



Romance and Dating in Later Life: What Have We Learned?

Cassandra Cotton

Acknowledgements

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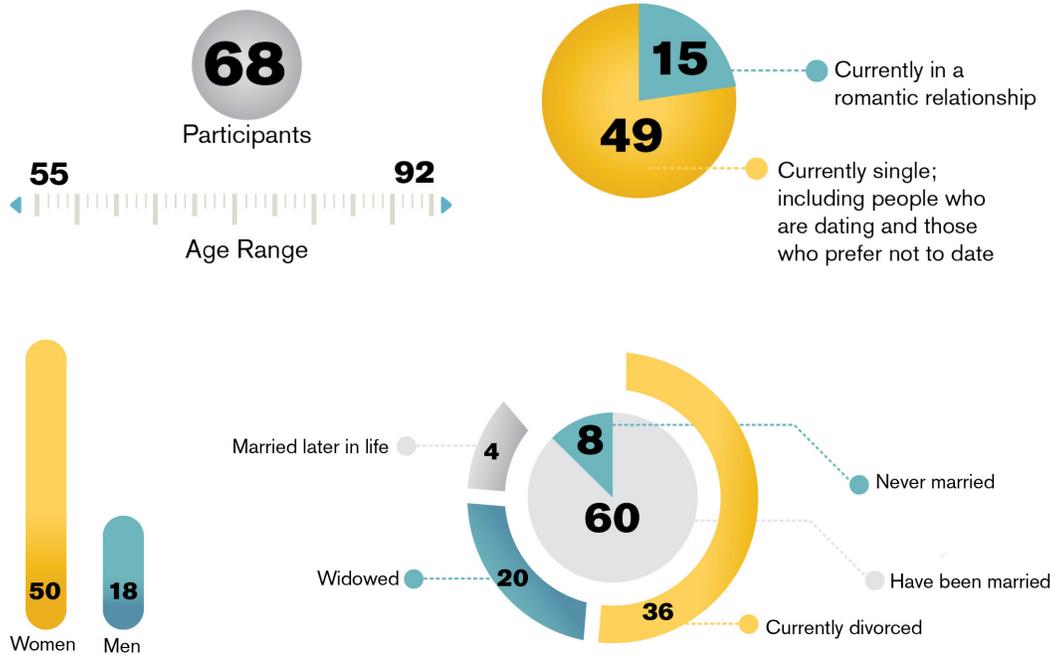
Introduction

A large and growing number of adults are single in later mid-life and older age. According to Pew Research Center, about 29% of American adults age 50 to 64 and 33% of those age 65 or older are currently single, including never-married, widowed, and divorced individuals. Just under 10% of older adults (both men and women) reach later life without marrying, though many have engaged in other kinds of romantic relationships over their adult life. Widowhood remains common in later life, particularly for women, whose partners are often older. As a result, longer portions of women's lives are spent after losing a partner. We've also seen a rise in union dissolving later in life, often referred to as "gray divorce," has resulted in growing numbers of older adults who have left a marriage. These adults may look for new romantic partners, both casual and serious.

In fact, many older adults do pursue dating or new relationships in some form. And it's this that we wanted to better understand – what is it like to date at this stage of life? How do people meet potential partners? What concerns do people express about dating at this time, and what do they find exciting and fun? What leads some older singles to choose not to date? How do older adults feel about the single life? These are some of the key questions we asked and participants answered. In this report, we summarize our group of participants and some of our significant findings that have emerged out of our data.



Who did we talk to?



The Romance and Dating in Later Life project talked to 68 people aged 55 to 92 about their experiences with singlehood, dating, and finding romantic partners at this stage of life. Data collection took place from October 2022 through June 2023, and the research team conducted 67 interviews and 2 focus groups.

We talked to 50 women and 18 men. Most participants (60) are white, while four are Black, and four described themselves as Hispanic/Latino alone or in combination with another race or ethnic group. Given the tremendous age range of participants, 25 were working full or part-time while 43 were retired or receiving disability benefits and not presently working. Forty-five participants had at least a college degree, while remaining participants had some college education (21) or a high school diploma or less (2). Nearly half of participants described themselves as middle class (35), with smaller proportions identifying as lower-middle class (7), working class (4), upper middle class (19) or upper class (3). Sixty participants have ever been married; 36 are currently divorced, 20 are widowed, and 4 have remarried later in life. Eight participants have never been married. Some participants (31) reside in communities with age restrictions, and the majority (53) live alone, while others live with a romantic partner, with children or extended family (including their own parents), or with roommates. Most participants (49) are currently single, and many have been actively dating in the last year (37). The majority of participants describe feeling satisfaction with their lives at time of interview (58).

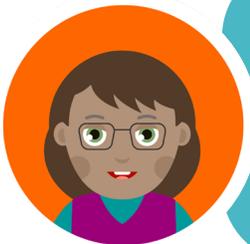
Findings

Our findings demonstrate that romance and hopes for companionship, love, and intimacy are important in the lives of many adults in later life. We also find great diversity in how older adults think about singlehood, how they approach dating and looking for potential partners, what kind of relationships they seek, and concerns older singles have about dating at this stage of life. We collected very interesting data on how older adults are thinking about (and having) sex, and on how the dating game has changed from early adulthood. Finally, we can highlight successful strategies for finding love in later life through the stories shared by our participants who have found a partner. In our findings below, we use pseudonyms in the place of participants' real names, and some identifying details have been changed to protect participant confidentiality.

Feelings about singlehood in later life

Our group of singles (49 people) experienced singlehood for a variety of reasons: 8 had never married, while 36 were divorced and 20 had lost a spouse. These different reasons for singlehood resulted in a range of feelings about being unpartnered.

One of the most common responses to our question “How do you feel about being single at this stage of life?” was a resounding “free!” Many participants found a sense of freedom and liberation about being single, including both men and women. Some respondents suggested they found it peaceful, less stressful, and providing opportunities for flexibility and doing whatever made them happy.



“I think that for the first time in my life, I have peace as far as that goes because I don’t need to worry or carry anybody else’s luggage or problems or try to fix somebody else.”

-Yvetta, 59

“I’m fine with it. I feel kind of liberated... So being single has as has its perks. It’s been liberating and I’ve enjoyed it so far.”

-Aaron, 55





“The freedom that I have now is exhilarating. [It’s] empowering. I wouldn’t change anything. I told somebody the other night, I made some warm chocolate chip cookies. I mean, I had a craving for chocolate. An when you’re single, you don’t have to worry about placements or sitting down or anything. Boom. Dishes in the sink? Good. I don’t have to clean them. So here I had my warm cookie, my ice cold milk. I looked at the living room and it was empty. Nobody there. And I said, my dad had a phrase, ‘it don’t get no better than this.’” And that’s what it was.”

-Carol, 76

“You know what, I have certain fears about being alone in my age. Like, what if all of a sudden my health becomes bad or I’m not in the best financial situation that I wish I was in at this age? So that kind of stuff scares me a little bit. But until I got divorced in 2016, I had never in my whole life, I had never lived alone. I went from my parents’ home to being married. So I had never known what it was like to live alone. And I love that. I like being able to sleep when I want and eat when I want and go out when I want. As far as in my personal life, it’s just it’s nice not to have to answer to anybody.”

-Jean, 67



“I love it [being single]. I love flexibility. Flexibility in my life. That’s one thing about my life without a relationship or with a relationship, I require flexibility. I require the ability to choose my own path because I only get one shot.”

-Drew, 63



Some participants, particularly those whose spouses had died, understandably often found the transition to singlehood more complicated. Feelings of loss were difficult, particularly for those who had recently experienced the loss of their partner. Participants discussed this experience as unsettling after long-term relationships, and some described a strong desire to find love to provide companionship and comfort.



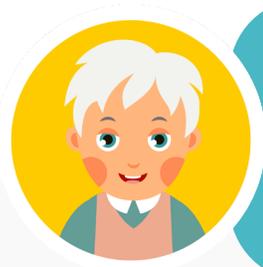
“Well, I went through a big grieving process, losing him, but I was more his caretaker than his wife, you know. So I don’t know if we were really having a relationship there. But of course, you know, losing him, I never planned on losing him. So that was a big shock, you know, to be by myself after being him with him for so long. But I don’t feel strange being single. I don’t feel strange being a widow.”

-Eva, 75

“I’m not comfortable with it [being single]. Like I said, it’s all new territory to me, no only in this place, you know, but just the fact that [my husband’s] gone. Sometimes I feel unsettled.”

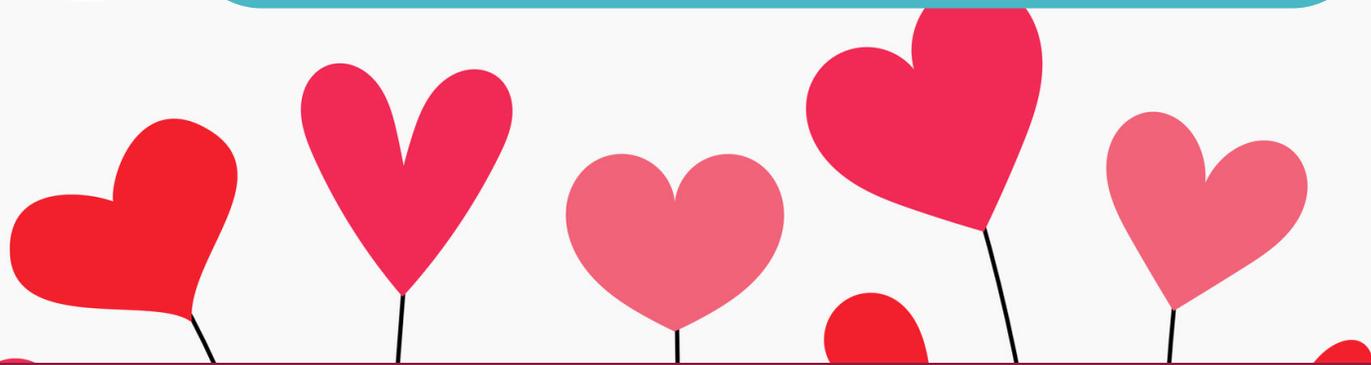


-Minnie, 74



“Well, it’s [being single] not ideal for me. I’m not ashamed of it or anything, but it’s not ideal. It’d be much better for me to have a loving relationship.”

-Dolores, 77



Many participants were adamant that singlehood did not automatically mean loneliness, with several explaining that they might be alone, but they were not lonely. Some participants explained that while they would love to find a partner and there are elements of relationships they miss and would like to have again, this did not mean that they were sad and lonely.



“You know, people say ‘Oh, you know, you must be lonely.’ I’m not lonely at all. And I explained it to [my friend] this way because he and I compare notes a lot because we’re kind of in the same boat. I said, ‘I’m not lonely.’ I said, ‘I’ve got people in my life, you know, I’ve got my family. I’ve got my friends now. My kids are wonderful. I’m not lonely. I’m lonesome.’ And by lonesome, I mean I would like to have that companionship of somebody that I know I could go to when I’ve got a concern or I could go to and share some fantastic news with, somebody that would get excited for me with me, you know?”

-Brian, 67

“I’d like somebody in my life, too. But I am not lonesome. I don’t want them to fill this void because I don’t have that.”

-Maude, 76



“I do, miss, you know, there’s that companionship thing of having that one person that cares about you, that knows you, that kind of thing. But I’m perfectly independent. I like being alone. I don’t need money from anyone else. My girls don’t need another father, you know. I, I’ve owned three houses. I mean, there’s nothing that I need from a guy.”

-Meg, 62



What kind of relationship are older singles looking for?

A large proportion of single participants were interested in some kind of romantic relationship, though several were not currently dating and weren't sure if they would put significant effort into meeting someone. Among those explicitly interested in a new relationship, some are interested in serious commitments, including cohabitation or marriage, while others would prefer more casual relationships. Desires for emotional intimacy were reported by many participants, and a substantial proportion of participants were also interested in forms of physical and sexual intimacy with a new partner.

Some participants thought of marriage as the ideal next relationship if they met 'the one' who they found a lot of compatibility with. Others aimed less explicitly for marriage but considered living together and sought long-term, serious commitment.

"It's not that I'm opposed to marriage. I mean, if all the things were there, you know, like if we get along, great. Compatible. Same thing is when you're young, you want somebody compatible that you see a future with and all that. Yeah, I might consider marriage."

-Gloria, 75



"Yeah, [I'd get married again] if it was the right person, yeah. Because I think that that's the ultimate commitment to each other."

-Bev, 60



"I want to be married with a man... I think God made us for commitments, really. I think everybody really wants a commitment... I believe God says we need to be married, a committed relationship."

-Penny, 78



"I want a committed, monogamous relationship. I could live with someone if we could tolerate each other. Neither of us lost that degree of independence."

-Keith, 76



Other participants wanted less serious relationships, looking primarily for companionship and fun. Many participants valued their independence and own space, and were more interested in a relationship that allowed them to maintain that freedom.

“Just take me out every now and then. Take me out for dinner or take me to a movie or take me to a whatever, you know? And then you go on your merry way. That’s all. I don’t want nothing from you, and you don’t want nothing from me. That’s the way I want it.”

-Joyce, 76



“I would not be interested in the together 24/7 things that I’m seeing.”

-Ann, 71



“I think I would like to date and maybe them can come out and hang out a day at my house or I can go and hang out with them at their place. Go somewhere, go places. But it would take a really, really special person for me to commit.”

-Yvetta, 59



For some, sexual intimacy was a strong desire, either alongside greater commitment or on its own as a more casual relationship (or rarely, in multiple relationships).

“I’m looking for all of that. I am looking for a sexual relationship. I am looking for somebody to do things with. I’m looking for somebody that I can talk to about anything and not be judged. I’m not necessarily looking even with living with anybody. I’m not excluding that. But they keep their place, I keep mine.”

-Willa, 73



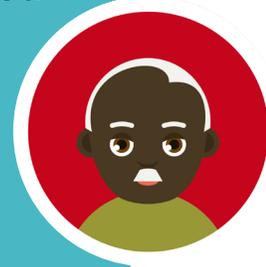


“Well the guy that I was just seeing had me convinced that seeing multiple people was the way to live my life. And I was happy with that... And I still think that that might be okay, but it’s hard to find people who have that same opinion. Most guys, I think, want something serious.”

-Cheryl, 60

“So as you get older, you have sexual relationships. You know, they have their own place, you have your own place. Go with the back and forth whenever they happen to spend the night. But you’re not moving in. You’re not getting married either.”

-Rudy, 64



Concerns about dating in later life

While many single older adults were interested in dating, these decisions were not with complication. Participants discussed a range of issues that raised concerns while they were dating, ranging from how to handle financial issues that might arise, concerns related to family members, worries about potential partners requiring caretaking due to increasing health issues in older age, and finally, apprehension about what sex in later life – especially with a new partner – might be like.

Those who discussed financial concerns included participants who described themselves at either end of the socio-economic spectrum. For some, this concern was related to their limited income at this stage of life.

“Now that I’m on a limited income, it’s been hard. And that’s another thing that holds me back from like going out and meeting people because I don’t want to burden somebody with my mess... I think it’s fear. Fear of having those things thrown in my face. Feeling rejected or made to feel like I’m less worthy because of the finances or my health.”

-Yvetta, 59



For others, particularly those who had saved for retirement or inherited from parents or spouses raised concerns about being taken advantage of and the need to protect their finances for themselves or for their children or grandchildren in the future.

“The truth is, I’m a little afraid of being taken advantage of because we now have this reputation of being, you know, old rich people.”

-Ann, 71



These worries about finances led many participants to suggest the ideal way to handle finances in any future relationship would be to keep things distinct and separate, which was common among our participants who had started a new relationship in later life. Some indicated they would just maintain separate finances entirely, while others (specifically women we interviewed) were insistent about the need for legal protection if they remarried.

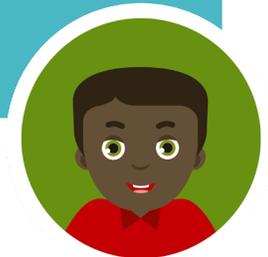
“There would be a prenup for sure! Everything I have up until X date is mine. Debts, assets, all that. Everything he has up until X date is his.”

-Meg, 62



“I think it could be better for the relationship where you just your own, everything’s your own in case it doesn’t work. You don’t have to go through a big legal battle to break it all up.”

-Mark, 58



“I do feel like some of the men I dated maybe weren’t interested until they found out I had a nice retirement from [Arizona government job]. So oftentimes the term we hear is ‘nurse with a purse’ – I don’t know that I’ll ever remarry because that comes with a lot of financial responsibility. If I remarry, there’ll definitely be a prenup and that stuff will be discussed.”

-Helen, 60



Concerns about family members, particularly children and grandchildren, were raised by many participants, both men and women, across the age range. For some, these issues came from their own family, where children expressed a desire for older parents not to date or marry. Some participants with this experience suggested this was driven by their children's concerns about inheritance.

“It’s usually the children who are afraid of losing their inheritance and whatnot. So [not getting married] sounded like a good idea financially, personally, for the family, because the kids were not happy about even the idea of me starting dating. I did not get support from the kids and I think it was financial, that, you know, they would lose whatever they perceived their due inheritance might be.”

-Warren, 91



For other participants, they either did not have their own children or had adult children who were happy to see their parents look for love and companionship, but participants themselves were worried about starting relationships with potential partners who were still raising children. While this concern was most often expressed about minor children, it often extended to adult children living in the home or, more rarely, for any children at all.

“If they have children living at home, I kind of shy away from that because I would rather not. I’ve already gone through that and it kind of just hinders the relationship, I think.”

-Aaron, 55



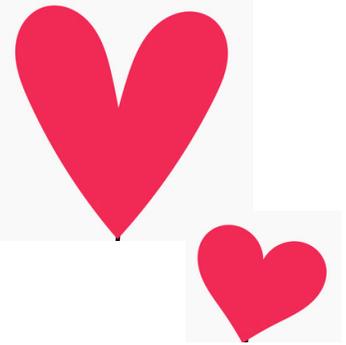
“It might eventually become a no, if they had adult children [at home]. If they’re rich, they have a huge mansion in their compound. I can’t imagine any other situation. So it would probably be because their child needed to come back over at home due to a financial crisis kind of thing. I suppose I would have to hear about it. That doesn’t bode well.”

-Meg, 62



“I understand your kids mean everything to you... But I don’t want to third or fourth, you know, after your kids. I don’t want to come fourth after your children. So I’d rather just not deal with them.”

-Kathleen, 62



Concerns about potential partners’ health and the possibility of becoming responsible for caregiving led several participants, especially women, to be wary when thinking about dating. For some, this resulted from having taken care of spouses for lengthy periods prior to their partners’ passing; these experiences often led older singles to worry not only about becoming a ‘nurse’ but also about the possibility of experiencing that kind of loss for a second time.



“So, you know, when you think about, well, somebody my age, that [poor health] could happen to them right around the corner and then all of a sudden I’m into the nursing mode again and I compare that versus what I have now. And I put up with either the loneliness or thinking, ‘Gee, it might be nice to go on a date once in a while’ or this, and it’s like, okay, that versus all of the baggage that comes with a romantic partner. And so I’m not ready for that trade off.”

-Carol, 76

“I just heard the term coined “a nurse with a purse.” There’s men that are looking for someone to take care of them and they have money... I don’t want to take care of someone. I don’t want somebody older that has health problems.”

-Judy, 63



“If I wanted to be a nurse then I would be working as a nurse!”

-Silvia, 74



A number of participants described concerns about starting a sexual relationship. For some individuals, this was primarily related to worries about how things might work, given how aging can impact both men and women’s bodies and levels of desire.



“A big question to me is intimacy and sexuality. It’s got to be a whole different thing because the parts don’t work the same... So I think that’s a mystery to everybody on how that, you know, how that functions.”

-Eva, 75



“And sex is different when you’re [in your eighties]. But things don’t work as well as they used to. You make do with what you have.”

-James, 82



“At this point in age, and how long it’s been since I’ve had sex, I don’t know if I still can. That is so scary [laughs]. Because if you meeting somebody and you’re physically attracted and you get together and what if it doesn’t go well? You know, that’s scary to me.”

-Jane, 68

Beyond concerns about physiology, several participants addressed the rising number of sexually-transmitted infections in older adult populations in Arizona. Knowledge of this issue led several participants, particularly women, trying to determine how they could address the topic of safe sex with potential partners.

“The sex question is interesting because I get the impression a lot of women my age have lost interest... But men now with Viagra, you know... And there’s a lot of that happening in senior communities from what I’ve been told. Especially since sexually transmitted diseases among elderly have gotten so high.”

-Linda, 66



“That standpoint as from not knowing if they’re ‘clean’. You know, anybody can say that they’ve been tested for everything and that doesn’t mean anything! So unless you show me the card that you went in today... So there’s that mistrust.”

-Margot, 62



“Brand new [relationship], you don’t know medically if there’s a problem or if he has a disease... Can you ask a guy that, ‘do you have a clean bill of health?’”

-Carol, 76



Sex in Later Life

Though several participants expressed some concerns about sexual relationships in later life, a number of participants reported satisfying, exciting, and enjoyable sex lives with their current or recent partners. Many of these participants reported the thrill of a sexual relationship with a partner who they felt comfortable with, finding sex at this stage liberating given their increased knowledge of their own bodies and what they enjoyed. For some single participants, a desire for sex pushed them to think about the sexual connection as the primary form of intimacy they were looking for. Some participants were careful to note that their understanding of sex had evolved to include a variety of forms of physical and sexual intimacy, including cuddling and kissing.

“We’re sexually active together. This is the best sex I’ve ever had in my life.”

-James, 82



“Sex has been good. And we didn’t expect that. And we just often talk about it kind of surprises us... I mean, really, the sex has been far, far better than I ever dreamed that it would be at this age.”

-Glen, 83



“I really wish that I would have a relationship with someone, but I think that would come after the sex.... Now it’s like I’m older, and I kind of want the passion in the sex first and then, you know, maybe we can be friends or something.”

-Judy, 63



“To have sex in my life again is very exciting.”

-Eleanor, 78



How has dating changed?

Several participants noted that dating was different – and in some cases, harder – than it was when they were younger. Several participants, both men and women, felt like dating at their current age presented a number of challenges, but also sped up the process, as participants wanted to enjoy their time more and felt like they should capitalize on romantic opportunities when they came.

“The dating game has changed.”

-Willa, 73



“I don’t know how to act romantically at this age because it’s so different... Like I said, meeting someone at 24 and meeting them at 74 seem so different.”

-Eva, 75



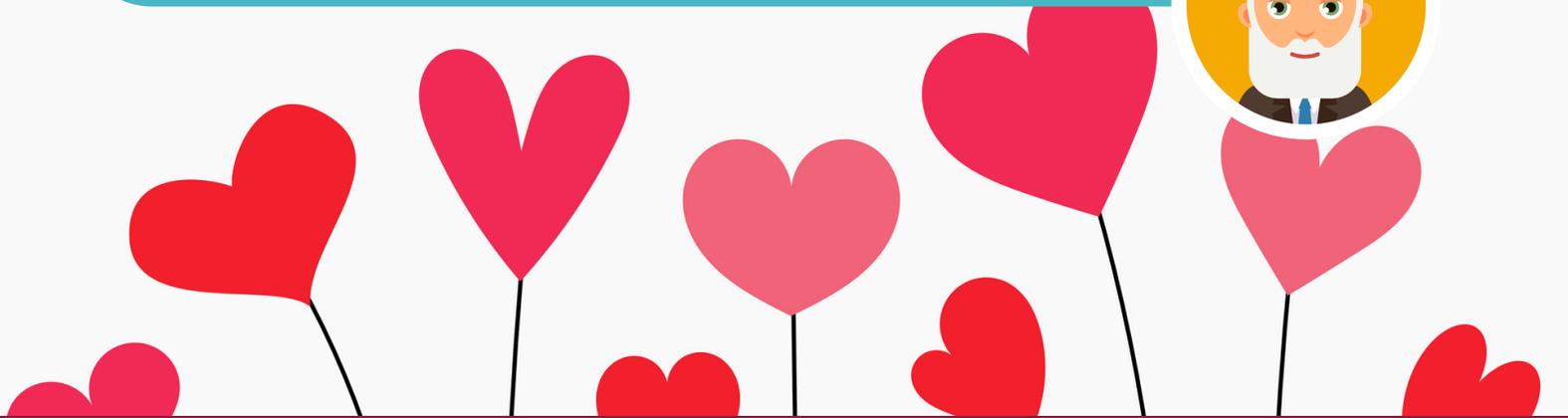
“I am totally surprised [at how hard it is to date now]. I dated a lot in college. And I guess you could say I was pretty good at it. But at 71, it’s not so easy.”

-Ann, 71



“Another thing about dating at this point is, if you’re going to date somebody, you got to start out the romance early on because if you don’t, what’s probably going to happen at our age?”

-Drew, 63



Some participants suggested that dating might be harder at this stage because it becomes increasingly difficult to meet people, as the options for dating have shifted from a friend-of-a-friend or someone met at work to online dating and singles meetups.



“I guess I feel like the options are a lot more challenging than like, than you’re used to... I think the older you get, it can be harder to meet people.”

-David, 55

“I guess I just wish it was like 50 years ago, and my neighbor would introduce me to somebody and you’d just date for a little while and maybe you would get more serious and maybe it wouldn’t. And it’s not like that anymore. So it’s tough.”

-Jean, 67



For some participants, coupled with the difficulty of meeting people in general came the possibility that the dating pool changed – or in some cases, participants’ desires for what they wanted in a partner had shifted.

“It is [different] especially when you’re older, because it’s not easy to meet people that you have a lot in common with. And I think the older you get, sometimes it might even be harder. I’m getting pickier [laughs].”

-Brenda, 71



“I think when you’re younger, you have expectations too, of what you want and need in a partner. It’s not that much different. It’s just that the dating pool diminishes when you get older.”

-Gloria, 75



Interestingly, some participants agreed that dating had changed, but for the better. Some felt it was easier to date later in life because of their greater self-knowledge and contentment with who they were, as well as greater certainty about what they wanted from a partner.



“It’s easy to be very direct and open and honest at this age.”

-Keith, 76



Success Stories: Where are people finding partners?

Among the 19 participants who had started a romantic relationship later in life, there were a number of successful strategies when it came to dating and finding partners. A number of other participants, not currently in relationships, had also reported positive experiences with dating through a number of these methods.

Somewhat surprisingly, a number of participants with a romantic partner began dating after rekindling an old flame! Some participants went back to previous partners – even dating back from high school and college – in their quest to start something new. Looking up old flames on social media, like Facebook, proved a popular and sometimes successful technique, even when romance wasn’t the goal. Re-forging these connections brought back happy memories of youth, and sometimes allowed a fresh start. Some participants, like Carol, felt like it was more comfortable to date a man she had known and had a relationship with when she was younger: *“it’s a reuniting from high school days. You’re comfortable, you have the history.”* Others, like Deborah, found it nice, explaining *“I guess you never really forget when you love somebody!”*



Some participants started a romance by turning to friends and former family connections after their spouse passed away or following divorce. This proved successful for couples like Alma and William, who began to live together as married when Alma was 79 and William was 90. They had known each other for decades as they had family members who were married to each other, so they had passing interactions from childhood and early adulthood while each married other partners and lived in different states. Following the passing of William's wife, the two connected on Facebook and quickly found a romantic connection. Alma explained, *"He went off and had his family and I had mine. So that was the end of that. There was nothing. And then I saw him two years ago on Facebook... So I called him and he met me for coffee. And that's how that started."* Similarly, after Glen's wife passed away, a casual interaction with a long-time acquaintance blossomed into love. He explained, *"Knowing how close she was with her kids like me, how close she was with her grandchildren like me... I think that had a strong effect. [Otherwise] I don't think I would have taken step one. Honestly, I didn't want to date... Before I looked around, it was something that already had happened. And I'm very glad."*

In keeping with the times, a number of participants successfully navigated online dating apps and websites to find love. Dennis met his husband on an online website, after trying to date in-person but not finding someone who wanted the same things that he did. Dennis says *"I wish I could have met him 40 years ago and had a life with him. Because it's everything that I really want in a relationship. He was looking for the same thing that I was looking for, someone to spend your life with and to have an adventure. And that's what I got!"* Other online daters have had success with apps and websites like Hinge, Match, and Bumble, which allow users to heavily personalize profiles to let potential partners get a sense of who the person is before connecting. A number of participants described positive experiences going on dates with people they met online, although these didn't always turn into longer-term relationships.

In good news for the roughly-half of participants who reside in age-restricted communities, several participants found love at their community's social events, including dinners, games-nights, and dances. Norman met Pamela at a dance event held at their community, explaining that after a series of difficult personal events, *"the very next month I met the lady that I'm with now, at the dance, where else? To get to the bottom line, dancing is the best way that I have found to date in later life. Probably in younger life, too. But it's just great because you get to meet so many people and it's so much fun."* James met his girlfriend shortly after moving into an age-restricted community, at a community meeting where she caught his eye.

Dolores met her casual boyfriend over a game of cards at their 55+ residence, while Lloyd met his girlfriend over lunch in their community's dining room, when a mutual friend invited her to join them at their table. These connections often came as a surprise to participants who reported they weren't explicitly looking for a partner or thinking about dating when they met the person they were now seeing. While set-ups or introductions by friends were often not very successful, several participants expressed a desire for family and friends to introduce them to other singles. For one participant, Warren, his relationship with his long-term partner began out of a surprising set-up, where someone who viewed themselves as a matchmaker passed along contact information to Warren for a woman he'd never met. After sitting on the phone number for a while, and then decided *"I wasn't seeing anybody, I wasn't doing anything. What have I got to lose?"* The initial phone call provided a spark to Warren and his partner, who remain together several years later.

Social events and outings provided some participants the opportunity to meet their current partners, while many other participants frequent these events in the hopes of meeting someone. Bars remain a classic location to find someone, which was the case for Janet, who met her long-term boyfriend at a bar where she went to listen to music. Janet explained she had often met previous boyfriends in these kinds of situations, and laughingly noted that there's a great bonus to meeting people this way: *"you know, in a dark bar, you can't tell how old somebody is! So he thought I was ten years younger!"* Many participants found going to bars or music events with a group of friends useful to help meet people in a casual atmosphere. Aside from bars, a substantial number of participants referenced joining Meetup groups as a way to meet new friends and potential partners. Meetup, a website where users join online groups that hold offline (real-life) events, was popular among men and women across the full age spectrum of those we interviewed. We found lots of interest in Meetup groups specifically dedicated to singles (including for older singles), but a large number of participants were primarily active in groups focused on their personal interests – wine, dining, hiking, dancing, etc. Several people noted that these groups felt more casual and comfortable because the focus was not on dating or finding someone, but instead on shared activities. This felt more natural for those hoping to find a partner, because they felt a relationship could be built off of these shared hobbies and interests. Helen is an example of this, as she met her new boyfriend at a Meetup group focused on physical activity. She explained how she started dating after her divorce: *"So it was actually through Meetup groups and you find someone who has a common interest. So that's how I started dating again, through the Meetup group... The man I'm dating now, it was through a group that we met... It was all group-oriented. And you can get to know someone in a very relaxed environment."*

Conclusions

The perspectives of the 68 people who participated in our Romance and Dating in Later Life study have helped develop a more thorough understanding of what it is like to be single, to date, and to find new love at this stage of life. Because we spoke to both women and men across a nearly 40-year period of mid and later life, we are able to see how factors like gender and age, as well as race, social and economic status, disability, health, political and social attitudes, and others impact both whether older adults are interested in dating and what kinds of relationships people are looking for at this stage. Moving forward, we hope to delve further into these themes to uncover more about what it is like to look for love – or not! – for adults after age 55. We are grateful for the contributions of our research participants who have taught us quite a bit about these experiences and have demonstrated how rich and enjoyable life can be, with or without romance.

