



# *Healing a wounded heart: A first aid kit for emotional injuries*

*Design by Erika Hajdu  
Text by Pieter Desmet*

Swipe left and swipe right. Congratulations 🎉 a match! The match leads to a chat, then a date, an exciting evening. "I had a good time. Will we see each other again?" These days, we can look for some fun, excitement, romance or perhaps even a life partner with a simple click or swipe. Dating has never been easier, and the pond that we fish in is bigger than ever. The companies behind dating apps advertise success stories about passionate love and happy endings. But the temptation also has a dark side. There is growing concern about the volatile behaviour that is encouraged by these digital interactions and its negative effects on our well-being. Designer Erika Hajdu researched the small emotional wounds that may form during online dating. She subsequently designed Huggle, a product that helps us heal those wounds through self-compassion.

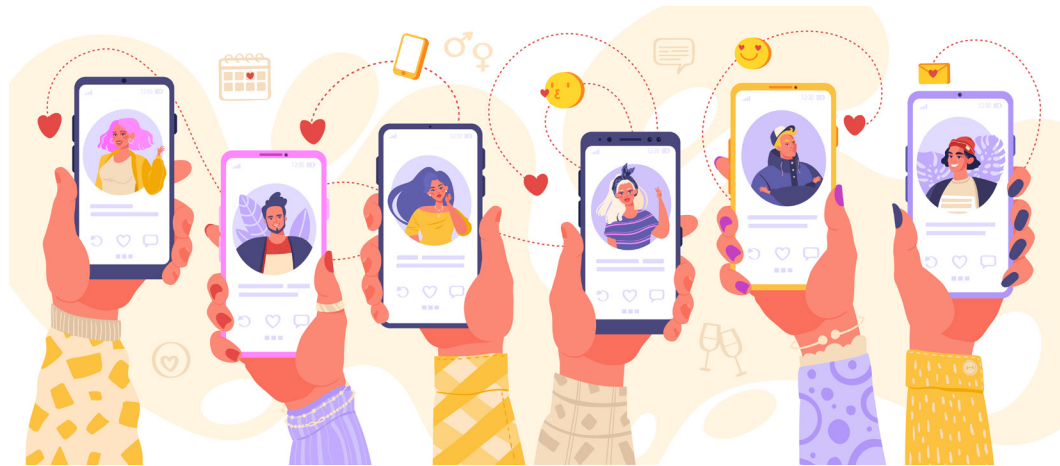


Figure 1 – dating with a click or swipe

### The rise of online dating

For me personally, 1994 represents the year of the festive opening of the Channel Tunnel. This new link between England and France was celebrated as a symbol of European unity. What completely passed me by at the time, however, was another event that had an even greater impact on personal connections: the launch of kiss.com, the world's first photo-based online dating service. In 1994, the number of couples who met online was negligibly small. So how did you find a partner back in those days? Through your network of family or colleagues, of course. But Kiss.com paved the way for a radically new approach, and that approach became mainstream 15 years later thanks to rise of smartphones (Figure 1). Today, less than 30 years later, as many as 40% of all couples worldwide have found each other through online dating (Rosenfeld, 2022) - facilitated by more than 1500 different services and applications. However, along with this overwhelming success criticism is also mounting. For example, dating apps are said to reduce love and intimacy to consumer goods, leading to an impoverishment or "McDonaldization" of romance. Today there is an increasing belief that online dating can also be accompanied by all kinds of negative emotions. Over time, these emotions can eventually lead to negative self-image, anxieties, and even addiction and depression (Salaric, 2022).

### A first aid kit for emotional injuries

You likely have a first aid kit at home. Disinfectant and some adhesive bandages. Indispensable when it comes to minor injuries, a cut or scratch, for example. But what about our emotional injuries? Failure, guilt, rejection and loss are just as much a part of everyday life as the occasional chafed elbow. These experiences are often not traumatic but, if neglected, can have a major impact on our emotional well-being. According to psychologist Guy Winch in his book "Emotional First Aid" (2013), we can easily put a bandage over a cut, but we don't have a first aid kit for emotional wounds. That idea inspired Erika. She set herself the goal of designing a first aid kit for emotional injuries suffered during online dating. To gain insight into those wounds, she came up with a diary survey to identify the negative emotions of 13 young people while they were dating online. She summarised her insights in a set of 14 flashcards depicting common emotional injuries. She then interviewed five experts to determine what the best coping mechanisms are for those injuries. Ultimately, she chose self-compassion as the foundation for her design: a positive and caring attitude towards yourself.



Figure 2 – Pills for self-compassion

### Huggle: A Pill for Self-Compassion

Huggle is a collection of brightly coloured pill-shaped containers dedicated to self-compassion. The 'pills' come in a glass jar that you place in a visible place in your home. Each pill is packaged in a biodegradable mycelium coating and wrapper. The wrapper shows when you can open which pill. For example: "Are you feeling down because your match isn't replying? Open me!" or: "Are you feeling down because your match is not responding to your proposal to meet

up? Open me!" You take a pill, break it open, tear and peel off the mycelium. In the pill, you will find a piece of paper together with a mini exercise (figure 2 and 3).

For the exercises, Erika combined the insights from her own research with the work of Guy Winch and that of the self-compassion expert Kristin Neff (2003). The pills come in three different colours, each with their own kind of instructions:

#### Orange: Reflection pills

These pills help you to see your negative experience in a different light by way of focused reflections. For example, "How can I take a balanced view of this situation?" or "What is the voice in my head saying? What can I say to that voice to calm it down with compassion?"

#### Red: Action pills

These pills help you to let go of your negative experience through courses of action. These may include actions to make you feel good, such as "Let's put my favourite clothes on today" or actions focused on the interactions during dates, such as "Let's express my needs clearly and calmly and listen to their point of view."

#### Green: Connection pills

These pills help you to call on your support network. You give the pill to a friend to initiate a conversation so that you feel a sense of connection. The pill contains sentences that can spark a conversation, such as "My best memory of you is..." or "The things I like to do with you are..."

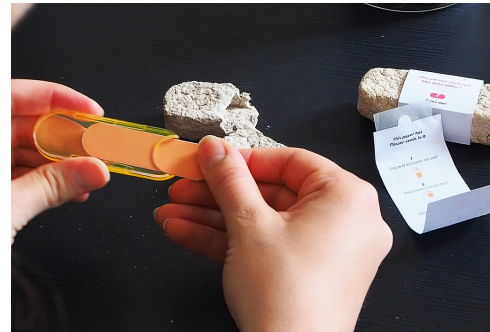
### 1 - jar of pills



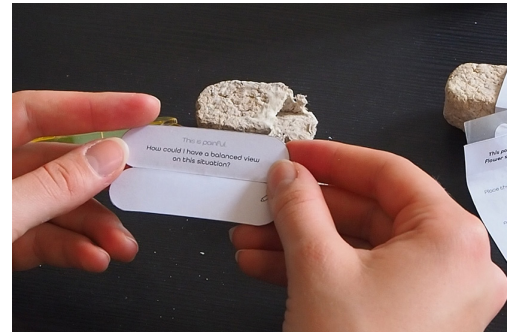
### 2 - choose a pill



### 3 - open the pill



### 4 - read the assignment



### 5 - make a note



### 6 - save the pill



Figure 3 - first aid for emotional injuries

It is completely up to you to choose a colour, depending on what you feel like at that moment. After opening the pill, make a note on the slip of paper if you wish. Following the exercise, you put the paper back in the pill, and then the pill back in the glass jar. Placing the pill jar in a prominent place

in your home acts as a visual reminder to take good care of yourself while dating (Figure 4). You can always remove a pill from the jar and reread it. Or you can leave it in your bag or pocket, so you have it on hand whenever you need it.

### “Don’t let it get you down”

In her research, Erika discovered a taboo on the hurt we can suffer when dating online. For example, your match stops responding in the app or doesn’t show up for the first date. The general attitude is often one of “oh well, that’s just part and parcel of it all; don’t let it get you down.” But if you look deeper, these small instances of rejection can build up to a negative self-image or a fear of dating, precisely because they are pushed aside or ignored. Your heart is not necessarily broken - it is just a scratch. You won’t have to go to the doctor, but a bandage can do a lot of good. Emotional first aid can help you deal with that ‘invisible’ pain, recover from it more effectively, and build resilience so that you can maintain a positive attitude to dating. Huggle is all about resilience through self-compassion. It won’t help you find a life partner, but it will help you safeguard your personal well-being in that search for some love. Because let’s face it: loving someone else starts with loving yourself.



Figure 4 - A reminder for self-compassion



Erika Hajdu (photo) created Huggle in 2022 as part of a graduation project initiated by Hazal Ertürkan (TU Delft) for the master’s programme Design for Interaction. Her supervisors were Hazal Ertürkan and Pieter Desmet (TU Delft). The following experts provided additional advice: Laura Sels (Ghent University), Tila Pronk (Tilburg University), Tessa Dekkers (University of Twente), Nils Keemakers (Maastricht University) and Marsha Goei (Breeze). Prior to her education in Delft, Erika studied at the University of Leeds (M.Sc. Design) and the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (B.Sc. Industrial Design Engineering). She also worked as a media designer at Helios GmbH in Germany.

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# Colophon

## **First aid for a broken heart: A first aid kit for emotional injuries**

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## **Product concept & design by Erika Hajdu**

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All other images by Erika Hajdu.

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All articles from the series are available at [www.diopd.org](http://www.diopd.org)

## **Reference**

Desmet, P.M.A. (2022). First aid for a broken heart: A first aid kit for emotional injuries. Delft, Delft University of Technology.

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The logo for TU Delft, featuring a stylized flame icon above the letters 'TU' in blue and 'Delft' in black.