today are adopting a more casual approach which is reflected in dating habits. Why date when you can just "chill" or "hang"? Flowers and candle-light dinners are oh-so-20th Century. Casual is cool. Commitment is scary.

Relationship experts say no matter how casual, the after-effects of a shattered relationship is always traumatic. Serial daters often leave in their wake broken hearts and bruised egos. "It is a problem when one party gets serious, and the other is just playing around," says Nadia, a student of BBA at East West University.



Mobile phones today are a style icon. Photo: Shafique Alam

Young men and women are often pushed by peer pressure towards a physical intimacy they are not ready for. Prof. Mokaddem Hossain says those most at risk are adolescents. "They take decisions very emotionally," says Prof. Hossain. "In many cases boys and girls from villages and small towns are not quite savvy when they come to Dhaka. They lose their bearings due to the culture shock. Often people take advantage of them."

Sania says a friend of hers had a relationship with a man who was a lieutenant in the army. "She was barely 18 at the time, but her boyfriend was older. But he made her pregnant. She had to have a medical procedure. Her family never found out."

Prof. Mokaddem Hossain says such emotional trauma can seriously damage lives. "There should be counselling centres in all the colleges and universities," he says. ""Young people often don't know who to turn to and take advice from their peer group. This can be very dangerous."

Prof. Hossain also stresses the role of the family. "The internet and the mobile are causing the loosening of parental control. A teenaged boy can come home late and say he was working in a cyber café. He goes straight to his room, saying he has eaten with friends. His parents have no idea what he is up to. Teens can communicate through text messages with their boy friends under the very noses of their parents and they wouldn't have a clue. It is important for parents to listen to their children so they can support them and guide them. They must also teach them religious and social values."

Najmul Alam, a banker, says he tries to be a friend to his 17-year-old sister. "But I wouldn't want her to date," he says. "There is no sense in allowing it and asking her to be careful. There is too much temptation. It would be like sending her into a minefield and asking her to watch her step."

The loosening of social taboos in the age of information technology has weakened the role of the family and placed the onus on young people to be responsible and to look after themselves. But many experts fear they may not have the tools to navigate the perilous waters by themselves.

Dr. Mobarak Hossain, General Manager (Services) at Marie Stopes Bangladesh, says a comprehensive plan should be in place to educate adolescents. Dr. Hossain sees a sharp rise in the number of young women seeking to terminate a pregnancy through Menstruation Regulation (MR) procedures. "In 2007 we did about 36000 MRs, and last year it was around 48000," says Dr. Hossain. Dr. Hossain is keen to point out that the 50% rise may not be entirely due to an explosion in unplanned pregnancies. "MRs have been publicised. People now know it's available, so many people now come to clinics rather than going to quacks."

Dr. Hossain says Marie Stopes has an awareness plan that seeks to educate adolescents. "Our youngsters are in danger of sexually transmitted diseases, as well as physical and emotional trauma," he says. "They must receive institutional support, and also receive support and guidance within the family."

Sociologists say the wheel is turning full circle in many countries, such as the US, where the family is actively promoted, and chastity is once again "cool".

"Whether we want to walk the same path and experience those ups and downs is for us to decide," says Prof Mokaddem. "We could wait for the pendulum to swing back, or we could simply look at them and prefer to preserve what we have."

What stood out in dozens of interviews was the desire among young adults to have a say in finding their own partners, and having control over their own lives. At the same time, most think it is vital to involve their families along the way. Relationship experts agree that with a healthy dose of judgment, discretion and precaution, you can build rewarding relationships and long lasting romances-- and technology would only add wind to your sails.

And the candlelight dinner may not be extinct after all.

"After the first phone calls and a few rushed meetings at fast food joints, if you begin to get serious, you want something different." says Sania. "That's when you want more time together and a quieter environment far from the madding crowd. Candlelight dinner? Definitely!"

The fundamentals still apply. Cupid would approve.

*Many names have been changed to protect the privacy of interviewees.*