

Older Women, Younger Men: A Current Trend

Geena Davis, 60, and Iranian surgeon Reza Jarrahy, 45;
Tina Turner, 75, and German record executive Erwin Bach, 59;
Carol Burnett, 82, and musician Brian Miller, 59.



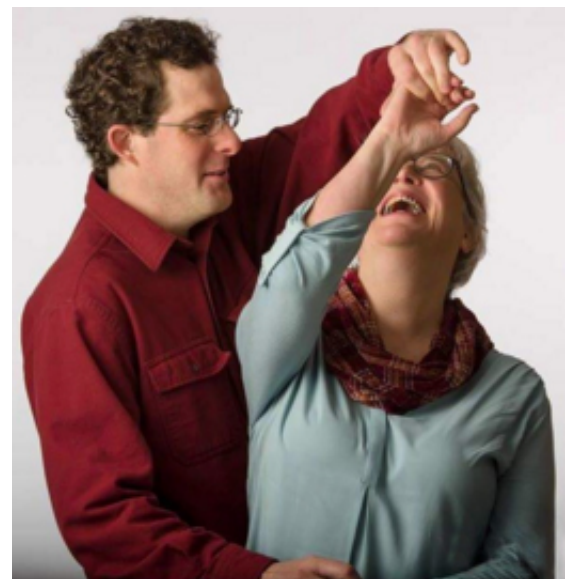
According to a recent AARP poll, a third of women aged 40 to 69 are dating men ten or more years younger.

by Sally Wendkos Olds

What do Geena Davis, Tina Turner, and Carol Burnett have in common? Aside from fame and success, all married men at least a decade younger than they are. But it's not only rich and famous women who are attractive to and attracted by younger professional men with whom they forge relationships. There are many of us.

According to an AARP poll, one-third of women between the ages of 40 and 69 are dating men ten or more years younger than they are. There's 62-year-old Sherry Beauchamp, who has been going to a contra dancing group for a few years. A year and a half ago Brian, 39, a man new to the group, asked her to dance. They danced together several times; at the end of the evening he invited her to dinner. "I panicked," she told me, "and thought, 'Oh no, this guy's much too young for me.' I told him I was tired and just wanted to head home."

Undaunted, Brian immediately asked, "What about next week?" Sherry told herself, "Okay, it's just dinner and I have a whole week to process this." And thus started the relationship between white-haired, glasses-wearing, conservatively dressed Sherry, and tall, dark-haired, muscular Brian. The two have been living happily together for about a year, so happy that this past New Years Brian proposed. *Brian and Sherry at right, photographed by Doug Plummer.*



Bryce Britton, a therapist, met her younger husband 30 years ago when they went with a group of friends to an art show. When Bryce touched the wool of Dale's shirt, she felt his firm biceps. "I really liked that," she remembers with a smile. Dale walked Bryce to her front door and kissed her goodnight.

Soon after Bryce told the friend who had organized the gallery trip, "I'm going to marry that guy." She didn't know that Dale was eleven years her junior and a marketing director for a real estate company.



A couple of weeks later, when Dale had not called her, a friend told her, “You’re liberated. Why don’t you call him?” She did, they learned each other’s age, and they ended the evening after his office party having sex in her car. Her divorce became final, they married two years later, and they’re still happily married today, after 28 years. *Bryce and Dale left.*

Marcia, who breeds poodles, and Carl, a contractor, met at a cook-out birthday party when she was 45 and he was 35. She was widowed, he was divorced, and both had been single for a while. It was love at first sight for Marcia, who knew right away that this was the man she wanted to marry, but Carl, who had just gotten out of a very bad marriage, never wanted to marry again. “I had to be very patient,” Marcia remembers. “I could

be—because I knew he was going to be my husband.” After dating for five years, they married. Now ten years later, they are still married, happier than ever.

Rachel, a retired teacher who now tutors children, was in line at the post office with an armful of packages. Suddenly the packages fell to the floor. As she was bending and reaching to collect them all, the man behind her helped her pick them up, and then held some for her until she reached the front of the very long line. They talked while they waited, but since each was wearing a wedding ring, neither looked at the other as a potential date—until they learned that each had been widowed. Peter, a real estate appraiser, invited Rachel to go for coffee, and by the time they went to a movie two weeks later, they had learned that Rachel, 77, was 18 years older than Peter. “This person really got to me,” Rachel now says. “I can be myself with him. He opened up my life, and it’s flowering.” Now four years later they see each other every week or so, travel together, enjoy each other’s company—and have great sex. Sex is a big part of their relationship, but neither wants to remarry or even live together.

Often people’s first thought when they hear of connections like these is “she must be rich” or “he must have an Oedipus complex.” Or she’s a hot and sexy “cougar” and he’s a hot and sexy “cub” lusting after each other for amazing sex. But from my conversations with several older woman-younger man couples and experts, the truth is simpler. Most often two people come together, find each other attractive, discover commonalities between them, form a bond—and then learn each other’s age. By that time it doesn’t matter.

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My impression is borne out by marriage and family therapist Dr. Marty Klein, award-winning author of seven books, including *Sexual Intelligence*. Dr. Klein told me, “When outsiders look at a relationship, they have no idea what’s salient to each partner. It could be a sense of humor, money, sophistication, whatever. And when people stereotype others in any way, they’re saying, ‘I know what’s important about you without knowing you.’ And that’s just silly.”

Adds psychotherapist Tina B. Tessina, PhD, author of *The Ten Smartest Decisions a Woman Can Make After Forty*, “Age difference is an adolescent worry. When you’re a teenager, an age difference of ten or more years makes a vast difference in your experience and your outlook on life, but, as we get older, life experience and emotional growth even things out. A ten-year or more gap in your ages makes little difference in how well you can conduct your relationship.”

Age is front and center on online dating sites, where it's usually the first thing people mention—both their own and those of the potential partners they want to meet. This may explain why none of the couples I interviewed met this way—because for them age is unimportant. They all met the old-fashioned way, being out in the world.

Various factors in society seem to be encouraging this kind of coupling: feminism, which has made women more independent and less inclined to abide by traditional norms; the increasing liberalization of age norms in general; the emphasis on fitness that helps women stay healthy and energetic at later ages; and the high rate of divorce, which encourages men and women to feel less constrained by cultural “shoulds” and freer to seek partners who will make them happy this time around. An older woman in good shape may seek a partner closer to her level of vigor and less likely to leave her a widow; a younger man may find an older woman more experienced sexually and in life in general. As Peter told Rachel, “Enjoying sex with an older woman is every adolescent boy's dream.”

Age-related problems do sometimes arise when the couples are in diverse life phases. Sherry, for example, is getting ready to retire from her administrative job, while Brian is studying to be a medical assistant. And Carol, a grandmother at 60, whom I interviewed for my book, *The Eternal Garden: Seasons of Our Sexuality*, knew from the beginning that her affair with 28-year-old Ned could not last. “He wanted to get married, he wanted to have children, he wanted all the things he couldn't possibly have with me. So when he first started making passes at me almost a year ago, I resisted. Then I gave in—and everything was perfect between us except our ages,” she told me ruefully. With sadness, Carol eventually ended the relationship, breaking both their hearts.

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Another complication can be the presence of grown children, whose attitudes are likely to differ. There's Carl's daughter who has been calling Marcia “Mom” since her own mother died three years ago. And then there's Laura, who resents the fact that her mother's husband is eleven years younger than her own boyfriend. “I always considered myself very accepting of unconventional relationships,” Laura admits. “But then I started to wonder: When my mother was being friendly to my friends, was she accepting them as my friends or was she just looking for a younger man?” In most of the families I visited, grown children were happy, and maybe in some way relieved, that Mom was happy. They wisely appreciate the fact that with a partner, their mother is less dependent on her children for emotional sustenance.

Patrick, a lawyer who is seeing Judy, a paralegal 15 years his senior, said that some of the things that attracted him to her in the first place was that she dressed nicely, “without trying to look like a teenager.” She looked as if she took care of herself—her hair, her teeth, and her fit figure. He likes her independence, the fact that she doesn't talk about her aches and pains, her openness to listening to the music he likes. And best of all, she laughs at his jokes—even the ones she's heard before. As she told me, “It's okay to be with a younger man—you just have to be sure he's old enough to need reading glasses, so he doesn't notice signs of your age and still thinks you're beautiful.”

Ultimately, for any woman who wants to meet a younger man, the recommendation is the same as it is for any dating connection: Be out there. Go places where you're likely to meet like-minded men, be open to people of diverse backgrounds, be willing to do new things, look your best whenever you go out—even to the post office, IKEA, or Amtrak. As my mother used to say, “You never know who you'll run into.”