

# The Dating Game —Again

Suddenly single in midlife?

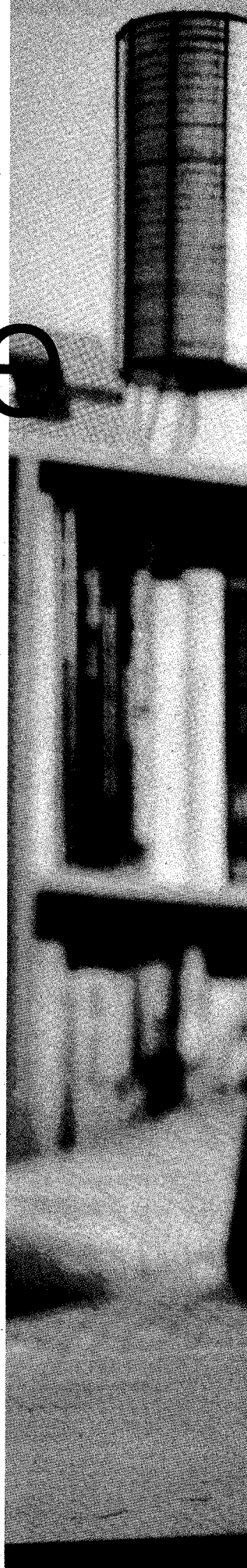
Here's how to bounce back and brave  
the dating scene again

BY SUSAN PEDWELL

All week long Onna Aris was looking forward to Friday night. She agonized over what to wear – something not too frumpy but not too sexy either. It was the first date for Aris, 33, since her marriage of eight years had ended in divorce a year ago. And because Aris and her husband had dated for four years before marrying, she actually hadn't dated in over a dozen years. Thus, Friday night was an event of monumental proportion.

"It was psycho," sums up Aris. "We went to a movie, and when the lights went out my mind started racing. Do we have to sleep together tonight? Will my son like him? Where will we live? If we get married, how will our blended family work out?"

When the movie ended, her date asked if she would like to go out for a cup of coffee. By then Aris was barely able to breathe because of her anxiety. "I think I'd better just go home," is all she could manage to say.



Whether you're separated, divorced or widowed, if you haven't dated for a decade or two, you're bound to feel panicky at the idea of spending Friday night with someone new. On top of that, your confidence may have shattered when your marriage collapsed. And you may keep asking yourself over and over why you stayed in the marriage for so long.

But most people, who find themselves suddenly single are eventually ready for a new relationship, if not another marriage. In fact, formerly married people are marriage enthusiasts. In Canada, 90 per cent of men and 62 per cent of women who divorce at age 40 will remarry. Divorced individuals tend to marry other divorced individuals, and widows tend to marry widowers. Quebec, though, has a low remarriage rate following divorce, probably due to its large Catholic population. Catholics are forbidden to remarry after civil divorce.

If you want to reenter the dating scene, there are many doors to open — but the most important door to open is your own. To meet that special someone, you need to get out and enjoy yourself with others.

### Looking for Mr. Right

If you're considering dating again, newspaper ads and glossy brochures for single's dances, dinner parties and cruises may have caught your eye. Christa Kroboth started a single's walking group, A Stroll in the Park — Walking & Adventure Club, eight years ago so that singles like herself could walk safely through Toronto's parks and ravines. On the first walk, 20 singles set out along a nature trail. Now there are 5,000 names in her database, and besides bimonthly walks and weekend getaways, plans are under way for a single's vacation in Banff, Alta.

"Being in nature is a very romantic way to meet someone," says Kroboth. She knows of at least one marriage a year sparked under a canopy of trees on a club walk.

But single's events don't appeal to everyone. "You all know why you're there, and everyone's right-in-your-face friendly. It's forced," laments Joy Enda, 36, who has tried a variety of single's events. Enda has concluded that what she calls "the old-fashioned way to meet people" works best. "Get out and do something you enjoy," she advises.

If you've always wanted to learn how to ski, now's the time. Choose an



**Look in  
a new place.  
Why not  
log on  
for love?**

activity that excites you, not one you feel you should be interested in. If reading makes you sizzle, turn this solo act into a social occasion by joining a book club. If you like nothing more than a movie matinee, join a cinema society. If Mr. Right doesn't walk in, then you can still ogle the silver-screen star.

Of course, there's no accounting for how some singles meet. They meet in group therapy, or even scooping up after the dog in the park. You never know

where you'll meet your new love. Eugenia Parker, 39, of Guelph, Ont., met her Prince Charming in the liquor store.

When her marriage of 12 years came to an end, Parker wasn't looking for anyone new. "I liked my own company," she said. Then she noticed the manager of the local liquor store.

"He had a seriously nice attitude," she recalls. "He was a single father who put his son first." She began going to the liquor store for no good reason. "I made up all sorts of reasons to talk to him. I'd tell him that I was having a dinner party and then ask him what to serve. We'd chat, then I'd walk out without buying anything." Eventually he asked her out. They dated for two years and have now moved in together.

### What's New in Dating?

If the last time you dated was at a sock hop, you may want to try a more modern venue. What about the Internet? There are millions of men in cyberspace and not all of them are married or 14 years old. Head for the chat rooms where you can be in live communication. Pick a room with your geographic location. But don't believe everything that appears on your computer screen. Don't give out your phone number, address or even your name. If you want to know someone better, consider arranging cyber-

### Don't Forget Johnny

How can you help your kids feel secure when you begin a new romantic relationship? "You have to go really slowly," advises Toronto family therapist Pearl E. Langer. "Before bringing a date home, prepare your child by talking about it. Make the first meeting brief — maybe just an introduction at the door."

Some single parents feel they can spare their children's feelings by dating only when they aren't around. Langer feels it's better to tell the children. "Kids watch their parents very carefully," she says. "They seem to know what's going on."

Young children need to be reassured that you're still available for them. "When you begin dating, your energy is going elsewhere. Your emotional availability changes," says Langer. As kids adjust, they may regress, act out or become sad. "If the parent and child have been a duo, it's almost like a mini-divorce," she explains.

For teens, dating is confirmation that their parents' marriage is over. Your teen may become anxious, even angry. He might exclaim, "I'm the one who is supposed to be dating!" Start a discussion with your children, asking them how they feel and if they want to talk about their feelings.

"Go slow about bringing home the date to sleep over," warns Langer. She urges single parents to see the situation through the child's eyes: "Suddenly there's this person living at my house. They're sleeping where Mommy and Daddy slept."

Over time, children can adjust. They shouldn't stop you from entering a new relationship. "It's absolutely appropriate to have a life outside your child," she assures.

## RELATIONSHIPS

dates or exchanging e-mail addresses — and try to avoid giving out your business e-mail address.

If you're clicking online and want to meet in person, meet in a public place (as you should with all first dates) and have your own transportation. A first date needn't be more grandiose than meeting for a cup of coffee.

When Corinne Ford of Toronto logged onto the Internet, she knew exactly where she wanted to go — to the message board for the tour company she was travelling with to Italy. She wrote that she didn't know anyone in the tour group and wanted to get to know another person who was also going alone.

A week went by, and then an e-mail message appeared from Jonathon Helmann of New York who would also be on the tour. Enjoying each other's quirky sense of humour, they were soon e-mailing each other two and three times a day. "It was all in fun, but I began to develop a crush on him," admits Ford. She later learned that Helmann had a big crush on her, too.

When they met at the airport in Rome two weeks later, there were no disappointments. "He is a wonderful person, the most caring person I could

imagine," says Ford. They've now been dating for just over a year.

You might want to try a dating service. Peter Crocker of Toronto sent students out with hidden micro-phones, posing as potential clients to help research his directory. *A Consumer's Guide to Dating and Introduction Services in Ontario*. What Crocker concludes is, "The only competent matchmaker for you is you. To understand yourself, the other person and the relationship is so complex it can't be predicted." He warns consumers to

be wary of agencies that won't disclose their fees over the phone and that claim sky-high success rates. Discouraged by the lack of success, Crocker now operates his own agency in Toronto.

Billing herself as "Canada's only traditional matchmaker" is Ruth Claramunt of the Hearts Introduction Service in Toronto. "I really have to get to know someone," she explains. During a home interview with the person seeking a match, Claramunt looks at the types of

books that line her client's shelves, takes note of what music she listens to, and carefully watches how she relates to her pets and children, if there are any.

With over a thousand clients across North America, Claramunt has matched so many couples she's lost track of the number. But in a recent two-week period, three couples she introduced got married. She even found her daughter a match! "I feel like Noah felt putting everyone on the boat, two by two!" she says.



### As with Wine

The longer you've been married, the steeper the dating learning curve. If you find yourself suddenly single in your 40s or 50s, you might worry about such details as who pays for dinner. In today's world, there are no hard-and-fast dating rules. Also, if you're older, you will encounter a gender imbalance. "As you grow older there are fewer single men and more single women," explains Crocker. Men die younger, and older men tend to choose a younger bride.

They don't know what they're missing. "Women in their 40s have more potential for a good relationship and a better sex life — ask any woman if she's a better lover now than when she was 19, and most will say they can be more erotic now," says Vancouver marriage and family therapist Bianca Rucker.

When Christine Bretherick's marriage of 14 years ended, her self-esteem took a nosedive. After a single's dance, Bretherick, then 37, decided to place a personal ad. It read: "Teacher, mid-30s with a zest for life, seeks sincere, professional male. Write to: Box 313." Of the 44 responses, one letter stood out. The respondent wrote that since Bretherick was a teacher, he thought they could at least have a good conversation.

"When we met, I didn't feel worthy," recalls Bretherick. "I felt like a secondhand vehicle. As the relationship progressed, I told him, 'I'm sure there are newer models on the block.' He said he had tried them and loved me." A few years later, they tied the knot.

Love is patient. Given another opportunity for a meaningful relationship, most people find they can love again. Maybe like never before. ■

### Ready, Set, Date!

You've probably heard this rule of thumb for reentering the dating scene: It takes half the amount of time that you were in a relationship to get over it. So if you were married for 10 years, you won't be ready for another significant relationship for five years.

"That's simply not true," counters Vancouver marriage and family therapist Bianca Rucker. "Some couples living together are already processing living apart. They may have been emotionally separated a long time before the divorce and are ready to date soon after they separate." Other couples seem married long after they divorce. They've slid off their wedding bands, but the bond is still forged.

If your husband walked out one day, you may be waiting against all odds for him to return. If he found someone new, you could be seething. You've been deeply hurt, but you don't have to sit around and wait to heal. You can take an active role in coming to terms with your loss.

To help her clients who are reeling from a breakup, Rucker gives them daily exercises.

1. Get in touch with thoughts and feelings. "If you haven't dealt with something, it comes back to haunt you," warns Rucker.
2. Read. Rucker recommends Diane Vaughan's *Uncoupling: How Relationships Come Apart* (Vintage, 1990).
3. Write in a journal.
4. Do something creative.
5. Be physically active.

But don't stay home every night doing homework if you're eager to go to a single's bar. "Begin dating anytime you feel ready," instructs Rucker. "Relationships are good arenas for growth. You don't have to wait until you've resolved all the issues."

A signpost that you're ready for another relationship is that you feel good about yourself. "If you don't like yourself, it won't be a functional relationship," warns Rucker. The more you love yourself, the more capable you are of loving someone new.