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MARK WEST, *Arlington*
(above)

‘I don’t really want to put this on hold just because I don’t have a job. I realized at some point I’d been paying \$30 a month or whatever for JDate, plus the investment of my time. Maybe if I pay \$700 I’ll get better results.’

RACHEL LEVY, *Brookline* (left)

Can't buy me love

It's hard to find a date when you're looking for a job

By Meredith Goldstein

GLOBE STAFF

Mark West doesn't date much. In fact, these days he doesn't date at all. That's because dating costs money, and West, like many other unemployed people, doesn't have any to spare. After losing his job five times in eight years, West was recently laid off again, days after Christmas, from a part-time job editing an education trade magazine. West, 39, has heard that women don't mind paying their own way on dates, but he's old-fashioned. He likes to cover the check.

"I haven't dated in the last couple of years," said West, who lives in Arlington, where he spends most of his day job-hunting online. "Dating is expensive."

Some singles have taken themselves out of the running for love during this recession. Unlike couples and families, who may interact with each other more when they're housebound, the single-and-jobless are often isolated by cutting their entertainment budget. When there's no money to date, it means suffering through a drought that's both professional and personal.

According to job counselors, it's a problem that primarily affects heterosexual men. The US Labor Department has reported more men out of work, while the number of employed women continues to rise. Even though the stigma of unemployment has diminished during these bleak times, traditional gender roles remain: Men are supposed to pursue dates and offer to pay.

"That is the way it is," said Jarrett Goetz, an unemployed 33-year-old from the North End who assists start-up companies. "There's something that makes us insist on doing so. It's some sort of programming."

Like West, Kevin Cain, 44, has also paused his search for romance. The biotechnology marketer has been out of work for a year and has been actively looking for jobs since April. He's now doing part-time catering work to help cover his \$3,000 mortgage in Hingham, earning a tenth of what he once made.

When he considers what it would cost to take a woman on a date he thinks: "That's my electric bill."

"I haven't tried to date in at least six months," Cain said. "I can't afford to take myself to dinner, let alone somebody else."

To Cain, it's not just about the money. It's also that he

doesn't feel dateable. He wants to meet a partner as a confident, self-supporting man. Right now he's just a guy looking for work who can't afford more than a beer when he goes out.

Cain acknowledged that "there are women out there who would be fine with the situation." But he's not fine with it. "I'd like to date, and I enjoy the company, but I just feel, like, inadequate. And when you're in the 'burbs it's even worse."

Marilyn Santiesteban, client development manager at the human resources consulting company King & Bishop, said she is not surprised that many jobless singles stop dating. Echoing Cain's concerns about inadequacy, she said it's not about the expense of dates as much as it is about self-worth. "What changes is your personal perception of your power and your value," she said. "That has to impact how you feel about dating in general."

Of course, for some singles, hibernating from the dating scene isn't an option. Goetz, who works with start-ups, says finding a partner is a key part of his happiness. He has kept his online dating membership, and continues to have a few dates a week. He's just more conscious of what he spends.

Rachel Levy, who keeps a blog from her Brookline condo about her employment search, just spent \$700 to join the matchmaking service LunchDates. She doesn't have much cash to spare — she's been out of work since July — but she considers the dating expense an investment in her future. Levy is 37. She wants to get married. Waiting to find a mate until she has steady work isn't wise, she said. She must pursue her romantic interests as aggressively as she hunts for jobs.

"I don't really want to put this on hold just because I don't have a job," she said. "I realized at some point I'd been paying \$30 a month or whatever for JDate, plus the investment of my time. Maybe if I pay \$700 I'll get better results."

Levy says her employment search has, in fact, mirrored her search for a romantic partner.

"There's the first round interview and a networking meeting at Starbucks," she joked. "The funny thing is, I do feel that networking has helped me in dating. It's helped make me more comfortable."

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RECESSION DATING

Dating without an income? Here are some tips for the un- and under-employed looking for love.

DON'T HIBERNATE Cutting off your cable television is one thing. Severing your ties to the outside world is another. Consider your dating life an investment. Seeking romance as a single is not only good for your psyche, it boosts your confidence, which you'll need for your job search.

FIND THE CHEAP Develop a list of first-date spots that say something good about you but are also wicked cheap. Pizzeria Regina in the North End has plenty of character and an inexpensive menu. Picco in the South End works, too. If you're really trying to limit costs, choose a restaurant that doesn't have a liquor license — like Baraka Cafe in Cambridge. Nothing bumps up a bill like booze.

DOUBLE HUNT Job fairs are for jobs, but a number of employment seekers at every employment event also happen to be single. Consider every networking event a social one. Chat up potential mates, not just potential employers.

DON'T PAY If you're on dating websites that charge a fee, try the free ones instead. There's no charge for OkCupid.com. Match.com also recently launched DownToEarth.com, a free site.

HAVE NO SHAME Unemployment shouldn't make you a pariah — especially these days. The stigma of unemployment has diminished now that so many people are jobless. You can be honest about your work status without letting it define you. After all, your unemployment is temporary. When you meet new people, tell them what you want to do for a living, not what you've been forced to stop doing because of the economy.