

Roy Millard and Sheila Young found love and companionship through online dating

Dating in later life

With St Valentine's Day in mind, **Louise Duffield** hears some expert advice for those returning to the dating game

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY KELLEIGH BOWEN

DATING CAN be invigorating and fun – whatever your age. However, it can also be a little daunting, especially if it's been a while since you've done any.

Things may have changed, the way people meet may have altered, but it's never too late to give it a go.

A survey of 2500 online daters by dating website Elite Singles last year showed that romance can happen at any time. Even after break-up, separation and divorce, 96 per cent believe you can fall in love at any age, and 87 per cent of single over-70s

believe love could be just around the corner for them. Sixty per cent of seniors still believe in love at first sight, and superficial attraction remains important; the face, chest and bottom were voted the top three most attractive features in an older person.

The Colour Report, by retirement housebuilder McCarthy and Stone, looked at life in retirement and discovered that 19 per cent of pensioners polled were a member of an online dating service, rising to 27 per cent of those aged between 70 and 74. Some 33 per cent of 65 to

74-year-olds said they had been successful and met someone special, compared with 24 per cent aged 75-plus.

"And perhaps reflective of their independent and active lifestyles, one in five said that even though they didn't meet anyone special, they enjoyed a few nice dates," says the report.

Last year, the BBC commissioned a report by Mintel which looked at the dating habits of the over-55s. The report revealed that 35 per cent of British people over 55 were single at the time.

The most popular way to meet a new

partner was through family and friends, followed by socialising and work, and then via the internet, according to the survey of 2000 people. Mintel discovered that more than one in five 55 to 64-year-olds had met a new partner or date through a website or app.

Manj Weerasekera, who specialises in working with people looking for love after divorce or the break-up of a long-term relationship, says it's natural to have a number of different feelings and fears if you're returning to the dating scene after a long absence.

"If it's after bereavement, there may be some guilt," he explains. "A lot of the behaviours and feelings that people have would be fear-based, so, for example, anyone who's separated or divorced, or lost someone they have been with for a long time, gets comfortable with that person. They get used to you and you get used to them and, for most people, they would think they would be with that person for the rest of their life."

The circumstances are likely to shape how an individual feels about dating. For example, a person may feel unsure of their identity after going through a divorce where assets were lost, he says. There will be a whole mix and myriad of emotions.

"For both genders (there may be) the uncertainty of whether they are still attractive. They haven't been dating for maybe 30 or 40 years," says Manj.

"The good thing is that the person they are going to meet is probably going through the same thing and they are likely to be of a similar age and with similar upbringing, and they would have dated (previously) in a time known to both."

According to Manj, when finding love seems like a distant dream, we can take some comfort in using statistics to gauge our progress in the search for 'the one'. For example, only about one out of ten dates goes well. And it's not unusual to get only two or three replies to the 20-plus messages you send out on your chosen online dating service, for example. So

Online dating warning

Many people now use the internet as their first port of call when dating. If that's your chosen route, a quick search will reveal just how many different websites there are to browse.

It's important to be internet-savvy, do your research and remain vigilant and level-headed, says Manj Weerasekera, the Fresh Start Guy. If you're not confident, seek advice or ask a friend or family member for support.

It's worth noting that online dating fraudsters conned victims out of more than £33m in 2014/15, with 3543 people reported to have fallen victim to dating scams, according to Action Fraud, the UK's national fraud centre. Take sensible precautions to avoid pitfalls, and chat to those who have already gone down the internet dating route for advice.

Nowadays, it's also common for people to use apps on their mobile phones to identify potential partners who are nearby, but Manj believes that joining a club or two is a good way to meet new people.

"My favourite one is to get people to join a club in something they are interested in. Or learn something new perhaps and get out and meet people that way. Don't go out looking for someone, get out to enjoy yourself a bit more. For someone divorced or widowed, it's really important to get back into life.

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how can we improve the chances of success and get the statistics on side?

Studies suggest we each have a preferred sensory ‘modality’, which determines how we process and store information, says Manj. Some people are more visual, while others are more kinesthetic (lead with their feelings). The other senses are auditory (what we hear), olfactory (smell) and gustatory (taste). We use all of them, but we tend to lead with one; we’re just not consciously aware it – and this includes while we are dating.

Although the exact statistics vary, it appears that both the visual and kinesthetic senses are predominant.

Manj suggests the following to statistically improve the chances of success:

■ **Expand your pool** – the more people you meet, the more chances of success you have.

■ **Be choosy** – when you know what qualities are important to you, steer clear of dates that don’t meet your criteria.

■ **Make a stunning first impression** – whether it’s online or in person, first impressions count.

■ **Consider your date’s expectations** – think ahead about what your date will expect in terms of personality, demeanour

and appearance. Disappointment can be a major relationship killer.

■ **Be realistic** – if you get the signal that something is wrong and it simply isn’t going to work, end things cordially and amicably and count it as a success.

■ **Be honest** – there is perhaps no quicker way to relationship success than being honest with yourself and with your date.

■ **Define success on your terms** – fully consider your goals as you get back out into the dating world, and pick a measure for success that suits you best at this moment. Remember, a 100 per cent success rate in dating is not realistic, but by following advice you can increase your chances and your dating ‘batting average’ – which in turn means you are more likely to find the person of your dreams.

Even though dating may feel daunting, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) says there has been a sharp rise in the number of over-60s tying the knot, with the largest percentage increase in the number of marriages in 2011 and 2012 being for men and women aged 65 to 69, rising by 25 per cent and 21 per cent respectively, which illustrates that love and romance can still burn brightly later in life.

Do’s and don’ts of dating

Manj Weerasekera, who operates as the Fresh Start Guy, offers some advice on how to set about dating and how to make a good impression during dates:

1 Set targets of who you’d like to meet and the type of person you’d like to attract. If you don’t, your mind will do it anyway

2 Get clear the impression you wish to make. Think to yourself ‘what type of person do I need to make sure I show up as for that person to be interested in?’ How do you want to come across to a potential partner? Sophisticated, good-humoured, relaxed, fun? Decide in advance on the great impression you wish to make

3 Think about what you are going to say, how you come across and develop yourself a strong self-image. Before the date, remind yourself of what’s great about yourself and remember the times when you had your most successful dates

4 Try not to see it as a date. “You are just meeting a brand new human being,” says Manj. “Take an interest in this person. Find out as much about them as you can and be yourself.”

5 Be a great communicator and make sure the conversation goes 50/50. “When your date is talking, pay real attention so they feel you’re interested in what they are saying. If you’re shy, paying attention will reveal what you can ask them or speak about next. Attention is also the key to charisma and unlocking chemistry,” says Manj. “When you are speaking, try not to talk too much about previous partners and certainly do not talk negatively about them. Finally, get the balance right and do not talk about yourself all of the time.”

Find out more

■ For more details about Manj Weerasekera, who operates as the Fresh Start Guy, see the websites: (www.freshstartguy.com) or (www.facebook.com/freshstartguy) or find him on Twitter: (@FreshStartGuy). The first chapter of his book, *The Divorced Man’s Guide to Finding Mrs Right*, is available to download free from his website

■ For further information about retirement housebuilder McCarthy and Stone, see the website: (www.mccarthyandstone.co.uk).

Roy Millard and Sheila Young: Internet date led to more than companionship

When Roy Millard and Sheila Young went online dating, they were searching for companionship. What they found was much more.

Roy had been married for 44 years when he lost his wife eight years ago. Sheila had been married for 48 years when her husband died in 2011.

Having been off the dating scene for many years, they both opted to try internet dating when they felt ready to look for a new relationship.

Roy explains how he took the plunge after feeling that he wanted to share his life with someone special.

“When you go out with friends they are brilliant, but not being part of a couple doesn’t always feel right,” he remembers.

Sheila felt the same.

“A week before my husband died, he said to me ‘you have got to make a new life for yourself’ and I said ‘I can’t do that’ and he said ‘you must,’” she recalls. “He was 11 years older than me.

He said ‘you have got to do something with your life’ but I never thought I would, but after 18 months I started to feel the same as Roy did. I have a great family and friends around me and they kept me going and I had settled into a life on my own but it felt like there was always something missing. If I went to a party I was never comfortable and would try to avoid such situations.”

After a couple of glasses of wine one evening three years ago, Sheila plucked up the courage to sign up for a month’s trial with a large internet dating organisation. Roy admits to being ‘scared stiff’ when he began filling in his profile details at around the same time.

He had a couple of dates before widening his ‘search’ area, which put his profile in front of Sheila, who says she immediately ‘fell in love with his eyes’.

Roy, who’s 75, was living near Market Bosworth at the time. Sheila, 73, had her home in Birmingham. After

chatting for a while online they arranged a first date and went for coffee at a garden centre, followed by a pub lunch after they got on so well.

Roy remembers feeling quite nervous but describes the date as ‘lovely’. Sheila also felt nervous but says: “A lot of it disappeared when I saw him and we started talking. I felt so comfortable with him.”

A second date soon followed – a day trip to Stratford-upon-Avon – where it rained continuously but the weather didn’t spoil the day.

“It poured with rain the whole time, but we enjoyed it,” remembers Sheila. “It was lovely.”

Less than a year later, Sheila suffered a brain haemorrhage.

“When I left hospital they said I needed someone to look after me and Roy moved in and has been around ever since,” laughs Sheila.

Last year, having sold their respective homes, they moved into a McCarthy and Stone Retirement Living development, St Clements Court, in Atherstone.

Roy explains: “Sheila and I lived over 30 miles apart, so we hoped to find somewhere in between both of our families. We looked at a variety of properties by different developers and were really taken by the plans for St Clements Court. Located in the centre of Atherstone, it is perfect for us – we can walk into town and enjoy the cafes, restaurants and local shops without any need to drive.”

They couldn’t be happier and both are delighted they took the plunge and began dating again in later life.

“There are people on their own who are happy the way they are, but if you think you would like someone else in your life, some people need that,” says Sheila. “If you are like that and you enjoy company, it doesn’t have to go as far as we have – you can just have a friendship. That’s all we wanted, a friendship, but it’s developed into something bigger. I would recommend it but you have to be careful about which internet dating sites you use.”

Roy is delighted with the way things have turned out, adding: “It’s great having a companion again.”



Rubies and pearls on the way out

If dating results in a new relationship, followed by marriage, it might be interesting to know that research last year revealed newlyweds shouldn’t expect to have landmark anniversaries marked with traditional gifts, as more than half of Britons are ignorant of the celebratory customs.

The research conducted by One4all, the Post Office gift card, found 55 per cent were not familiar with wedding anniversary milestones, such as silver, pearl and ruby. A further 61 per cent were unaware that ruby wedding anniversaries – one of the best-known milestones – are celebrated after 40 years together. Only ten per cent give and receive presents which tie into the traditions, and almost half believe old-style anniversary gifts like rubies, diamonds and pearls neglect male tastes, with one in ten feeling they are old-fashioned.

In 2015, Britons’ top ways of celebrating anniversaries were exchanging cards, having dinner or an evening out, going on a romantic short break and giving gifts that reflect their partner’s tastes and interests. Exchanging gifts which tie into the traditions trailed in fifth place.