

It's Never too Late for Romance

By Marion Shoard
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After decades of togetherness, your partner dies. What then? A life alone, perhaps lasting twenty years or more? Or a search for someone new? If the latter, how do you master the dating game when you are sixty, seventy or eighty?

One thing that will have changed since your teenage fumbblings is that systematic searching for love has lost its stigma. Introduction agencies, the personal ads and computer dating are now routine in a world where traditional social networks have broken down and time is scarce.

Plenty of newspapers and magazines feature personal classified columns in which you place an ad and hope for replies. Often this does not cost much, even in prestigious publications. You can select a publication that reflects your social background, outlook, interests and sexual orientation in the hope that this will limit the field to kindred spirits. But of course, if you are operating alone you have to rely on your own ability to screen out people who are time-wasters, potential axe-murderers or stalkers - or simply not Mr Right.

Surveys show that many of the men who place adverts or respond to them, whether online or offline, are far from truthful. Many are married and simply looking for an affair - although they may pretend otherwise. Safety is an issue, since stalking in particular really does take place.

Always arrange to meet a date arising from an ad in a public place. Tell a friend beforehand where you are going to be. Do not reveal your home address or telephone number (except your mobile) in the first few meetings. Do not allow your date to pick you up or return you home afterwards and dial 141 before calling him from your landline. If, when you are ready to give him your number he doesn't want to give you his, become suspicious: why doesn't he want you to ring him out of the blue at home?

Introduction agencies come in two main types. Some compile a database of men and women looking for romance, and try to match them up, either using computers alone or with considered human sifting. They send their clients lists of possible matches and then leave clients to take things further. Carolyn, who has tried several database agencies, told me: 'It's crucial to know how many people an agency has on its books. One told me they would send a new list of names every month, but the same names kept cropping up. One sold me a lifetime membership, but then changed its name so I lost my money.' She might have added that while the possibility of 20 or 30 names a month may sound promising, you are left with the time, trouble and expense of contacting, meeting and perhaps spending many unrewarding evenings.

If you are considering using an agency, ask questions beforehand. The Association of British Introduction Agencies has a code of practice with which it expects its member agencies to comply.

Search agencies do not rely on a database pool but proactively search for matches on an individual basis by placing adverts on behalf of clients in suitable newspapers and magazines. They then interview face-to-face people who reply, sometimes for hours, demanding documents such as divorce certificates and telephoning them unannounced at home. If all seems well, they draw up a profile and recommend a meeting to the client. The process can take months and inevitably costs much more than database alternatives.

Jill Rhodes-Harvey operates her own search agency. She told me: 'Most women of 55 are not looking for marriage: they are happy to be in a dating situation, although obviously they would like it to be long-term. In contrast, men of that age tend to want to date younger women, often with a view to reliving a younger way of life, with a woman in her early to mid-forties who has teenage children'.

This observation is in line with research carried out by Dr Kate Davidson of the University of Surrey who has conducted in-depth interviews with older widows and widowers about entering new partnerships. The widows she talked to were looking for a man to go out with; the widowers somebody to come home to.

Those leery of organised approaches can of course still look for love through events and activities in their local communities. Jane Pendlebury, a counsellor based in the West Midlands, advocates looking for romance in a milieu in which people can be seen in context. 'If you meet on a cruise or on an arranged date, it's like a holiday romance: you can take on a false picture.' Drama groups, dances, badminton, bowls, computer classes and university of the third age groups may prove more reliable. If you have a special interest, from photography to bird watching, so much the better. More than 60 per cent of all relationships start at work. For many older people, this could be voluntary work.

Jane advocates recognising some of the difficulties in your own personality before embarking on a serious relationship in later life. You need to recognise what you could give as well as what you might receive. Some people look for love after dealing with a deceased partner's long illness. If their whole existence perhaps for years has revolved around caring and supporting, they may have lost themselves. They may even harbour anger towards their dead partner for abandoning them, even though they know this is irrational. At the same time, they may fear a new relationship lest it brings illness and bereavement all over again.

These sorts of issues are serious and counselling is often the best way of tackling them. If you take that path, make sure that the counsellor is an accredited (not just an ordinary) member of the British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists and so has received the necessary training to deal with what can be a complex business. Counselling by somebody not sufficiently qualified can do more harm than good.

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Sex can be a real obstacle to relationships in later life, since any loss of sexual function can undermine a man's confidence. Counselling on sexual matters can be extremely beneficial. Relate may be able to help from one of its local offices. Or you could obtain a list of counsellors qualified in this area from the BACP. There are many advice manuals on this crucial area, such as Dr Sarah Brewer's *Intimate Relations* – see below.

It is easy to forget just how much time and effort, not to speak of heartache, can be involved in dating, particularly if you have not dated for forty or more years. Denise Knowles is agony aunt of *Yours* magazine and a counsellor working for *Relate*. She told me: 'We sometimes tend to think that as people get older they're less vulnerable and less likely to feel hurt. Actually, I find the opposite is true'.

Should you find love in later life, you may have to bear in mind its impact on your adult children. Some people like to see a new man or woman in their parent's life, not just because they're pleased to see their parent happier but also because he or she may relieve them of the burden of support. Others, however, put as many spanners in the works as they can rustle up – sometimes because they dislike the idea of their parent having sex with someone other than their own parent, and sometimes because they fear that they and their children will lose their inheritance.

On marriage, the husband or wife inherits the spouse's assets automatically if he or she dies intestate. However, it is perfectly possible to draw up a will in favour of your children. Often people embarking on marriage in later life bequeath their property to their grown-up children on condition that their surviving spouse can continue to live in it until death. A wills lawyer can provide advice tailored to your individual needs.

There is no need to let stereotypical ideas of the form relationships should take dictate your lifestyle. In later life, you should feel freer to customise friendships and partnerships. As we grow older, the differences between us increase. A lifetime's attitudes to how we behave in our own homes can make cohabitation, no matter how deep our love, quite difficult. If you always take your shoes off when you step inside your house, and expect others to do so, if you always leave the kitchen spotless after every meal, how do you live with somebody to whom such behaviour seems ridiculous?

One way in which some older couples try to circumvent problems is through entering into 'LAT' relationships, or living apart together. Couples meet often, go away together, stay over in each other's houses, but do not live together. These relationships have of course been around for a long time and rely on those involved being sufficiently healthy to move around and sufficiently wealthy to maintain two homes.

Whatever relationship you want and whatever stage you are at, discuss everything with your beloved, advises Denise Knowles, who told me that success 'in any relationship, regardless of age, all comes down to the ability to communicate'.

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And perhaps a joint project can help too. My next door neighbours have just returned from celebrating the wedding of their aunt who, at the age of 65 and divorced for more than thirty years, recently fell in love with a never-married farmer aged 67. Exhausted after a night in which the newly-weds led the dancing, my neighbours told me that the foundation for what looks like proving a long and happy marriage is not just romantic passion but a combined venture into a new field – organic farming.

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Relate has local offices.
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Dr Sarah Brewer's book *Intimate Relations: Living and Loving in Later Life*, published in 2004 by Age Concern Books, is available to Women's Health readers at a special 20 per cent discount.

Marion Shoard writes and lectures on older people's issues.

Her new book *Later Life: A Guide* will be published in 2008 by Polperro Heritage Press.