Experience attendee I would say from season one, when Daphne and the Duke are in front of the Queen and he talks about how he wants to marry his best friend.

00:03:28
Duke in "Bridgerton" "To meet a beautiful woman is one thing, but to meet your best friend in the most beautiful of women is something entirely apart. And it is with my sincerest apologies, I must say.

00:03:39
Harry Enten Do you think that the type of romance that we see in "Bridgerton" is possible in the current world that we live in?

00:03:47
Bridgerton Experience attendee Gosh, I hope so. I think we live in a fairly cynical world these days, and it's not necessarily harder to find love than it was 200 years ago. I think there are challenges, but I still don't believe in it.

00:04:01
Harry Enten These folks are not alone. Despite the decline of steady partnerships in the U.S., it seems like we still want to experience love in other ways, through media.

00:04:11
Love is Blind clip Here you will choose someone to marry. Hello. Nice to hear from you. You can't say "see ya" without ever seeing them.

00:04:19
Harry Enten Just look at the sheer number of dating shows that have been released in the last few years. "Love is Blind", "Love on the Spectrum", "Indian Matchmaking." Heck, there's one where they even put on ridiculous prosthetics and go on dates. It's called Sexy Beasts.

00:04:37
Sexy Beasts clip I like your fin. So what if I pick you and I'm not what you expect under me?

00:04:43
Harry Enten So who better to talk about the recent rise in romance media than a creator in the field?

00:04:49
Adriana Herrera I'm on the Adriana Herrera and I write romance novels. We, we always say as romance writers that we keep the lights on in publishing. It's \$1,000,000,000 industry.

00:05:00
Harry Enten Adriana has written historical and contemporary romance novels. A few of her titles include "A Caribbean Heiress in Paris", "Finding Joy", and "American Dreamer".

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Adriana Herrera I'm a Black Latina. I, I write a lot of queer romance. Not all of my romance is queer, but I write a lot about it. I write a lot about the immigrant experience. I'm from the Dominican Republic.

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Harry Enten Aside from the occasional Nancy Meyers movie. I'm pretty new to the romance genre, so I wanted to know what makes it tick.

00:05:31
Adriana Herrera In a romance, there needs to be a "meet cute" or two people meet for the first time, something happens. Sparks fly. There needs to be a dark night of the soul, where everything is lost. There needs to be a grand gesture. Like, think "Sleepless in Seattle," meeting at the Empire State Building, and then you have your happily ever after.

00:05:52
Sleepless in Seattle clip It's you. (It's me.) I saw you in the street.

00:05:52
Harry Enten That "happily ever after" part is critical. Romance fans call it the HEA, and Adriana said it's the main rule for romance novels.

00:06:11

Adriana Herrera

It's the same as a thriller. You have to know what happened by the end. Like if you read an Agatha Christie novel and at the end of the of the book. If Poirot's not rounding up everybody to kind of like, lay out who did it, you would be very upset. So it's the same in romance, that's the one rule. You have to have a happily ever after.

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Harry Enten

So I guess my natural follow up would be what makes a good romance novel, quote unquote good? Or is there not just one answer to that question?

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Adriana Herrera

I think about Jane Austen, like Pride and Prejudice.

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Pride and Prejudice move clip

My affections and wishes have not changed but one word from you will silence me forever.

00:06:52

Adriana Herrera

I mean, I don't know if you've read, seen the movie, but there's the 2005 version of "Pride and Prejudice." There's a moment where Matthew Macfadyen, who is the character that plays Darcy, like the first time he touches Lizzie, he like grabs her hand to help her into a carriage. And when he walks away, he's, like, flexing his hand. Like, he, like, got struck by lightning, right? Like there was a little, like, spark. And to me, that that moment encompasses what a great romance does. I think it slows down a moment, an emotion, and it really digs deep into how every single little thing about that person that's coming to the other character's life is like unlocking them, like literally transforming them into the person they're going to be by the end of the story. A person is going to be open for love.

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Harry Enten

And not all of us are open for love. I'd like to think I'm open for it, but sometimes it's a little hard -- it's a little hard to be vulnerable.

00:07:54

Adriana Herrera

It's very hard, and I think that's what is so impactful. And that's the power of romance. And in those 350 pages, you see people that are walking into a story completely closed off to love. And by the end, they find that perfect person that can change everything for them.

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Harry Enten

Would you say that there's sort of a romance renaissance happening in the media?

00:08:21

Adriana Herrera

I mean, I think "Bridgerton" definitely has gone a long way into rebooting and into the consciousness. I think romance readers who have always been voracious, we've always known the power of a romance novel. And if you think about it in the media, like I always say in terms of - I'm Latina, so every Latin person knows the power of a telenovela, which is essentially a romance, right? And so people who have been consumers of romance have always known the power of it. But I think in the last two years, where things have been so dark for so many of us, like being able to pick up a book that, you know, is going to like deliver joy and hope by the end and give you those good feelings, is transformational. And I think people have gone to romance because in the end, you are guaranteed that you're going to get that happily ever after.

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Harry Enten

So I guess do you think people can get their romance fix from fiction instead of real life?

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Adriana Herrera

I think they do. And I think it would be interesting to figure out how many people who are not actively looking for a romantic partner are romance readers. Because I know in my readership there are people who are happily single, who are voracious romance readers. And I think, again, it's because a romance novel is always a reliable good time.

00:09:52

Harry Enten

We looked into this idea: how many romance readers are not actively looking for a partner, and unfortunately we couldn't find an exact number. But recent data from the consumer insights team at Penguin Random House found that the majority of romance readers are either married or in a relationship. So maybe the rise of romance media can't explain the rise of single people. Why do a lot of people think that romance is dead in real life?

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Adriana Herrera

I don't think it is. I think perhaps expectations of what romance could look like and feel like may differ. And I think that's why personally, I think why in the genre, it's so important now that we see all kinds of different relationships, people who are asexual, people who are queer, people who are interracial relationships. Because for a long time there was a single story about what a romance could be. And it usually was two cis, straight white people who were from affluent backgrounds. And I think people think romance instead, because we've been offered a very particularly curated image of what a romance could look like. I don't think every person needs to be giving their partner flowers every week for their for their partner to be romantic. But you know what is super romantic to me when I am like on a deadline and my partner gets me like a coffee and like a sandwich from Starbucks and brings it to me because I just forgot to have breakfast.

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Harry Enten

Perhaps romance isn't dead. It just looks different than before. But there was one thing Adriana said that got me thinking about who our next suspect might be.

00:11:45

Adriana Herrera

I think people are more aware of what they don't want and they are willing to wait to find that person that is willing to change who they are for them or willing to become a better version of themselves for them, which essentially is what happens in a romance novel.

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Harry Enten

After the break, I'll look into Adriana's theory. We'll hear from a relationship psychologist about why some people are choosing to delay marriage. And we'll get to the bottom of an obvious suspect for what killed love. Dating apps.

00:12:26

Harry Enten

Welcome back. Before the break, we learned that romance isn't dead. It just looks a little different than before. And romance novelist Adriana Herrera suggested that the real reason people are delaying marriage might be because they have higher standards for potential partners. And guess what? There is some data to support this idea. According to a 2020 analysis of census data from the Pew Research Center, quote, only 44% of millennials were married in 2019, compared with 53% of Gen Xers, 61% of Boomers and 81% of the silent generation at a comparable age. But to be clear, it's not just that people are delaying marriage. No, no. Across age groups, fewer people are marrying than before. Lower marriage rates hold for pretty much every age group compared to 40 to 60 years ago. An earlier report from Pew found that about two thirds of millennials do hope to marry someday, but about a quarter of them say they just haven't found someone with the qualities they're looking for. One of the qualities they might be looking for, according to recent research, is money.

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Monica O'Neal

Unfortunately, gendered wise, women still want men who make more money. Bottom line.

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Harry Enten

This is Monica O'Neal.

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Monica O'Neal

I'm a psychologist and relationship expert. I have a practice in the Back Bay of Boston and I'm faculty at Harvard Medical School. When it comes to financial instability, that has certainly been something that impacts the rate of which men get married. Now they really have to contend with dating women who make more than them or perhaps even have more financial opportunities than they would ever have.

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Harry Enten

Monica says when it comes to same sex couples. There's not enough academic research to know either way.

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Monica O'Neal

We just know that gender roles tend to fall with like income who's making the the greater amount of income meaning like the more masculine roles and ideologies kind of follow the person who makes the greater amount of income. But when it comes to heterosexual couples, regardless of whether or not they're non-monogamous or whatever women want men who make more money and men want to make more money.

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Harry Enten

So are more people single than ever because there's a lack of, quote unquote, eligible bachelors? Monica shared the results of a 2013 study by the American Psychological Association, which lends some credence to this theory. In the study, heterosexual couples at the University of Virginia participated in problem solving and social intelligence tests. At the end, they were told whether their partner scored in the top or bottom percent of all university students. Researchers found that hearing how their partner scored didn't affect how participants said they felt. But when researchers tested their implicit self-esteem.

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Monica O'Neal

What they found is that as men encountered women who were more successful or whatever, their sense of themselves actually declined. So it indicated to them that even though men might consciously say that this is something that they want, what they found is that men actually feel worse about themselves and therefore are more likely to reject women who are smarter or more successful than they are. As women become more educated and bigger earners, it doesn't leave women with a lot of options with the man who's going to be completely comfortable and supportive of their desires to be earners and to work hard and to truly feel like partners.

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Harry Enten

And there are other factors at play.

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Monica O'Neal

Millennials and generation Z, they have grown up with high rates of divorce within their parents, which also is one of the things I think that has caused push for people to wait until later. Like they're also getting messages of like -- men get the message of you should date several people. Don't fall in love with the first woman who treats you well and takes care of you, kind of a thing. And younger women are getting the message of take your time, you know, build your career. And that's actually supported by some research.

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Harry Enten

Declining partnership rates are having a ripple effect on other aspects of love too, like sex. A 2021 study, for example, identified the decline in romantic relationships as a leading factor for why young adults are having less sex compared to previous decades. They also found that a rise in playing computer games and drops in income and alcohol consumption, explain part of this sex trend, too. Still, Monica thinks these factors are a very small piece of the puzzle when it comes to the question of what killed love. So let's address the elephant in the room.

00:17:14

Monica O'Neal

Tinder is like the most viable suspect. I say let's like, you know, definitely like polygraph, fingerprint, lock them up. You know, I think they're the ones that killed marriage and dating because they really set the template to how people date. Dating apps themselves, you have to keep in mind, they have zero interest in love. They have zero interest in whether or not people actually find relationships. Their primary goal is to keep people on apps because that's how they make money. And what has happened is they've created a culture that really leads people to not take the time to invest in getting to know anybody. People might meet, they might match. Then they go out on a date. If they don't meet the expectations of what they were expecting to see on a profile, they're not going to go further. It's not going to have a second date. And when you actually look at the way people build relationships, the primary thing is that you have to get to know somebody. You have to have experiences. And conflict is one of them too. And people are ready to swipe left if they read something awkward. People are ready to ghost, if they experience something awkward. People are no longer curious about each other. They just simply move on. And that's why I think Tinder has ruined everything.

00:18:31

Harry Enten

Remember that stat I shared at the top of the episode that 30% of adults ages 25 to 54 don't have a steady partner. The first time that number top 23% was 2012. And guess what else happened in 2012? Tinder. But maybe apps are just a scapegoat. Let's hear from someone who is on the inside.

00:18:56

Zach Stafford

I mean, it's like an easy thing to blame. They're everywhere. People just think that because we have so much access to so many different types of people and that you have this fear of missing out or a FOMO with love, that is the direct correlation between marriage and my marriage rates are down. I don't think that's fully true. I think it's really complicated.

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Harry Enten

This is Zach Stafford.

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Zach Stafford

I am the former chief content officer of Grindr. I'm currently a journalist and producer.

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Harry Enten

When it debuted in 2009, Grindr became one of the first mobile dating apps on the scene. It uses location based technology to connect couples, particularly gay, bi, trans and queer people. Since it launched, it's attracted tens of millions of users, but it had some issues.

00:19:45

Zach Stafford

I had dealt with and bounced from people who caught their partners on Grindr that weren't supposed to be on there, or people who are using Grindr to explore being open or have a third. And then their partner fell in love with somebody else. So it's not like apps are completely not at fault, but they're not completely at fault. It's complicated. Just like love.

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Harry Enten

You now, Monica said. Dating apps are making us too picky. Zach says romance songs and movies were doing that long before dating apps were.

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Zach Stafford

I think people, due to media, have been conditioned to think that love is one thing and then they experience it and it's not exactly that thing. So then they think, "oh, wait, this doesn't feel like a Beyonce song. It doesn't feel like an Adele song." So then they keep fishing. They think like Prince Charming is like a swipe away. But it's like "girl, these guys are do you live in your town like you should know by now if they're going to be there or not." And if they just take a second and breathe, they'd realize the grass probably isn't always greener and that, like a real relationship requires like a lot of work and commitment and time.

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Harry Enten

Zach admits that dating apps have made us risk averse, but he also says they've done some good in the dating world, especially for LGBTQ+ daters. And he experienced that personally when he used Grindr for the first time after flying home from college.

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Zach Stafford

It was the first time in my entire life living in Tennessee that I saw the scale of queer people around me. I was like, "oh my God, there's so many gay people." And "oh, I always knew that person was gay," always assumed all this stuff. And it radically changed me. And that's been the expression for a lot of queer people, is the Internet has allowed us to see ourselves in so many different spaces and places.

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Harry Enten

Zach says apps have also allowed LGBTQ+ folks to date in a safer way.

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Zach Stafford

Historically, we've seen tremendous amounts of violence in those physical reaction --interaction, so the apps have allowed for there to be a safeguard for queer people to explore. It's also allowed people who think they're straight or anything else to safely explore their own sexualities in like safe spaces without having to get to a physical place. You know, those connections aren't just about sex, but it's also about finding space. So, I think it's for queer people, just been like a godsend, where for straight people it's like, God, you all already have so much. Like, you get even more now. So I wish straight people, you know, good luck to them with everything that they do. But they already had access. They could assumed everyone was straight before. But for queer people, we couldn't and now we have a way to figure it out.

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Harry Enten

So even though dating apps may make it harder for some people to find a partner, they've made it easier for others.

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Zach Stafford

You would be hard pressed these days not to meet a queer couple who don't have an app somehow entangled in their dating history. Like my boyfriend and I did not meet online. Very rare. We met at a Cross Fit gym, like it was -- and still to this day I'm like God for some boring. That's not like old school because it's become less stigmatized

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Harry Enten

A 2019 study found that online dating has also become the primary way heterosexual couples meet. And let me state the obvious here: that was before the pandemic. The popularity of dating apps has only increased since 2019. Love em or hate em, they're here to stay for a while longer. Now I understand why people might think dating apps killed romance, but like that 2019 study suggested, dating apps have also brought people together. Heck, I met my first girlfriend post-college through online dating. It's more common than you might think. So if dating apps aren't to blame for why more people are single, then what is?

00:23:22

Zach Stafford

I think this big question of who above may not work all the time because it assumes that humans intrinsically have somebody and needs someone at all times. And I don't know if I believe that you have so many different types of relationships in your life. And I think a romantic relationship no longer is the end all, be all, because of, it probably never should have been. It should have always been about like your family, your friends, the people you work with, your communities. I mean, that whole saying it takes a village wasn't just about a child's about people. You need all different types of people in your life to have a full life.

00:23:56

Harry Enten

Could it be that more people are single simply because they want to be? After the break, I'll talk to a researcher who studies single living and maybe I'll finally get to the bottom of who or what killed love.

00:24:16

Harry Enten

When it comes to love troubles, it's easy to blame dating apps. But as we just learned from Zach Stafford, dating apps might be a bit of a red herring. Well, maybe I'm asking the wrong questions. Here I am framing partnership as the ideal, and singlehood is a problem. But is it?

00:24:36

Bella DePaulo

One of the myths about single people that annoys me the most? This idea that what single people want more than anything else in the world is to not be single anymore. No, to lots of us, love, love, love being single.

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Harry Enten

This is Bella DePaulo. She's the author of "Singled Out," and she's been studying single people for decades.

00:25:04

Bella DePaulo

What I'm most interested in and study most often now are people I call "single at heart." You know that thing people say to try to commiserate with single people? They say, "oh, well, being single is better than being in a bad relationship" or "being single is better than wishing you were single." No, that's far too grudging for people who are single at heart. Being single is better, period.

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Harry Enten

Guess what? Folks choosing to be single doesn't make you miserable. And Bella has real data to back this up.

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Bella DePaulo

What studies show when you look at people who are not looking for a romantic partner is over the course of their singles lives, they are getting happier and happier. They are also investing in their single lives. They're investing in their friends. And as they become more satisfied with their friends, they're also becoming more satisfied with their lives.

00:26:16

Harry Enten

But that doesn't mean it's all smooth sailing. One of the trends Bella studies is what she calls singleism or the stereotyping and stigmatizing of single people.

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Bella DePaulo

So, for example, in the United States, just counting laws at the federal level, there are more than a thousand laws that benefit and protect only people who are legally married. It's like this pinata gets burst and a thousand benefits and protections get rained down upon them. Wonderful. But it still leaves out all the people of any sexual orientation or gender identity who are not legally married, who don't get any of those benefits and protection. So lots of those things still need to change. But yes, overall, it's getting better.

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Harry Enten

So let's take a step back. Right. There was a 2020 Pew Research Center survey that reported that half of all single people do not want to be in a relationship or even date. So tell me some of the about some of the reasons that people are choosing to be single.

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Bella DePaulo

Young people especially would say I have other priorities right now. But a big one across the age range is about four out of ten said, and more of the older people, "I like it. I just like being single" and "oh, nobody's going to like me. I had bad experiences, all those kinds of negative things," they were much less common. But you know what else really matters? Whether you have tried marriage before. So the people who are divorced or widowed, they are especially likely to be saying, "no, thank you." You know, it's the people who are who have never been married, who think, "hah, what am I missing?"

00:28:17

Harry Enten

So my whole idea of this episode was, you know, essentially that romance is on the decline, that it's kind of dying. And I think some people might attribute the rise of singles to the decline of romance. Do you think that's accurate or not?

00:28:37

Bella DePaulo

I think the decline of romance is part of this societal wide progression toward a way of feeling open to living your best life. And so people who love romance, who feel like that really is the center of their life, it's what they want, they can still do that. But other people don't feel as pressured to just pursue romance just because it's what other people think they should be doing. And I think the same thing is true of the decline in the frequency with which people have sex. So the conventional wisdom, right, is that, oh, if lots of people were having lots of sex, that's good, right? So in the 1980s, if more people were having more sex, that means the 1980s were the best time for sex. Well, maybe not. Maybe what that meant was that there was more pressure for people to have sex, even if they weren't interested. And one of the things that's changing now is that there's much more awareness that people are different. And some people, such as asexuals, aren't that interested in sex. And some people who are sometimes interested in sex aren't interested in it all the time, and that there's all different ways to have intimacy and closeness in your life, and they don't have to involve sex.

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Harry Enten

So I guess my final question is, if single people didn't kill romance, then what did or is that just not even a fair question to ask?

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Bella DePaulo

Oh, I don't think romance has been killed. It's just been put in its place and it deserved to be put in its place.

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Harry Enten

When Bella DePaulo says romance has been put in its place, I think she means that it doesn't need to be everyone's life goal. It's just something people can pursue if they want to. Folks, love and romance is frickin tough. I'm someone who really didn't start dating until my mid-twenties. And it's been an absolute whirlwind. I've been worried at times that I would never find love. Heck, I'm not even sure I knew what love was. Like many in the millennial generation, I've waited to get married. I was too concentrated on my career and hadn't met the right person. But funny enough, what I learned recording this episode inspired me. If I want to be single, then that's great. But the past few months have taught me that sometimes you just don't know when lightning will strike. Maybe I should have seen that answer from the start when I talk with someone named Tracy at the Bridgerton Ball. What do you say to those who say that love, dare I say, is dead?

00:31:45

Bridgerton Experience attendee

Oh, no, no. It's. It's something you have to work for. And not everyone's willing to put in the work. But it is absolutely alive. And not only romantic love. I love my family. I love my friends that I'm here with. And you just have to be open and receptive to it.

00:32:08

Harry Enten

Coming up on our next episode, one of my favorite topics weather forecasting. It's the best it's ever been. So why do people love talking about the times that forecasters get it wrong? And how will climate change affect our ability to predict the weather? Tune in next time to find out. Margins of Error is a production of CNN Audio and Western Sound. Our showrunner is Cameron Kell. Our producer is Savannah Wright. Production assistance and fact checking by Nicole McNulty. Mischa Stanton is our mix engineer. Additional support from Tameeka Ballance-Kolasny, Dan Dzula, Allison Park and Alex McCall. Our executive producers are Ben Adair and Megan Marcus. And me? Well, I'm Harry Enten.

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