



Regions Wealth Podcast

Episode #46

Romance Scams: The Costly Financial Scam Targeting People of All Ages

Romance scams have become the most costly scam in America. While the sums of money lost are often significant, for the victims of romance scams, the emotional toll can feel even more staggering. In this episode, Senior Corporate Security Fraud Investigator Bryan Clark joins us to discuss how romance scams work, common signs of a romance scammer, and red flags to be on the lookout for. We'll also discuss steps to take after financial fraud occurs, and what you should do if you think a loved one is falling victim to a romance scam.

SME: Bryan Clark, Senior Corporate Security Fraud Investigator

Episode Transcript

Sarah Fister Gale:

Welcome to Regions Wealth Podcast, the podcast that tackle's life's challenges with financial experience. I'm your host, Sarah Fister Gale.

If asked to name the most costly financial scams in America, things like fake checks or those infamous emails claiming that you're the lucky beneficiary of a long-lost inheritance might be first in mind for most people.

And while those are still prevalent, the *most costly* scam in America is one that many people still haven't heard of: *romance scams*. According to the FBI, Americans lost approximately \$1 billion to romance scams in 2021. During the same year, losses reported to the Federal Trade Commission totaled \$547 million — that's an 80% increase from the previous year. For victims, the financial losses associated with these confidence scams can be steep, and the emotional fallout even more significant.

Joining us to discuss this topic is Bryan Clark. He's senior corporate security fraud investigator at Regions Bank. Bryan thanks for joining us today.

Bryan Clark:

Glad to be here, Sarah. Thanks.

Sarah Fister Gale:



So, Bryan, in this episode of Regions Wealth Podcast, we're discussing romance scams: how they work, common red flags, and tips for protecting yourself *and* your loved ones. We've taken some frequently asked questions and have developed two characters who need your help.

First, we're going to hear from Samantha, who is concerned that her father may be falling victim to a romance scam. Let's listen.

Samantha:

"For the last few years, my dad has been romantically involved with a woman he met online named Laura. She's 43 years old, she is widowed, and she has an eight-year-old daughter. Dad claims it was 'love at first message' for both of them. While I really want to be happy for him, I've noticed a lot of red flags, especially over the past several months.

For me, the first red flag was Laura's refusal to video chat with him. Dad's completely convinced that she's just shy, but personally, I'm just hearing excuse after excuse after excuse. First, it was because her iPhone didn't have a working camera... so he wired her \$800 for a new one. Then, she tearfully confessed that she can't afford to pay for home internet, so he sent her money for that. Now, she just outright refuses, saying he's pushing her to do something she's uncomfortable with.

Laura works for the Peace Corps and is currently located in Rwanda, but has promised my dad that she's about to return to the U.S. so they can get married and start their life together. The thing is, she's been telling him this for months now — some sort of emergency always comes up that delays her return.

Now, she's come to my dad with a litany of requests: she's asked for money to buy new plane tickets, money to sort out some issue with her daughter's passport, money to buy her wedding dress and engagement ring overseas... In total, she has asked my dad for \$28,000. What's really upsetting to me is that she's convinced him that this money is the only thing standing between their ability to be together.

Basically, I think my dad is falling victim to a romance scam, but I just don't know how — or if — I should break it to him. My brother thinks I should just leave it alone and let him figure it out on his own. I get why he says that — our mom passed away six years ago, and this relationship has given my dad something to look forward to. At the same time, I'm worried this woman is going to bleed my dad dry. I really don't know the best way to handle this without hurting our relationship."



Sarah Fister Gale:

So, wow, that is a big story. Samantha thinks her father is falling victim to what she calls a romance scam. For those who may be hearing this term for the first time, what is a romance scam?

Bryan Clark:

Sure. The simple definition of a romance scam is where a scammer is targeting a victim in a romantic relationship and is trying to woo them to fall in love with them. But the ultimate goal for them is to steal their finances and get access to their money.

Sarah Fister Gale

And how do these romance scams typically work?

Bryan Clark:

It can go in a bunch of different ways. You could have individuals that are on dating websites that are targeted there. You can have ones that are targeted directly through unsolicited messages. And if they ever get involved, the scammers always want to keep these relationships a secret, because if the victim ever starts talking to family and friends about this relationship, a lot of them are going to try to say, "Hey, you know, you need to be careful that you could potentially be involved in a scam."

Sarah Fister Gale:

So are these sorts of scams common?

Bryan Clark:

Absolutely. I've been here at Regions in corporate security financial investigations for 17 years. And I have seen countless numbers of these cases, unfortunately.

Sarah Fister Gale:

Wow, that's troubling. So, what are the red flags or common hallmarks of a romance scam that people can look out for?

Bryan Clark:

Well, immediately, they're going to try to fall in love within the first few text messages. It's going to be quick. And from that point on, you know, it's going to become, "Can you help me with this emergency? Can you help me with this?" They're always gonna seek money from them. They're always going to promise them that, you know, "We're going to meet in person sometime. I'm so in love with you." But ultimately, that meeting is never going to happen. And



they're just going to keep asking for money. And every time, it's going to be an emergency why I can't come. "I've been in a car wreck. My daughter is sick, but I need money to help for that." But they're never gonna come, and then when the victim finally gets savvy to, you know, "Okay, this is probably a scam. Something's going on here," and they cease to send them money, then the relationship ends.

Sarah Fister Gale:

Wow. Are these scams typically pretty costly?

Bryan Clark:

Yes, absolutely. According to the FTC, we're looking at \$547 million lost in 2021 alone.

Sarah Fister Gale:

Oh, my goodness. How do these scams get so costly so quickly for people?

Bryan Clark:

Well, unfortunately, a lot of these people are looking for love and they want to believe that they're in love. As they say, love is blind. And so, they're not looking for the red flags that are happening. And they just want to help, and so they'll often send money, and they'll send all of their money sometimes. I've had cases upwards of half a million dollars where family fortunes and inheritances are lost for the entire family due to these scams.

Sarah Fister Gale:

Oh my goodness. And does it always start out with a big request, thousands of dollars? Or do some of these scams start small so you don't really notice?

Bryan Clark:

No, the majority of them, from my experience, have started small. And then, as the scam grows, they get larger and larger, because if the scammer's gonna start off immediately with a, you know, a \$50,000 request, that's really gonna throw up some red flags. But if we start off with, you know, \$500 here, \$1,000 here, and then we build up over time, as long as this scam relationship can go on, then the amount that they're requesting is going to increase.

Sarah Fister Gale:

And I imagine it gets easier to give \$1,000 if you've already given a few 100.

Bryan Clark:

Exactly.



Sarah Fister Gale:

And do these scams typically take place online, with someone the victim hasn't physically met?

Bryan Clark:

From my experience, the majority of the cases that I've investigated have involved online romances. I talk to these people a lot. And I always ask them, "Have you met them?" "Yes." They've never met them. Well, you met them online. You've talked to them on the phone. Sometimes they think that is meeting somebody. But not a face to face. There are cases that I have heard of where the people do meet in person. But again, any romance scam that we've investigated is where the scammer is trying to get access to that individual's finances, access to their money through, quote unquote, romance.

Sarah Fister Gale::

Is there a certain demographic who are targeted more frequently than others?

Bryan Clark:

As far as the romance scams, not really. Everyone can potentially fall victim to a romance scam. If you are out there looking for love, you are a potential victim. But with that being said, most of the victims that I've seen are middle aged to older. They seem to be a little more susceptible to these crimes, where the younger folks, you know, a few text messages here or there, they're like, "Nah, this, this isn't right."

Sarah Fister Gale:

And financially, can you get hit no matter what financial bracket you're in?

Bryan Clark:

Absolutely. I mean, if you've got \$500 and you're willing to give it to them, they're gonna take it. If you've got 500,000 and you're willing to give it to them, they're going to take it.

Sarah Fister Gale:

So how do the scammers typically extract the money from their victims?

Bryan Clark:

So, different ways from what I've seen. I've seen where it's specifically, "Can I have money? Can you help me out?" Just a direct request for funds. I've seen where they'll actually use the victim as a money mule. So they may have three or four different victims and they just start transferring money from one person to another. And, "Can you help me with this?" "Sure." "Well good. I'm gonna send you some money. You keep some of it for yourself. And then can



you send it on, you know, to whoever." And that may be part of the emergencies or other issues that we had talked about before. And so, they can kind of use them as a money mule.

But then the latest thing that I have seen is the use of cryptocurrency. And what I have found is it's very easy now 'cause here in Memphis, where I'm located, we've got crypto ATMs popping up everywhere and it's very easy to go, use your bank card, and purchase crypto, and then give the information to the scammer. And once they have that information, then that money is gone. So those are a couple of different ways that I have seen lately.

Sarah Fister Gale:

So for concerned friends or family members who believe a loved one might be falling victim to a scam, what's the best path forward?

Bryan Clark:

Well, first, try to talk to them. If they find out that their loved one is in a relationship that could potentially be a scam, try to talk to them. Unfortunately, from my experience, we have found that if they do feel that they are in a relationship and this is true love, they may be hesitant to give you all of the details, and they don't want to believe that they're a victim in a scam. And if that is the case, sometimes I will refer the family members to contact the bank, especially if they're conducting banking activities, wire transfers, any sort of electronic transfer.

You know, contact the bank and say, hey, I think my mom, my dad, my aunt, whoever it may be, is potentially involved in a romance scam or elder abuse, you know, financial exploitation. Let the bank become aware and we can take that a step further. Here at Regions we've got fraud investigators all over our footprint who are experienced in investigating these crimes. And if you get it to us, then we can take control. And a lot of times we've got a little more knowledge and persuasive verbiage that we can talk to these people and really say, "Hey, you are involved in a scam," and really try to get them to understand what's going on.

Sarah Fister Gale:

And loved ones do this even if they're not listed on their family member's bank account?

Bryan Clark:

Absolutely. They can always come to us, even if they're not on an account. Obviously we cannot provide them with any financial or banking information. But if they come to us and just say, "Hey, I feel that, my mom, my dad, my aunt, my sister is involved in a romance scam," they can report that to us and then that allows us to investigate it a little further. That allows us to contact our customer. We can do that anonymously, obviously. And look at their account. If we see money coming in and coming out, we know the red flags and we can



investigate that. And we've got the experience where we can talk to the customers and explain to them, "Ma'am, sir, we feel that you may be involved in a scam." Nine times out of 10, the first answer out of their mouths is gonna be, "No, I'm not." But we've got the experience to overcome their objections. And we've investigated similar cases, and sometimes we can talk to them and say, "Look, I've investigated this, this and this, and you are following the same pattern." And when it comes from a bank fraud investigator from their institution, sometimes they're a little more willing to listen to us. We can talk to them and offer them ways out of the scam and ways to help them. So definitely the family members can report it to us.

Sarah Fister Gale:

Do you find that people are more open to hearing that message from a financial adviser or a banker than they might be from their child?

Bryan Clark:

I think so. You get a third party, you get somebody with some knowledge that can clearly explain what is going on. And they can say, "Hey, look, I've investigated many of these cases." And you start talking to them about a case that you've investigated, and they're like, "Wow, that's exactly what is going on with me." I've investigated cases here and talked to victims, and found out the photograph that they've been looking at on whatever website that they're on is the same person, but just under a different profile. And if you can show that to people, they're like, "Okay, now I, I realize what's going on."

Sarah Fister Gale:

Wow.

Bryan Clark:

A family member, they don't really have access to all of that knowledge. You know, they can look a little bit, but, you know, then they don't want to be embarrassed by their family either. So sometimes it's easier for us to talk to them and then get a response back from that victim.

Sarah Fister Gale:

That's a really good tip, particularly for someone like Samantha who may be struggling with how to handle this.

Bryan Clark:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely

Sarah Fister Gale:

OK, so Bryan, next up, we're going to hear from someone who wishes to remain anonymous. She's become the victim of a romance scam and is looking for advice on how to handle it. Let's listen.



Barb:

“Thank you for taking my question, because I’m really unsure where to turn for help with this situation I’ve gotten into. I have to say, this has been incredibly hard for me to talk about, so I’d like to keep the details as vague as possible, if that’s OK with you. To cut straight to it, I believe I’ve been taken advantage of by someone very dear to me. We met on a senior dating site - a very reputable one, I might add. We fell in love very quickly and after a few months, he asked me to marry him. During the course of our relationship, my so-called fiance experienced some terrible health issues and needed help paying for a major surgery. I thought we were deeply in love, so of course I offered to help him. He promised he’d repay me as soon as he was fully recuperated. However, much like every other promise he made, I’m no longer of the belief that he ever planned on following through. When I finally opened up about all of this to a very dear friend of mine, she immediately saw a lot of red flags that I’d somehow missed. I suppose I was blinded by the excitement of it all. It’s become clear to me that this has all been some sort of scam. I’d like to file a report, but I don’t know where to begin, particularly since I have no idea who the man I loved even is.”

Sarah Fister Gale:

So Bryan, if someone believes they're being scammed, what is the first thing they should do?

Bryan Clark:

Sarah, if they believe that they're being scammed, the first thing that they need to do is cease communication with that individual immediately. I mean, that is the first thing. Just stop talking to them, whether it's via text messages, chats, phone calls, anything - just absolutely stop communicating with them.

Sarah Fister Gale:

And then should they speak to their bank or their financial advisor?

Bryan Clark:

Yeah, absolutely. So once they cease the communication with that person, it's very important for them to go to the bank and report it. And I understand that they may be embarrassed, they may not want to tell anyone what's going on. But if they come to the bank, we can help them protect their finances. You know, blocks on accounts, changing account numbers, a variety of different things that we can help to secure their money. And it's also important that if they've been talking to these people online and could have potentially exposed any of their online banking passwords or usernames, that they go in and they change those immediately. And



then also, since most of these scams are being run through a computer, it's also very important that they run an antivirus software check, check for any malware, viruses, keyloggers, anything like that, that the suspects could have installed over that time of the scam.

Sarah Fister Gale:

You know, that's so interesting. So many of the password protection clues are personal information like your first pet, or your mother's maiden name, things that could come out in conversations with a romance scammer. So, is that something that they're looking for?

Bryan Clark:

Absolutely. They will look for that information. And then try to use that to get access to their online banking. Because once they're in there, they have the ability, from that point on to transfer money out, open up new accounts, other schemes that they could use to get access to their money.

Sarah Fister Gale:

You raise a good point. I imagine a lot of people who think they might have been scammed are embarrassed or ashamed that they fell for it. What would you say to them about coming forward and talking about it and not being ashamed?

Bryan Clark:

That is one big obstacle that we have to overcome. But just gotta calm them down, reassure them, "You're not the only one. Like this happens all the time. I understand you're a victim, but we're here to help you." And again, "You're not the only one." And once they can kind of understand that, they'll open up to us and talk to us, and hopefully we can help them and educate them so it doesn't happen again.

Sarah Fister Gale:

Wow. So what about reporting scams? Is there a specific agency they should turn to?

Bryan Clark:

So as far as reporting, they can report it to the bank, they can report it to law enforcement, but unfortunately, a lot of these cases fall outside of their jurisdiction. So they may take a report for you, but they may not take any further action. I also recommend that they contact the FBI, and that can easily be done through IC3.gov, the letter I, the letter C, number 3 .gov. And that's a reporting system that the FBI uses to track, monitor, and also try to recoup any money that could have been sent. And then also contact the FTC and file a report there as well for any



online dating sites or social media outlets where the potential scammers could be using their platforms.

Sarah Fister Gale:

And is it difficult for victims to recoup money they lost in these scams?

Bryan Clark:

Yes. And unfortunately, in these scams, what we are seeing is the use of wire transfers, any sort of electronic banking transfer, those are much more common nowadays because the money can move so fast between different accounts, and across the country, and even across the world. So, if they feel that they have been scammed, they need to report it to the bank, to the FBI immediately. Time is of the essence. And really, if we go over 24 hours, our odds of making any sort of recovery dwindle greatly. So they feel that they've been a victim, and they've sent money, and they realized, "Hey, I know I'm a victim of a scam," they need to report it to their bank immediately.

Sarah Fister Gale:

If it's so difficult to get the money back, especially if time has gone by, is it still valuable to report the scam to an agency?

Bryan Clark:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. One, because you never know. We do have some success stories where we do get money back. So that's obviously the number one reason why you should report it to us. And then also report it to us and the government agencies mentioned before so we can track the suspect names. -So, if we can get a database with all of those names and information, that's just going to help us down the road.

Sarah Fister Gale:

Wow. In addition to reporting the crime, what steps can individuals take to protect themselves after the scam, so it doesn't happen again?

Bryan Clark:

Well obviously, as we mentioned before, changing all your passwords on, you know, your online banking accounts, your username, passwords, all of that. Check your computer for any viruses that could have been installed during that time. And educate yourself and be on the lookout for any future scams because I have seen where the same victim, the same individual has been used several different times in different schemes and scams, whether it's a romance scam, a lottery scam. The victims will get targeted several different times in different scams. So, education is key, because they're not going to stop, they're going to continue going. And so, the more people that we can educate, the better off we're going to be in stopping these.



Sarah Fister Gale:

So, knowing how widespread romance scams have become, what steps can individuals take to protect themselves on online dating sites?

Bryan Clark:

First, you've got to be careful when you're dealing with people that you are not meeting in person and it's just online. Anybody can be anybody they want to be online. So, the first thing is just be careful. And then know your red flags. If the person is located overseas, that's a red flag. If they're trying to say that they're a doctor, or they're in the Merchant Marines or some well-respected profession, sometimes that can be a red flag too, because it's a trusting relationship. And you're like, "Oh, well, they're a doctor over there, so everything's gotta be okay." So, you can use that as a red flag.

And then also, if the relationship is just moving too quickly, if we are in love and it's been a day, we need to throw a red flag on that one. Slow down, slow down. Take your time, just as you would in any relationship. And again, if they start asking for money right away, that's gonna be your immediate red flag that we've got a romance scam going on. Education is key. So, the scammers are always evolving. They're changing their ways. They're coming up with different things. But if we can educate consumers and our customers, to me, that's the best way to combat these types of frauds.

I kind of want to go into just a real quick story. You would think a bank fraud investigator and his family would be immune to any of these kinds of scams. And unfortunately, we're not. It can happen to anybody. I had a family member who lost a loved one. And they were targeted directly through an online messaging app saying, "Hey, I know that you just lost someone." How did they know that? They were looking through the obituary pages. These scammers will go into great lengths to find their victims sometimes. And they targeted my relative online, and were able to send them a message directly, and start a relationship that way. And she didn't tell us about it for a long time until she was kind of like, "I got this person that's asking for money." And luckily, I was able to talk to them and say, "Look, this is what's going on. This is a scam." But unfortunately, they did not know. So just be really cautious with any online romance, online friendship, especially if it starts off and it's moving very quickly.

Sarah Fister Gale:

Bryan, at the end of each episode, we like to ask our guests for some key takeaways. What can we share with our listeners about how to identify a romance scam, and what to do if you find yourself involved with one?

Bryan Clark:

So first, be very cautious with any online romance, any online friendship, particularly if the contact is unsolicited. Look for your red flags. The second takeaway, obviously, slow down, go



slow, because many of these scam relationships that I have seen want to move very quickly. We're in love within four to five messages, and then immediately, we're asking for money. And if it seems that every time you were supposed to meet, or something's supposed to happen, and then all of the sudden, we've got an emergency and we need more money, definitely use your red flags that you've learned from this podcast and just slow down. And thirdly, if you do become a victim, don't be embarrassed. Trust me, these scammers have taken many victims along their way. So do not be afraid to come to the bank, to report it to the FBI, to report it to the FTC. Get that information to us and let us help you. We have the tools. We have the knowledge, and we are here to help you. So just do not be afraid. And it's very important that you get it reported to us as quickly as you realize that something is not right, 'cause in all of these investigations, time is of the essence. If we're trying to make any sort of recovery, and/or to protect you from any further scams down the road.

Sarah Fister Gale:

Those are great insights. Bryan, thank you so much. This has been such an informative conversation.

Bryan Clark:

You're welcome. You're welcome.

Sarah Fister Gale:

And thank *you* for listening today. To learn more about romance scams, how to spot the signs, and steps to take if you or someone you love has been targeted, visit www.ftc.gov/romancescams. And to report a scam to the FBI, you can visit their Internet Crime Complaint Center at www.ic3.gov.

For more tips and resources to help you spot and prevent financial scams, be sure to visit regions.com/fraudprevention.

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