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Romance after 50

Dating for older adults can be challenging but, in some ways, better than ever.

BY JIMMY MAGAHERN

"Go for ice cream." That's the first bit of dating advice Brian Howie has for Arizona singles over 50 who may just now be wading back into the dating pool.

"Avoid coffee dates," adds the author and host of the nationally-touring series of town hall-style relationship forums, "The Great Love Debate," which makes its fourth stop in the Phoenix area this spring. "Coffee is for a business interview. If you want to spend the same amount of time, especially in Arizona, go get ice cream. Ice cream is fun. Ice cream is playful, ice cream is casual, and people let their guard down when they're eating ice cream. That's the perfect first date.

Because even if you don't like each other, at least you ate ice cream!"

Letting your guard down is really Howie's main advice for older adults re-entering the dating pool. "The one thing I always tell both men and women in this age group is to get rid of the words 'not my type,' says the L.A.-based relationship expert, who's age 52 himself. "Because if you just got divorced or you're widowed after 10, 15, 25 years of marriage, you don't know what you like anymore. So your first step should be to get around large groups of people before you try to be in a one-on-one situation with someone. You need to acclimate yourself socially with your community, grow your friends group, grow your networking group and go to events where you can be around a lot of people. That way you will learn what you like and get your conversation voice back again."

Stepping out of your comfort zone is another big step. "People over 50 can become set in their ways, which is a big turn-off for people looking to start a new relationship with someone," says Howie. "But we also hear countless examples of people being taken out of their comfort zone with the right person. You know, if a new idea is presented to them in a positive, reinforcing, enthusiastic fashion – especially by someone they're interested in – suddenly they want to cook, or go to Italy. Suddenly they want to do all sorts of things that they never imagined they wanted to do before.



Relationship expert Brian Howie's main advice for older adults looking to date is to let their guards down. (Photo courtesy Brian Howie)

So I think people have to understand that when it comes to love and relationships, most of what you're looking for lies outside of your comfort zone."

Joann Cohen agrees. Cohen is the Scottsdale-based matchmaker and dating coach who's been doing this professionally since 2007, and says she deals with a lot of older clients who almost proudly admit they're stuck in their ways.

"One of the things that I hear a lot from my clients, and especially from other women, is 'That's just the way I am,'" she says. "But what I tell people is we all have different sides. When you go on a job interview, you certainly present a different side than you do to your friends. You don't want to lie or be fake, but you do make an effort to present the best version of yourself. And you have to put the same effort into dating."

Exploring dating apps

Cohen, 61, also agrees that people in their 50s and older who suddenly find themselves single should strive to create a lifestyle that's "conducive to meeting people," but she admits that can be difficult.

"One of the challenges that this group has is that as we age, there are less places where there's a concentration of the singles we're looking for," she says. "When you're in your 20s and 30s, you can go to a bar or go to singles events and you're going to have a pretty good mix. Once we get more

mature, those events don't exist."

As a result, Cohen says, a lot of older singles turn to dating apps and on-line dating sites. A recent Pew study looking at statistics from 2013 to 2015 found that the number of users aged 55 to 64 years old who dated online doubled from six to 12 percent – and the industry is responding to the boost in older users. Sites like OurTime, SeniorMatch and SeniorPeopleMeet requires users to be over a certain age (usually 50 or 55) to register, weeding out the younger set.

The problem with senior-specific dating sites is that older singles seldom want to identify as "old" – and are usually seeking matches much younger than themselves. "Ninety-five percent of the people who come in to the office over age 40 tell me they look young for their age," Cohen says, with a laugh. "The truth is, they look *exactly* their age! The other problem is men want to date younger women, and women want to date their own age or younger."

Instead of the senior-oriented sites, Cohen recommends using the same apps the younger singles use. "People are going to scream when they read this, but actually Tinder is still the biggest deal in dating," she says. "That and Bumble, which is more female-friendly." (On Bumble, only female users can make the first contact with matched male users in opposite-sex matches; in same-sex matches, either person can send a message first.)

For all its convenience, Cohen cautions against the over-use of dating apps. "In online dating, no one wants to waste time to get to know somebody," she complains. "The choices we see available give us the feeling of abundance, so if we don't see exactly what we want, we just swipe and go on to the next person."

This can carry over to real-world dates, too. "If there's not instant chemistry, we're done," Cohen says. "Even though we know, through study after study, that chemistry can grow and that good relationships take time to develop. There's really no shortcut around that."

"Least Dateable" City

Howie contends that singles in the Phoenix area, in particular, are accustomed to that quick-swiping, "thank u, next" style of dating. Each year, he collects demographic data and opinions from the more than 62,000 people who attend the Great



Relationship expert Joann Cohen says she deals with a lot of older clients who almost proudly admit they're stuck in their ways. (Photo courtesy Joann Cohen)

Love Debate shows across the country and issues a press release listing the best and worst cities for dating, employing a variety of metrics. In 2017, Phoenix was named the city with the "Least Dateable Women," with the caveat: "Go ahead guys, offer to take her on a date. She will take that offer and shop it around 'till she can find a better one."

"The feedback that I get from singles in the Phoenix area – and particularly Scottsdale – is that the women there are just very difficult to please," says Howie, whose boldly-stated critiques are often met with loud rebuttals from the debate audiences, clearly to his delight (Howie makes a habit of circulating through the crowds, mic in hand, soliciting audience participation). "They're always sort of the queens of the bigger, better deal – and to their credit, they're probably a little more energetic and lively than a lot of men in the same age group. Mostly because the guys don't keep up with the girls after a certain age."

Howie advises older men to "try and use a little more imagination" on dates. "It can be hard to impress someone older, who's already been on a hundred dinner dates," he says. "You need to either say, do or show her something she hasn't seen before."

"And the women need to make it a little easier," he adds. "They need to recognize that the men still want to figure out a way to feel appreciated and needed in their life."

Like Cohen, Howie agrees that there's no good shortcut to romance. "Just take a chance, give everyone you meet a chance," he says. "Spend 45 minutes with somebody. Not only will you find out a lot about them, you'll find out so much more about yourself that you ever even knew."

Mostly, both experts say to toss out your wish list of physical, financial and other preferences and be open to new experiences.

"I think a matchmaker is going to fail miserably if she just takes what people say they're looking for as the gospel truth," says Cohen. "We have to look beyond that to discover really what we're all really looking for. And beyond all of that is a feeling of being loved, respected, accepted and feeling safe with our emotions, safe with our hearts. That's the feeling we want. And then we try to find a person who actually

gives us that feeling."

A lot of the time, that person is not someone who fits our wish list – and is often, in fact, older than what we thought we were looking for.

"The advantage of dating when we're older is that we're not striving so much to achieve career goals, often the kids are out of the house and we're not trying to figure ourselves out so much," Cohen says. "So there's actually more time to focus on the relationship. And that makes everything a little easier." ■

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