

In the midst of a long and cold winter here in the north, Valentine's Day brings a heartwarming day of romance. Flowers, candy, and valentine's cards are exchanged in the hopes of enhancing or sparking a feeling love and connection. Most people long to have a connection to another person and will engage in all kinds of strategies to find the special person with whom they will walk along the path of life.

In their efforts to find love, people ordinarily assume the most they are risking is a feeling of loneliness or a broken heart. Unfortunately, for generations there have been people willing to prey upon the lonely through a romance scam. In a romance scam, the criminal poses as a potential love interest and works to steal money from the victim. Like most other scams, technology has opened a whole world of potential victims to these criminals.

Most of today's romance scams are started online. Whether that is through a dating app or a connection on social media, almost all these scams are initiated online. In all romance scams, a criminal selects a victim, pretends to be someone who the victim would be interested in getting to know, and builds the victim's trust through time and carefully planned conversations. Once trust is established, the criminal begins asking the victim for money. Usually small amounts at first but progressing to larger amounts as time passes. Documented cases exist of people losing millions of dollars to these criminals.

The criminals running these scams are typically more sophisticated than high-volume, low-effort scammers trying to convince random victims they have a warrant or overdue utility bill. The criminals running romance scams invest time in learning what they can about their victim, hoping to come up with the right back story and persona to hook the victim into the scam. Initially, it can be difficult to discern between a criminal running a romance scam and an authentic person trying to make a human connection using the internet.

Being cautious and suspicious is your best defense against this and any other scam. Ask questions and research facts given to you by people you meet online. Do you really have friends in common? Is that profile picture really them or did they find it online? Do a reverse image search of any photos they send you. Be suspicious of someone who constantly has excuses for why they can't meet in person. Consider why a person who had no means to travel to your location would initiate a romantic relationship across that distance. Be equally suspicious of someone who constantly has a story of turmoil in their life and is asking for your assistance. Most importantly, you should see a giant red flag the very first time a person you met online asks you for money. This is especially true if they want you to use a wire transfer, gift card, or crypto currency to send the money. Criminals love these kinds of payments as they are very difficult to track and recover. These criminals will sound very convincing and work to say all the right things to their victims. If you've never looked into their eyes in person, don't send money, regardless of what they say.

The desire for companionship is strong in people. We are social creatures whose emotions long for us to be together with other humans. We are also intelligent beings whose minds can spot signs of trouble in relationships. Make sure both your head and your heart agree that continuing a connection with someone you met online is a good idea. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.