

Experience Matters empowering the 50+

***I've been on my own for a while and I would like a relationship.
Whenever I think about dating I go cold, as I can't bear the thought of
anyone touching me.....***

We all have questions whatever our age when it comes to matters of the heart and sexual relationships. When we were younger it seemed easier to ask for advice but with the increasing years we believe that as experienced individuals we should know the answers. Of course that isn't true and we need to get better at asking.

I will be answering three questions that I am often asked.

***1. I've been on my own for a while and I would like a relationship.
Whenever I think about dating I go cold, as I can't bear the thought of
anyone touching me, even a hug gives me shivers, and taking my
clothes off.... I dread looking in the mirror and seeing myself. I don't
look like I used to and I know these feelings are stopping me meeting
someone.***

It's easy, as we get older to hanker after a time in our life when we imagined we looked effortlessly lovely! As you know, by looking back at old photographs, this is almost certainly not the case. So, forget about the past and concentrate on the world as it is, not as it was. Accentuating the positive is the only course of action not only to make you happier but healthier, too.

For a start, it can be surprisingly cheering to remember all the 'firsts' you'll never have to go through again. Just imagine never having to sit for all those exams, taking your driving test, getting drunk or even having your first period. Thank goodness all that's behind you! Of course, there are undeniably

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moments we all wish we could experience again like meeting our first love, giving birth to our first child or going abroad for the first time,

If it's true that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the first beholder who needs to see you as beautiful is yourself. Once you can do that, then you're no longer dependent on others to make you feel good. And you CAN do it for yourself. You CAN be as beautiful as you feel.

The magic of this is that, as soon as you see yourself as beautiful, so do others. It's infectious and has nothing to do with how you look in relation to any perceived stereotype. We also often foolishly compare ourselves with others but, as each person is unique, comparisons are as futile as they are irrelevant.

Take a look at yourself in the mirror and focus on all your good points. Start with the physical ones and make list e.g. good ankles, nice teeth etc. Now make a list of your qualities e.g. good listener, good sense of humour. Once you have your lists read them three times a day to yourself and focus your attention on these positive attributes throughout the day. You'll be surprised how quickly you begin to feel positive about yourself and you'll be back dating in no time.

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2. My marriage ended a couple of years ago. I have just started dating again. I've had several short relationships and I didn't think about safe sex; at 56, I thought I was too old. I've just been diagnosed with Chlamydia and gonorrhoea. I felt so bad and stupid when I had to go to the STI clinic and sit in the waiting room. I'm old enough to know better. How do I prevent this happening again?

You are not the only 50+ to find yourself at an STI clinic. A recent piece of research published in the June 2008 edition of Sexually Transmitted Diseases says that the rate of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) has doubled among the over-45s in less than a decade.

We are the generation that missed out on the sex education routinely given now to young people. Then, with the development of the pill which coincided with many of us experimenting sexually, fears of pregnancy were radically reduced and so we became less insistent on using a condom. Then many of us settled into long-term relationships that we believed were monogamous and we didn't worry about STIs.

Most of us who were brought up pre-HIV have remained quite ignorant about sexually transmitted diseases believing that we're too old for them. Of course this isn't the case as bacteria and viruses aren't age conscious! As we live longer and are healthier so we'll go on being sexually active longer, too. One doctor reported that the oldest person in his clinic in the last twelve months was 93! So we do need to protect ourselves.

Sexually transmitted infections are mainly passed from one person to another during sexual activity. There are at least 25 STIs, all with different symptoms. Infection is passed vaginally, orally and anally. Most STIs will only affect you if

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you have sex with an infected person.

Unless you've only had one monogamous partner and so have they, you could be at risk of developing an STI. That means the man wearing a condom whether you're likely to get pregnant or not! And they do work, if used properly. If men aren't familiar with them, practise until it feels comfortable.

It all sounds so simple so why don't more people use condoms? One reason is that, too often, we're not prepared. Don't get carried away in the moment and then remember when it's too late. (Alcohol often makes us lose our inhibitions.)

We also whatever our age or sex find ourselves too shy or tongue-tied to ask a new lover how many sexual partners they've had, and what neither of you can know for certain is how either of your ex-partners behaved. Practise asking your new partner so that, by the time you do it for real, it just trips off the tongue.

If you use safe sex you'll be fine from now on.

3. I've fallen in love again. After my wife died two years ago, I never thought it would happen again but it has. I feel fifteen, and can hardly eat or sleep. I'd really like to tell my adult children but I think they'll be cross and feel bad for their mum. We are a very close family.

Congratulations! How lovely. It's always such a pleasure to hear from someone who's come through bad times and found happiness. I wonder why you think your children won't feel the same? You've not replaced their mother; you never could. Maybe they need some reassurance that whoever you're with, however much in love you now are, you'll never forget their mum and

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you can all go on enjoying her memory even if there is a new woman around.

Sometimes children however old they are think they will lose their parents' love and attention when they make a new relationship.

Talk to them about this and tell them you will still be there for them and you will still spend time with them on your own. When we fall in love we tend to assume our children will feel the same and of course that's not the case. It will take time for them to make a relationship with your new partner, so give them time and take it slowly.

It's important that your new partner knows the family's history and how much your late wife was a major part of it, so she gives your children time to get to know her and doesn't expect too much at the start.

You may be worrying about your children's reaction unnecessarily. Very often, and contrary to what we expect, children are delighted when their parents make new relationships. It gives them the freedom to get on with their own lives without worrying that the bereaved or divorced parent is home alone and lonely. You may be very surprised by their reaction.

If you are interested in knowing more please take a look at our website www.experiematters.org.uk and join us at one of our workshops.

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