Each year, thousands of people fall victim to scam artists posing as potential soul mates. Catfishing and “sweetheart scams” con Americans out of thousands of dollars each year.

Malicious scammers, often overseas, will create a dating profile using other people’s photos and information from social networking sites. They will diligently fill out the fake profile and start to prey upon hopeful victims. The courtship escalates quickly as the scammer feeds off their victim’s emotions. Sweet messages and letters are exchanged for weeks, and then the scammer offers to fly to meet the victim. Just before they arrive, an emergency will occur: a death in the family, a horrible car accident, an illness, an expired work visa. Now they need a few thousand dollars wired to cover their emergency or fly to meet their lover—but after the victim sends the money, the scammer disappears.

This Valentine’s Day (and every month of the year), be aware of the warning signs of a phony romance.

**Catfishing**

*noun - cat·fish·ing*

Setting up a false personal profile on a social networking site for fraudulent or deceptive purposes

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“On some dating sites, as many as one out of 10 profiles is a scammer.”

~ Mark Brooks, editor of Online Personals Watch

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**RED FLAGS**

1. The con artist will have something horrific and tragic happen right before your plans to meet, or they simply fail to show up.

2. The scammer begins to express deep feelings for you after very little communication.

3. If your match claims to be a model, or only has professionally-shot photos, they are most likely a scam artist.

4. Your match refuses to use Skype or FaceTime. If you talk on the phone, their voice doesn’t match their photo somehow.

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Popular dating sites like OKCupid and Match.com have established precautionary measures for catching fake profiles. Many smaller or niche dating sites lack this kind of security system.

Military profiles are often used by scammers. Be wary of soldiers in the armed forces in desperate need of settling down.

If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

Never, ever, send anyone money, especially overseas.

Google your matches. Look up phone numbers, usernames, and social media profiles, and search their dating site photos to see if other fraudulent profiles appear.

Be cautious of profiles that use grammatically incorrect sentences or terms that sound like they’re lifted straight from an old-fashioned romance novel.

If the person claims to be local, casually test them on basic knowledge. Ask about local events, a hometown sports team, or restaurants. Be on the lookout for mistakes. If the person is not local, question why they want to pursue a long-distance relationship.

Do not give out personal information to anyone you have not met in person and trust.

Seek second opinions from your close friends and family.