



Romance Scammers are Happy to be Your Valentine

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MADISON – Between long-stemmed roses, boxes of chocolates, and dinners out, Valentine’s Day can do a number on your wallet. But for romance scam victims, these expenses are just a drop in the hat. According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), victims reported having lost more than \$143 million last year, the most of any type of scam. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection reminds Wisconsinites seeking love online to be on the lookout for requests for money from suitors.

“Romance scams are big business for scammers, and the FTC data tells us that reports are on the rise nationwide,” said Lara Sutherlin, administrator for the Division of Trade and Consumer Protection. “Scammers hook vulnerable consumers by professing their love for the victim, then launch an endless stream of requests for money. No amount is ever enough.”

In a three-year period from 2015 to 2018, the FTC saw reports of romance scams more than double to 21,000 victims, with reported losses quadrupling from \$33 million in 2015 to \$143 million in 2018. Seniors over the age of 70 reported the highest median losses of \$10,000. All ages and demographics are at risk of sweetheart scams, but the most common targets are divorcees or widows/widowers.

Social media, dating websites/apps, and online personal ads are romance scammers’ go-to tools for finding victims. Scammers create phony profiles that often involve the use of a stranger’s photo they have found online. They seek to gain the victim’s trust and love in order to get them to send money for travel expenses, legal help, medical bills, or any number of other issues. Requests for payments don’t end until the victim runs out of money or grows suspicious of the relationship.

Another potential risk from these relationships is extortion. Scammers ask their victims to move the conversation from a trusted dating site to another online location where the talk turns intimate. Photos and personal information shared in these exchanges is then posted to a public "cheaters" website. Victims are told they can pay to have this information taken down, but there is no guarantee that this bargain will be upheld.

If you are considering using an online dating site or app, research any warnings about the service before you sign up for an account. If you are contacted by an online suitor, take it slowly. Ask questions and look for inconsistent answers. Also, check the person’s photo using the “search by image” feature in your search engine – if the same picture shows up with a different name, that is a red flag.

It is possible that you are being targeted for a romance scam if your online love interest:

- Claims to be from the United States but is currently "traveling," "deployed with the military," or "working overseas."
- Professes love for you almost instantly.
- Asks you to leave the dating site and communicate by email or instant messages.
- Requests that you send personal information including Social Security, bank account or credit card numbers.
- Asks you to cash checks for him/her.
- Makes excuses for not meeting in person, such as last-minute financial, medical, or family emergencies.

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- Asks you to send money by wire transfer. Never wire money to someone you do not know or have not met in person.

For additional information or to file a complaint, visit the Consumer Protection Bureau at datcp.wi.gov, call the Consumer Protection Hotline at 800-422-7128 or send an e-mail to datcp hotline@wi.gov.

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