

Dating After 50

BY LISA WATSON

Q&A

with *The Love Doctor*, Terri Orbuch

FOR MANY PEOPLE 50 AND OLDER, THE last time they went on a date, they may have been wearing bell bottoms or driving a Barracuda. Terri Orbuch, best known as The Love Doctor, has been studying the subject of love and romance for more than 25 years. She's the author of five books, project director of a long-term study on marriage funded through the National Institutes of Health, and the relationship expert for 50-plus singles site OurTime.com. We asked her about returning to the game of love for those of a certain age.

Why do some seniors hesitate to return to dating after a divorce or loss of a spouse?

A lot of seniors think, *I'm too old now, there's nobody out there for me, or I don't want to get married, so why even date?* All of those are myths; you're never too old to date.

Seniors can be Baby Boomers or older, and from ages 50 to 100, relationships are even more important to your physical health. When people are in a healthy, positive relationship—they don't have to necessarily be married—they're able to handle stress better, less likely to get the flu or a cold or even headaches. They sleep better and are more likely to exercise. Many of those things are true, regardless of your age, but as you get older, those relationships offer more impact.

Are those benefits exclusive to romantic relationships?

Some benefits you can only get from romantic relationships, but most literature shows that relationships (parent/child or other family and friend relationships) in general, give us support in times of trouble and also someone to celebrate with us in good times.

A lot of people are looking for someone to talk to. One of the things I've found in my long-term romantic relationship study is a partner gives you affirmation. It doesn't take much—it can be a *Thank you, You're a great partner, You're a great friend, I really appreciate you, Let's plan on doing something next Saturday*—all those small phrases or small behaviors (hug, kiss, getting gas in the car) are affirming. They say you matter, and that's so vital for how we feel about ourselves and about life in general.

What are some of the concerns particular to seniors venturing into new romantic relationships?

People believe it's not like when they were in

college, where the notion is that it was easier. There are a lot of singles out there to meet, and online dating can be a convenient way to meet people. It's a great way to get your feet wet and test the waters. You can stroll through the profiles out there, you can write a message to someone, or you can have a friend sit with you and help you with your profile.

Some people also think that over 50 is the period of time you're not as happy or as confident, especially if you've gotten a divorce or experienced the death of a partner. What we find is it's actually the opposite: The older you get, the happier you become; and people become more self-assured and confident with themselves. They're much more likely to know what they want in a partner and less likely to settle with someone they don't want. Those are all positive for building relationships.

What are some common myths about dating in this age group?

The general public thinks that older seniors don't care about sex or romance, but studies show the desire for intimacy continues for singles over 50. They're still interested in romance, have sexual desire and want sexual intimacy.

There's also a perception that singles over 50 just want to quickly get married again, but that's not true. A lot of singles over 50 are looking for a companion to do things with or a long-term relationship that isn't necessarily marriage. I would say it's probably about 50-50 between those wanting marriage and those who do not.

I also think there's a huge myth out there that dating for singles over 50 is risky. But as long as they take safety precautions, they're totally OK. Things to keep in mind include: meeting in a public place, driving yourself to and from the first few meetings, doing some homework on the person, telling a friend where you are, listening to your instincts, and not drinking too much. They're the same tips I tell my university students—it's just that singles over 50 might not have dated for awhile, so it's good to refresh their minds on safety tips for dating, both online and offline.

Before re-entering the dating arena, what should singles do to prepare?

I discuss this in my book, called *Finding Love Again: 6 Simple Steps to a New and Happy Relationship*. In my long-term study, we looked at what divorced singles did before they started dating again, and it all has to do with themselves. When you date, people ask you about yourself: What are your interests? Your hobbies? What's your favorite movie? What I encourage singles over 50 to do is to sit down and think about how they would describe themselves to someone else. You can get a family member to help if this is a difficult task. You want to come up with at least



10 statements—they can be a physical description, interests, religion, family, the kinds of things you think represent you. The more specific you get, the better.

The second thing I encourage people to do is think about the qualities in a partner they would really like, or that are deal-breakers. If you don't know those things, then you won't know what questions to ask when you're talking to someone.

Also, think about your key life values. These are things like religion or money, and family. Are you a saver or a spender? How important is religion to you? One of the most important things determining whether two people will stay together over the long haul is similarities in key life values.

If you have adult children, how should you let them know you're dating again?

You first want to let them know that they're still important in your life. It sounds crazy because they're an adult, but it's an important comment to make because there might be some jealousy or other issues there. Tell them, *You're important to me and you're a priority in my life, but this makes me happy*. What can an adult child say to that? They can't say no. It's a different discussion when you put it that way.

Second, I think adult children are concerned with safety. You want to have a discussion about how you're going to take safety precautions. You're not going to give money to someone online or over the phone, you're not going to give your Social Security number, etc.

Lastly, it's OK if you want to talk to them about the process. If you're comfortable, you can ask them, *What photos do you think I should upload to my online profile?*, or *I've selected 10 people online. Do you want to come over on Sunday and let me know what you think about these profiles?* Knowledge helps; it's the unknown that's scary. The more knowledge you can give them, while keeping your boundaries, is a good thing.