

Realistic relationships

Friendships, partnerships and dating

No man is an island – and that goes for women too. We all have a basic need to socialise, form friendships and have a relationship with one special person. And although younger people may find it distasteful, those needs are just as intense when you're over 50 as when you are a teenager. Just as important, but somehow different...

For a start, when you're **in your prime** and looking for new relationships it's usually because old relationships have come to an end. That may be due to death, divorce or separation, or in the case of friends or colleagues, simply that your lives have moved in different directions, literally or figuratively.

Finding trustworthy, like-minded people whose company we enjoy is a huge challenge, and that's before we take into account the fact that they need to like us too. And if you're starting from a position where perhaps you've been hurt, betrayed, have low self-esteem or simply lack confidence because you've been out of the game for many, many years, it can seem daunting.

By this stage in our lives most of us are used to spending money to get whatever we need. But unfortunately, this is one area where money really can't buy you happiness. Okay, it might make it possible for you to join matchmaking bureaux, or participate in dinner clubs or singles holidays, but after that we're all as equal as each other in our search for companionship and love.

So where to start? No doubt you've surveyed the immediate range of possibilities – friends, social acquaintances and existing work colleagues and contacts. And without being judgemental, it's probably true to say that hanging round bars or living it up in clubs is something that's probably best left to the kids.

But although back in our youth that more or less represented all the options for meeting someone, these days there are a huge number of other options – dating agencies, dinner clubs, singles holidays, speed dating and of course, a myriad of print, telephone and on-line opportunities.

Whichever you fancy, what it comes down to is realising that you need to start to make things happen, and create your own luck. It is possible you might fall across someone by chance, but it's best if you give chance a helping hand.

Friend or lover?

Although when you're single it's easy to pinpoint all the things you feel you're missing by not having a partner, you also need to bear in mind that relationships are hard work. You need to be clear about what you will gain. Are you sure you're prepared to give up some of your freedom and possibly risk being hurt?

If not, perhaps you need to take some more time if you've only recently emerged from another relationship, or review other ways in which you can get the same benefits – for example, if what you're really looking for is someone to go on holiday with, you might look at tour companies that specialise in solo travellers and leave it at that.

Of course, not everyone is looking for a soul mate or a partner. Many people are just looking for companionship, certainly to start with, and some of the most successful long-term relationships have grown out of a situation where people were initially 'just friends'.

Prepare for success

As a wise **in my primer** you wouldn't embark upon any significant journey without adequate preparation, and embarking upon the perilous process of seeking new relationships is no different. Here are some things to consider:

Take a clear-sighted look at yourself and be honest about whether or not you are currently making the most of yourself. Some new clothes, a new haircut or losing some weight could all help your future chances for success – not just in terms of what other people see, but because *they will make you feel better about yourself*.

Get to know yourself. Draw up a mini-CV covering your achievements to date and a SWOT analysis

(strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) about where you are now. These are for your own use only but it's important that you're clear about your good points and those that aren't so good and what you perceive as your value as a person.

Ask other people (close friends, colleagues or family) for feedback, input and help. What words would they use to describe you? What do they see as your strengths? Why do they respect and admire you?

Be clear about the sort of person/people you want to meet and how many changes you're prepared to accept in order to accommodate a relationship.

Think through the sort of life you want in future – are you seeking radical changes, or very few? And honestly, how many of those changes are really dependent on another person – can you make them yourself?

Be brave and be prepared to persevere and take the odd knock back. But, equally, be open to having some fun and some amazing new experiences, too.

Practical first steps

There's plenty you can do to ease yourself gently into a new social scene.

For a start, make yourself *do* something different. Join a club or society that interests you and extend your skills and knowledge. Make sure it's something you're genuinely interested in and not just something you've chosen because you think it 'looks good'.

Make the effort to make eye contact, smile and talk to people more. In our society we're all conditioned to keep ourselves to ourselves, but there's plenty of safe, non-threatening opportunities where it's perfectly okay to chat to people, for example, the supermarket queue. Once again, this will get you used to making conversation and meeting other people.

Get involved with the community – volunteering and charity work is a great place to start.

Although these are great in themselves, they will probably only take you so far, so you need to explore the options for what you want to do next.

On-line dating, newspaper columns, dinner clubs, or dating bureaux? These are only some of the options which, depending on your location, finances and flexibility, might be right for you. Never overlook the value of other people's experience. If you can, find out what other people have tried, how it worked for them and what pointers they can give you. It's so much less painful that way!

Romance vs Reality – the general rules

Whichever avenue you pursue - and you may need to try more than one, some general rules apply that will help ensure that the process is safe, secure and ultimately successful. What it comes down to is ensuring that you keep sufficiently rooted in reality at a time when it may be all too easy to be swept away by romance.

First, be honest – and look for honesty in others. One of the most common complaints from either sex is that people lie about their age or background, or provide photos which are years out of date. What's the point? If you can't be honest about these very simple things or find that other people haven't been, the long-term future of the relationship isn't bright.

Take things slowly – you may be desperate to find the person of your dreams but in reality there's no need to rush. You've nothing to lose and everything to gain by taking things slowly.

Don't create a cosy future based on emails and phone calls – reality can be a great deal different so try and arrange a meeting as early as possible. 'Gut reaction' is usually a pretty strong indicator of future success for most people.

Keep initial conversations light-hearted but in amongst the chat ask some important questions and listen carefully to the replies.

Be prepared to change your ideas about yourself, the other person or the world in general but make sure you're not letting yourself be blinded by love (or lust).

Most important of all, take care and take steps to protect your personal safety. Be vigilant about financial and emotional fraudsters –they really do exist.

Six rules for success

1. Relationships are all about trusting, caring, and compromise – make sure you give as much as you take.
2. Put the past behind you and don't dwell on being a victim no matter how bad your past experiences.
3. Be flexible and be prepared to compromise – a relationship involves two people, so by definition you can't expect to have everything your own way.
4. Each relationship and each person is unique – don't try to recreate who you once were or what you once had.
5. Don't rush towards the future – focus on the now, let things develop slowly and enjoy the moment.
6. Don't wish you were younger -rejoice in the advantages of being **in your prime**.