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Dating scams: Looking for love

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Perhaps one of the more personal scams I've heard about deals with those for whom Valentine's Day is a painful reminder of just how lonely life can be.

Romance fraud and online dating scams were among the top reported cons of 2007, according to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center.

And with Valentine's Day comes people looking to meet that special someone at a dating website, said Barb Sluppick, owner and peer counselor at RomanceScams.org.

Here's how it works:

n Scammers set up fake profiles on dating sites and social networks. They use fake pictures of handsome men and pretty women as incentive. These are generally stolen from elsewhere on the Internet -- something incredibly easy to do with an abundance of social networks.

n They will claim to be from the U.S.

n More often than not, their profile story goes, they are successful. They work overseas. They are charming, compassionate, thoughtful -- all the things the lost and lonely look for in a partner.

The defrauding begins once the victim is hooked.

All of a sudden, bad luck hits the Casanova/Delilah. (And the relationship was going so well!) They ask for money. The reasons why will differ, but ultimately, it's cash they're after. It could be for hospital bills after a mugging, or plane tickets or visa papers.

And they're desperate to get to you, to be at your side. So desperate. And if you loved them you would É

In fact, from the outside, it may seem ridiculous that people could get taken this way. But people do. Among 15,950 members on RomanceScams.org are doctors, lawyers, police officers, people from the entertainment industry -- even an NFL player -- have been taken, Sluppick said Tuesday.

"It has nothing to do with intelligence. É Anyone can become a victim," she said.

All it takes is an e-mail address and wanting to be in a relationship. The scammer provides the rest.

Sadly, the latest turn on this scam is to pose as a member of the U.S. military deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan on a "secret mission," Sluppick said.

"Of course, (as) Americans, that tugs at our heartstrings," she said.

Finally, there's a more serious aspect to this whole game. Some of the money may be being channeled to terrorism, Sluppick said. The cons are organized and wide in scale, and people exposing them, with whom Sluppick is affiliated, have undergone serious cyber attack, even gone into protection from scammers outraged they have been unveiled.

In some extreme cases, women have continued relationships with the scammers even after they have been revealed.

How is that, you may ask? The con man, unveiled, confesses to his victims that, "Yes, at first I was using you, then I really fell in love with you."

The target believes them, and the relationship continues. Sluppick knows some women who have married the scam artist, even bringing them to the U.S. under a marriage visa.

Sluppick said, and I agree -- in this day and age of terrorist agents, that's scary.

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