



Dating Again: Tips for Starting Over in Midlife

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The end of a relationship is never easy - whether by separation, divorce or death of a spouse or significant other. Starting another romantic relationship can be scary, especially if you have not dated in some time. This fact sheet covers some important topics you need to be aware of before you re-enter the “dating scene.”

Are You Ready?

The first question you need to ask yourself is – are you ready to start dating again? Ending romantic relationships can be an extremely upsetting event. In fact, break-ups can result in feelings of anger, guilt, fear, rejection and a loss of self-confidence. It is important to take time to mourn the loss of your past relationship before starting to date again. There is no set number of days or weeks to wait before starting date again. Just make sure you are emotionally ready to begin a new relationship. Do not worry that you may be moving faster or slower than other people – your timeline will be different from theirs. Focus on your feelings!

Some questions to ask yourself to see if you are ready:

1. Are you still bitter, upset or sad about what happened in your previous relationship?
2. Are you still deeply mourning the death of a partner/spouse?
3. Are you interested in listening to and getting to know other people?
4. Are you personally ready to invest in a new relationship?

If you answered “yes to either of the first two questions or “no” to question three or four, then you probably are not ready to date yet. Consider why you want to start dating again – are you feeling overwhelmed being home alone ready to get out of the house? Or are you genuinely missing sharing experiences with another person? If it is the first, you may just need a night out with some friends. Jumping into a relationship for the wrong reasons can leave your partner doing some emotional heavy lifting early in the relationship, like helping you overcome the emotions from your previous relationship. You also may end up settling for someone who may not be the best fit for you.

Set Your Dating Boundaries

When you believe the time is right, you need to decide what kind of relationship you are wanting. Do you just want a companion for conversations, someone to go on casual dates

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(go to the movies, grab a cup of coffee) or are you wanting a committed and lasting relationship – whether that is living together or marriage? Deciding what type of relationship you want before starting to date can help define boundaries with potential romantic partners and avoid unnecessary pressure.

These boundaries also include what intimacy level you are comfortable with. Do you kiss on a first date? Do you believe sex is only between married individuals? It is important to let your dating partner know your comfort level so they are aware of your boundaries. It may seem awkward, but set aside some time to talk with your potential partner about your boundaries and expectations. Most of the time, dating partners respect these boundaries. However, if the person you are seeing does not agree with them, they may not be a good choice.

Your boundaries also need a healthy reflection on who you are as an individual and what you bring to the relationship. Are you fresh out of a relationship and on the rebound? Was the person you were with before abusive in any form and do you struggle with saying “that is not okay?” Do you have a tendency to accommodate others’ desires and end up going along with what they want instead of voicing your own wants or needs? These areas of self-reflection are fantastic things to consider for everyone in and out of intimate relationships. They also are areas to think about in terms of deciding what things to tolerate in relationships and your responsibilities versus your dating partners’. If you are struggling with some of these questions, it may be important to work through these issues with a qualified mental health specialist, such as a therapist.

The ultimate goal is to be a healthy individual who wants to be in a relationship rather than needs to be in a relationship with someone. The ideal relationship is one that both people honor and value trust, honesty, respect and open communication. Take time before starting a new relationship to determine if you are able to foster these values into your new relationship. Also, it is okay to wait for the right person to come along. This helps you avoid settling for the wrong person or bad behavior.

If you have experienced violence or abuse in the past, take some time to understand the cycle of abuse so you can stay safe and maintain healthy boundaries in your relationships. Working with a trusted and objective person may help you to examine unacknowledged or even unresolved areas of your life, such as previous abuse or traumatic experiences. Those experiences may be holding you back from being the best ‘you’ in relationships.

Where to Meet Someone?

You have decided you are ready, but where do you meet people? A great place to start is thinking about places you already go and what interests you. Many places offer a wide variety of activities, such as places of worship, book clubs, travel groups and volunteer organizations. Joining a group increases your chance of meeting someone with similar interests and perhaps life stage. You also can ask friends if they know someone who is interested in companionship or dating.

One other way to meet someone is through online dating. This is a great way to meet people if you live in rural areas, do not have time to attend an event or have trouble meeting new people. There are many dating websites and some are for different age groups, culture or sexual preferences. Before you sign up for one, do your research to determine which one is the right fit for you. For more information on online dating, see Fact Sheet T-6613, Online Dating for Beginners. Here are some quick tips for online dating:

1. Seek help with your online profile from trusted friends.
2. Be safe – if your gut tells you something doesn't feel right, trust it.
3. Take your time getting to know a match through the website's chat.
4. Don't rush into a relationship; keeping things casual over coffee is often easier than setting up a full 'date.'
5. Don't give up – if you don't meet the right one right away, just keep searching.

First Dates

First date jitters are not just for teenagers. Meeting potential partners for the first time face to face can be full of nervous excitement. The most important thing to remember is to listen as much as you speak. Here are some other first date do's and don'ts:

- Do meet your date in a public location (at the restaurant, movies, etc.) – anyone can pretend to be someone, so wait a couple dates before inviting a date to your house.
- Do dress for the occasion – you do not want to wear an evening gown to go hiking.
- Do make sure you arrive on time – no one likes to be kept waiting.
- Do put down your phone – only text or take a call if it is an emergency. As a safety measure, it is a good idea to text a friend before and after the date to let them know you are safe. Let them know where and when you are going, with whom and when you expect to be home.
- Do not talk about your past relationship or show too many photos of pets, children, grandchildren, etc. There will be plenty of time to talk about them on other dates. For now, focus on your date and what he or her interests are.

It may be a good idea to set up a virtual date prior to meeting in person. Services such as Zoom or Google Meet can allow you to video chat with someone without needing to provide your phone number. If you do meet in person, be sure to follow CDC guidelines regarding social distancing and wearing a mask.

Talk with Your Children and Significant Others in Your Life

If you have children, it is important to decide when to talk to them — before or after you start dating.

Children of all ages may still feel loyalty issues over the loss of their parents' relationship and may even cling to the hopes that their parents will get back together. The idea of their parents dating others could trigger negative feelings about the divorce or an unintended rejection toward anyone they think is replacing their other parent. It is important to be sensitive toward your children's emotions and take things slowly in terms of introducing a new dating partner to your kids. This should be done delicately when the relationship seems destined to become long-term. Some options are to introduce your new partner in small doses, such as at a meal, during an activity or while hanging out at the home. Allowing the children to get to know the dating partner slowly is the key.

When the timing is right, discuss your decision to date with your adult children as well. Ultimately, the decision to date is yours, but it is important to take your children's feelings and concerns into consideration. Even for adult children, seeing you with another person that is not their parent can be difficult, especially if they have not overcome their own feelings of loss. Your children also may be concerned that you may be taken advantage of physically, mentally and financially. Listen to their concerns and if there is a reason, consider talking to a professional or lawyer about your options to protect your assets.

If your spouse died, it may be equally important to talk to your in-laws and spouse's relatives,

Sex and STIs

It is not uncommon for dating partners to have sex. Remember that you need to decide what you are comfortable with in your relationships and set that expectation early. If you are currently or become sexually active, do not forget to practice safe sex. Many adults consider using protection to ward off an unintended pregnancy, however, you should also protect yourself and your partner from sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In fact, the rate of STI infections rose 23% among older adults compared to the 11% increase among the general population. These are infections or diseases that are passed on during unprotected sex including vaginal, anal or oral sex. Most STIs can be cured, but can have serious health consequences if left untreated.

Using condoms and having an honest conversation about STIs with your partner can keep you and your partner safe. Be sure you know whether or not you have a STI and be open about this before having sex with your partner. Talk with your doctor about your sexual history and any concerns you may have. You can visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website to learn more about STIs and their symptoms: <https://www.cdc.gov/std/default.htm>

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The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

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The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
- Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
- The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

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