



DATING AGAIN, AT MY AGE?

By Thom Dennis, D. Min., LCPC, CT

Perhaps early on an acquaintance or coworker brought up the subject of dating and you thought it was insensitive or at least too soon to even consider it. At the time, the mere thought of going on a date may have seemed repulsive or frightening or at least disrespectful to your deceased spouse's memory. It is hard to say how long a person should wait before dating again. Only you know if and when you are ready to begin considering another committed relationship.

How soon is too soon?

How long should you wait? It may be a month, six months, a year or five years after the death of your spouse. The timing is always the tricky part. Some people may have no shortage of opinions about how long you should wait—and perhaps nothing better to do than talk about your relationship status. Remember this:

You have no control over what other people think or feel or say, so don't let them stop you from doing something that feels right to you. Other people's opinions aside, there are a whole series of questions you may want to ask yourself as you explore the possibility of a new relationship. First of all, is it too soon? Certainly you need a period of time to absorb the full impact of the loss and to work through emotional ups and downs. The last thing you would want to do is use another person to work through the residual emotions you have about your deceased spouse; after all, budding relationships are complicated enough as it is. Ask yourself the following questions: Am I avoiding my emotions? Am I looking for a replacement for my late spouse? Am I ready to move in a new direction? The prospect of facing the future alone may be scary, but fear is usually not a very stable foundation upon which to build a new relationship. Ideally, you will want to work through

these types of questions before you start dating. Instead of measuring “how soon is too soon” in terms of months or years, base your decision on your readiness to commit yourself to being with a new person.

Honoring their memory

How have you honored the memory of your deceased spouse?

You can do this in many ways, including with tangible actions such as building monuments, giving money to charity or creating memorial objects. You also can do it in other ways, perhaps by sharing your memories with others, by celebrating important dates and anniversaries, or by vowing to carry on as best you can without them by your side. The truth is, the spouse who died will always hold a special place in your heart. If you do look for a new partner, you will want to look for someone who will not feel jealous of the love you still have for your deceased spouse. Find someone who will not be threatened by pictures on the wall or talk around the dinner table about the life you had with your late spouse. I hope you find someone who will appreciate the way you honor that part of your life and will be grateful for the ways your spouse helped to make you into the person you are today.

Our universal need for connection

I would hope that at some point during your marriage, you and your

spouse had at least a hypothetical conversation about what the surviving spouse should do in the event that one of you died.

Whether you had that talk or not, it is important to remember that human beings are social animals.

Our survival is dependent on being part of a community. For many people, that means being part of an intimate community of two. I have talked with many widows and widowers who say that one marriage was enough. They fulfill their need for connection by investing their emotional energy in a larger circle of family and friends. But for others, that just isn't enough. Beyond providing basic survival needs, a spouse offers a focus for romantic and sexual expression. Being part of a couple also offers a sense of identity. Being married can give you a clearly defined place in social situations. But even beyond issues like sex and identity, spouses provides something that is very important:

companionship. For many people, it is no fun eating alone, sleeping alone and being alone. While some people manage to live full and satisfying lives alone, there are no rules that say widows or widowers must spend the rest of their days by themselves.

What are you looking for?

If you come to the conclusion that you don't want to spend the rest of your life alone, consider what kind of relationship you want before you

actually start dating. Maybe you just want someone to cook your meals, clean your house or provide you with a sense of security. If that is the case, I recommend hiring a maid or getting a guard dog. Believe me, it's much less complicated that way. Perhaps you are just looking for someone to travel or dine with once in a while. That is perfectly acceptable. No matter what you are looking for, it is important to define your relationship parameters. Consider what qualities and characteristics you desire in a partner. Maybe you require that a partner be of a particular religion, race or ethnic group. Maybe you are not attracted to people of a certain political persuasion or appearance. Take the time to write down the characteristics that you are looking for in a mate. But trust me—you will be refining that list after you've been on a few dates.

What will the kids think?

While your happiness shouldn't be determined by whether or not your family approves of you entering into a new relationship, don't forget that your decision affects them as well. In your enthusiasm to grow your new relationship, you'll want to spend as much time as possible with that person. Just remember that your adult children are grieving the death

of one of their parents, and they might fear that they are going to lose you too. Always strive to keep the channels of communication open and to be sensitive to the feelings of everyone involved.

Sweaty palms

It's likely that much has changed since you were last a part of the dating scene. With the startup of Internet dating sites like match.com, in some ways it is easier today to meet potential dates. Even though you may feel like an awkward teenager, don't forget that you've grown a lot since then. You have had a lifetime to mature. You have a deep well of experiences and interpersonal skills to draw upon. My best piece of advice is to RELAX. As with most things, the more you practice, the better you get at it. Practice meeting strangers and making small talk every chance you get; say hello at the bus stop, chat in the grocery store line and introduce yourself to someone you don't know at temple or church every week. It doesn't matter if they are male or female—practice, practice, practice. If things don't go as well as you had hoped, just shrug your shoulders and say, "Oh well, it was just practice." Then try again tomorrow. It also may be helpful to adopt a playful "I'll try anything once" kind of attitude.

It usually takes many attempts before you find someone you actually like, so be patient. Finally, while appearance may be the first thing people notice, it is your personality that will win them over. If you decide to make some cosmetic changes, whether by buying a new wardrobe, dieting or having plastic surgery, do to improve your self-confidence, not to please someone else.

Dating again, at your age?

Early on, many widows and widowers say they don't want to open their heart to a new relationship and risk the possibility of going through the experience of loss all over again. It is understandable they feel this way, but as time passes they usually change their minds because they realize that the benefits outweigh the risks. If you are considering dating again, my hope is that you will be able to lay aside any concerns or objections and allow future relationships to develop unencumbered. Dating again at your age? I say: Why not? After all, love has a way of keeping us all young at heart.

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Thom Dennis has over 25 years experience helping individuals and families come to terms with the death of loved ones.

Having worked in parish ministry in both urban and rural settings, he has firsthand knowledge of the concerns of counselors and pastoral ministers as they struggle to find ways to address the needs of those who grieve.

Currently he works as a hospice grief counselor, comforting the bereaved from diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds. He will bring compassion, insight, and a wealth of resources to you and those in need.

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