

Dating: Issues for Women in Their 60's, 70's and Beyond

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Although emotionally available, reliable and self-sufficient men may be hard to find for single women in their 60s, and beyond, dating websites and social media offer opportunities to meet which were not available to previous generations. While many therapists are familiar with younger clients' wishes and fears about dating, they may not have encountered this age group and what they experience when dating. Concerns of divorced women differ from and are similar to those of widows.

Widow's Garden

By LG

Drying on the vine

Fading faded colorless

Disappearing

Empty bare branch

My living roots below the surface

Buried

Hidden

Winter solstice. Longest night

Slowly starving

Hitching post of the sun

In the shadow of my dream

Winter-over. Half tour of duty

I was dormant. Not dead.

Defeat of darkness against light

Awakened by you

This verse

Reversed

Presenting problems

Typically, single widowed women begin treatment due to difficulties such as depression, anxiety, grief and loneliness. Those who have a strong support network of relatives and friends tend to function better than those who do not. The wish to begin to meet someone new may emerge as treatment unfolds.

Underlying problems

The women who are widows express numerous fears. Fear of illness and fear of death in the new object are re-experienced as relationships develop. When asked what type of partner they are seeking, they want someone who is healthy and strong. They fear injury and fear loss of body functions in the new partner. Of course, some fears are realistic in this age group of 60 and older but their fears may be exaggerated. Idealization of the deceased spouse is not uncommon. It is part of the process of grieving, while it also serves to prolong grieving. It may be viewed as a defense against disappointment and anger at the late spouse. One is taught not to speak ill of the dead in many cultures.

Case Vignette

Mrs. E, a widow in her 60s, was referred for therapy three months after the sudden death of her husband. She was referred by her former therapist who had retired from practice due to his age. She felt that his retirement was another loss. She was depressed, slept poorly, and had suicidal thoughts. Although she had experienced frequent difficulties with her husband while he was alive, and had been very critical of him, often bored in the relationship and had distanced herself from him, she put him up on a pedestal after his death. She now viewed him as generous, patient and kind to her and to her family. Only gradually did Mrs. E realize how dependent she was on him, both emotionally and financially. He was her "rock."

As treatment continued, she blamed herself for the problems in the marriage. She felt she was self-centered, had low self-esteem and difficulty regulating her mood. Mrs. E berated herself for being immature, a bad wife who had been unfaithful, a bad sister because she felt resentful, and a bad daughter. Her loneliness and craving for physical touch drove

her wish to date, but her idealization of her husband led her to compare other men unfavorably to him. She feared disapproval from her sister because she wanted to date so soon and was also judgmental towards herself.

Having gained weight and gone through menopause, Mrs. E felt unattractive and anxious about her sexual functioning when she began to contemplate dating. She felt inadequate and devalued herself. With contempt she referred to herself as the Merry Widow.

Sexual conflicts overlap as a theme within the group of divorced women at this stage of life.

Divorced Women

The divorced women's presenting problems seem different in significant ways amongst those seen in my own practice. They tend to seek treatment after they have already begun dating and are experiencing problems in the new relationships. They are often angry and bitter at the ex-husband, generalize their angry feelings to all men and are unaware of their bias. They are often distrustful which they blame on the new partner and tend to be provocative and argumentative. They also suffer from loneliness. They have a lot of baggage from their marriage which keeps them repeating the old patterns in the new relationships.

Divorced women often seek treatment due to conflict with a new partner or inability to maintain a relationship. They view men in stereotypic fashion, for example, "all men are dogs, cheaters, insensitive and womanizers." Their anger barely disguises their hurt feelings which they proudly display as their badge of victimhood, as though this is the plight of the female sex.

Case Vignette

Ms. T already had two previous episodes of treatment which she felt to be useful in helping her to cope with her depression and feelings of betrayal due to her ex-husband's multiple infidelities. But she had no awareness of her own contribution to the marital discord. In relationships with new partners, she felt insecure, easily hurt and slighted. Ms. T believed men could not be trusted, that they were out for one thing, just like her ex. She denied her own distrustful tendency, instead she maintained that all men lied and were inherently untrustworthy. However, she was not truthful insofar as she used dating websites in which she lied about her age, and was deceptive about the fact that she dated several men simultaneously. Dominated by revengeful motivations, she was trying to even the score. She wondered how she could really know the truth about what men said about themselves on the Internet and upon meeting them. She bolstered her case, propped up with negative stories from her other bitter divorced friends. When dating, she was a tease, avoided sexual intimacy with men, rationalizing she wasn't ready, but she couldn't explain what needed to happen to help her to be ready. She feared being used by men and expected sexual relations to be painful in more ways than one. During marriage, sexual intercourse had served her purpose to conceive children and was not driven by libidinal urges. Her sexual inhibitions were ego syntonic.

She viewed herself as independent and had built a life for herself gradually after her marriage disintegrated. She had many friends, who were either divorced or unhappily married, and was very active with hobbies and volunteer organizations. She felt men sought women for sex and to do their laundry and housecleaning. I wondered why Ms. T wanted to find another man to date at all. It seemed she wanted the status of having a partner. Appearances were very important to her and she liked having a handsome man at her side when attending weddings and charitable events, and perhaps to compete with her sisters as well as to represent a narcissistic extension of herself.

Summary

This brief paper attempts to describe some common issues faced by women in their 60s and older who begin to date after becoming widowed or divorced. This is not intended to be an extensive study of issues faced by women after widowhood or divorce, but rather to introduce readers to a topic with which they may not have been familiar. Why do some women want someone as a partner and some do not? Some want to share the experience of growing older together and the wish to be close with a man. Others are motivated by the need to ward off feelings of loss, loneliness and to gratify narcissistic needs. It is important to have grieved the loss of the relationship or the loss of the partner whether due to death or divorce in order to move on successfully in the next relationship. Some prefer to remain single. They relate going solo to pleasure and autonomy and the new life which is created after loss. For others, there is a fear of another failed relationship, fear of intimacy and a wish to maintain the status quo.

Biography

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