

# Chapter 1

## Thoroughly Modern Dating

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Navigating today's dating scene
  - ▶ Knowing how social media fits into dating
  - ▶ Understanding how dating's the same and different for various circumstances
  - ▶ Recording your dating life
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**D**ating is about two people who are interested in one another and want to get together at a specific time and place. We're not talking rocket science here. Since the original fix-up — you know, the one between Adam and Eve (who had the advantage of the ultimate Matchmaker) — dating has evolved. With the familiar United States version less than 100 years old, the guy is often (but not always) the one who asks and pays, and couples still face the tension of possible sex at the end of the evening.

After some recent reflection about the dating scene, I concluded that the last ten or so years have indeed significantly altered the dating landscape, and anything that alters that landscape is certainly going to alter dating behavior. Technology is a tool, but it is a tool that has profound effects on how and what we communicate, how fast and with whom. The original changes had to do with the ubiquity of online dating: its ease, breadth, and nearly universal acceptance in a very short time. That same technology has now given us social networking, tweeting, texting, and the possibility of seeing and being seen instantaneously and universally, ready or not.

In this chapter, I detail those changes precisely. In addition to key points to remember about modern dating, including dating in the age of social networking, I offer special advice and guidance for folks who are in special dating situations. The chapter concludes with tips for using a dating notebook to keep track of what's going on in your love life. I promise no pop quizzes, but you'll be amazed at how much you can learn about yourself and the process.



Dating is the Wimbledon of social intercourse. So you'll be happiest and most successful if you practice, correct mistakes as you go along, and don't expect to make the finals the first time out. Dating should be fun and interesting. If it feels grueling, unpleasant, or exhausting, take a breath and a break and kick back for a while. You're fine by yourself!

## *Scoping Out the Changing Dating World*

Believe it or not, the changes that society, sexuality, entertainment, and technology have engendered in the dating scene can be distilled into a single concept: the need for speed! The entire process has been sped up so that courting behavior no longer functionally exists. Without some real caution the privacy that allows relationships to unfold can be compromised, and Facebook and other social network sites have allowed dating to become an audience participation sport.

### *Speed bumps*

Admittedly, human beings, when it comes to love, have always been impatient — even though Diana Ross, or at least her momma, said, “You can’t hurry love, you just have to wait!” People are under more pressures now to race dating at the speed of light when instead they should be taking very small baby steps, exercising due diligence, and noticing in minute detail what’s going on. Talking with a girlfriend about a groovy guy has been replaced by Googling, checking out Facebook, texting friends, chatting at online forums, blogging, tweeting, and texting. I know that the temptation is to close your eyes and just go for it: Tell the world and let the relationship chips fall where they may. Falling makes it seem much more fun, scary, exciting, and fast, but it’s not very productive if you’re looking for more than just cheap thrills. The exposure factor has never been higher, so the stakes, which have always been high when it comes to matters of the heart (let alone other important organs) are off the charts.

Admittedly, I bear some vague responsibility for this trend: I sort of invented speed dating, accidentally, when I first had a TV show in 2000. Speed dating, as it has evolved, usually gives participants six or seven minutes with each potential date, but I gave them three minutes to convince somebody to go out with them, though I was there to offer encouragement or redirect the Burger King philosophy of life: quick, hot, juicy, and “your way” work in some places, just not in dating! The need for speed is triggered by two equal and opposite tendencies: Ironically, couples are marrying earlier (obvious sexual urgency) and later (increasing fertility concerns), with women feeling that if they wait any longer they won’t have the option of raising children of their own.

### *Changing definitions of marriage: When and why*

Dating has changed. Marriage is changing. Gender roles are changing. There are now more single people living by themselves than ever before in the history of the world. This tendency, coupled with the reality that life expectancy

has nearly doubled in the last century, means that individuals are concluding that they can hold off on marriage or not marry at all. These options mean that dating doesn't necessarily point in the direction of settling down as it once did. Additionally, settling down could mean spending many decades with one person if they marry early, prompting them to proceed cautiously.

Statistically, more people are marrying and remarrying than ever before. Concerns about fertility are balanced by women deciding that they can have children without the benefit of a partner, another factor that has radically altered the dating landscape. Some people who are raising children are dating but have never married and don't intend to do so.

If all this makes your head spin, you are not alone.

## *Fantasies and realities*

In addition to the census, demographic data, and the changing realities, television shows in the 21st century have significantly changed the dating landscape since popular notions perpetuated by the media, while originally fantasy, have a strange habit of morphing into our shared reality. Dating shows have always been a part of the TV landscape, but the bar has been raised, or lowered, depending on how you look at it. In addition to the traditional plethora of inane reality-style TV dating shows, *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?*, *Who Wants to Marry My Dad?*, *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *My Big Fat Ugly Fiancé*, and *Millionaire Matchmaker* have not only made dating a blood sport but convinced the viewing public that hot tubs and serial necking in front of a TV camera are normal aspects of dating. Rules about no kissing on the first date and no sex until the third date seem laughably out of fashion if you watch television. Dating as a competitive sport — complete with body contact and backbiting — has cheapened, degraded, and sexualized dating as well as increased hostility in ways we're not even completely aware of.

Okay, so most of us probably look at television dating shows and say, "That's ridiculous!" We know that a lot of editing and prompting goes on. But we are all influenced, subtly and not so subtly, by these shows in how we date, how we view the opposite sex, our own behavior, and what's acceptable and what's not acceptable. Reality TV has made competition, mean spiritedness, and just plain nastiness part of the social landscape between men and women, making the war between the sexes appear as a bombed-out landscape with few survivors and multiple casualties. And the exposure: I'm not necessarily talking hot tub here. No emotion is too raw, no vulnerability too dangerous, no image too intimate. Chapter 10 may make you believe in civilization, manners, and survival as possible goals in dating for yourself and others.

Adding to the general confusion is the fact that so many television shows suggest that being gay is not only acceptable but hip and nearly ubiquitous, which has certainly increased the potential for at least considering yourself

bisexual, or even more terrifying, having your partner consider him or herself bisexual. Thus dating has become a question of will or won't your date come out of the closet after you get to know each other. Interestingly enough, the statistics on the percentage of the population reported and reporting as gay are unchanged since Alfred Kinsey's studies 60 years ago. Thirty years ago, TV would have you believe no one was gay; today TV would allow you to assume *everybody* is gay.

## ***Terrorism, war, and recession***

The terror attacks of September 11, 2001, have also changed the social landscape forever. In the weeks and months following the destruction of the World Trade Center, the realization that life could be so dramatically fleeting and unpredictable meant folks rethought relationships suddenly: broke up, or committed to one another foregoing — perhaps forever — the sense that we all have all the time in the world. As time goes by, as is always the case, the trauma fades for most, only to be replaced by a devastating recession, double-digit unemployment, a floundering stock market. The point being that as humans are affected by their environment, dating is impacted. In addition, no particular event has consequences that are universal or forever. The human condition is one of change.

Dating in this context has taken on a level of intensity and urgency, with people often looking for instant meaning in an inappropriate way — make my life meaningful, make me happy, make it all worthwhile, pay my bills — a heavy burden indeed for a process that was invented to be light, delicate, and lengthy. Modern dating has always worked best as a carefree, pleasant experience, at least initially, but that evaporated after September 11. Questioning whether coupledness or bringing children into this world was a good idea was offset by the questioning of the willingness to be alone if the world was about to end. The simple question of “Am I willing to spend the rest of my life with you?” has been altered by the fear factor in general and by the threat of terrorism on a daily basis. Intellectually, people may have understood that anybody could perish at anytime, but September 11 drove home that point in a dramatic and tragic way. The years since have provided ample examples of vulnerability — financial, social, and political.

## ***Gadgets, gadgets everywhere!***

Modern technology has had an impact on all aspects of our lives, including dating.

Instant coffee, fast food, and instant gratification have been a part of the social landscape for years, but instant messaging, constant access through cell phones, caller ID, the Internet, texting, YouTubing, tweeting, and Facebooking (see the section “Dating in the Age of Facebook” for more) have made it all too easy to act impulsively and regret at leisure. Moving at the speed of light is sexy for sound waves but scary for human relationships, especially when it comes to dating. Exposure works well for photographs, but relationships often flourish with a bit more privacy, especially in the early stages.

### *Online dating*

Even when Internet dating was in its infancy, I understood the advantages and disadvantages of the computer as cupid. Computers dramatically increase the pool of potential dates, as well as offering options, which is never a bad thing. They give people an opportunity to “meet” people from different social circles, creating the delightful sense that somebody wonderful is just around the corner (as long as one is able to resist endless corner peering). But it’s important to online date for a minimum amount of time before going in-life. My basic rule of thumb is that you should have no more than a couple of e-mail chats and phone calls over a couple of weeks before you meet somebody face to face.

The last time I checked, literally millions of people are online dating. On a more personal level, I know 12 couples who met online (not all of whom have admitted to having allowed a computer to match-make).

Here’s the good news and bad news about online dating (for more info on online dating, see Chapters 5 and 23):

- ✔ The good news about online dating is that it does increase the number of possibilities and can be morale boosting to see how many people are around and available, plus it gives you an opportunity to shop.
- ✔ The bad news is that it can be impersonal, time consuming, and addictive, with a large dollop of fantasy, and there’s a tendency to shop.

Also, people tend not to be 100 percent honest about who they are, what they’re looking for, their weight, age, marital history, their past, their sex, or whether they’re straight or gay, because dating online is fantasy. Married people have been known to pretend that they were single; gays, straight; older people, young; young people, older. But if nothing else, it’ll give you the sense that there are available single people out there.

BEWARE



## An inherent Internet temptation: Long-distance relationships

While I cover this topic later in this chapter (see the section “You’re in a long-distance relationship”), let me emphasize here that the cute soul who lives half the country away cannot be your soul mate — just your fantasy love. And fantasy isn’t what you are seeking in a dating

relationship. If you’re not careful, you’ll end up spending most of your time together in bed, increasing the longing when you’re apart and completely blinding you to the underlying personality, quirks, and soul of your partner. Not a great basis for a long-term relationship at all.

### *Instant messaging*

Instant messaging enables you to get in touch with somebody immediately and talk in real time to that person in a completely artificial while seemingly urgent way. Instant messaging discourages self-censoring, voice clues, or reality-based feedback loop. If you’re angry with one another (or even if you’re not), you may end up typing something that you might not have said if you had a little longer to think it through. Although you do get an instant response, it’s not the same as a conversation, so things like tone, sense of humor, body language, and irony really do get lost in typing. No matter how you cut it, communicating through the Internet really is simply typing. If IMing is seductive, how much more is being able to tweet or send a picture from your cell (please tell me you’re fully clothed) or posting your latest image online?

### *Chat rooms*

Chat rooms are another part of the fantasy world of the Internet. They’ve been known to be very disruptive to relationships even when they’re not suggestive or pornographic, and when they are, Nelly bar the door! And for those of you who view Internet porn as harmless or private, beware! Because Internet porn is so instantly available (it doesn’t even come in a wrapper anymore), it’s right there in front of your keyboard. Women tend to be grievously offended by it, and men tend to think, “What’s the big deal?” If Internet porn is part of your life and you’re dating, you need to think through what you’re really doing here, what your intent is, and what happens if you get caught. Remember that very few things are private anymore.

### *Social networking sites*

I talk in depth about these sites in the upcoming section “Dating in the Age of Facebook.” Just a few words here: For singles, social networking sites are often

a way of checking status (“Are you admitting that we’re dating or not?”). But for folks in relationships, whether married or not, these sites are a way to get in touch without any stigma or even having to admit they’re looking around. The intent seems harmless; after all, parents are often “Friends” on their kids’ Facebook pages, so the whole thing is pretty innocent, right? Sometimes yes, sometimes not so much.



Since you’re reading this book, I assume that you’re single (even though much of the information is also useful for keeping a marriage strong and healthy if you view yourself as dating your spouse). If you aren’t single, social networking sites present a specific challenge. Innocently deciding that you’re going to get in touch with an old love and see how that person’s doing and catch up can turn into something a great deal more disruptive without some caution and discussion with your spouse. I have always encouraged couples to attend reunions together because the temptation of history and nostalgia can be treacherous to navigate. Social networking sites, including Classmates.com, have become reunions without the need for travel.

### *Cell phones*

To say cell phones have become ubiquitous doesn’t begin to explain how common they are. My daughter visited Thailand and was astonished to discover that in a country where the average annual income is \$700, everybody had a cell phone! There are actually more cell phones in the world than toilets. No snide comments, please. Smart phones now mean that there is no need for a camera, laptop, phonebook, gaming system, television, newspaper, magazine, ticker tape (does anybody even know what that means anymore?), or concierge. If we could only teach ’em to give backrubs. But I digress.



## **You need two computers in your life**

Dating is a social activity, while work is about competence. Please don’t use your office computer at work to instant message, visit chat rooms, view pornography, check to see whether the dating site has gotten much action, check out the latest on YouTube, or see who’s friended you. You need to have at least two

computers in your life: one at work and one at home. If you don’t, you may find that you’ll have only the one at home because you’re going to get fired from the one at work. Work is about competence; you’re not being paid to work on your social life.

With regard to dating, the first thing that you should know about a cell phone is that unless you're late for a date or lost and trying to get in touch with your date by cell phone, turn it off! A date is not the time to show how popular you are by letting your date know how many people call you. That's why voicemail was invented. The worst-case scenario I've ever seen was a couple walking down the street and holding hands, while both of them were talking on their cell phones, so you know they weren't talking to each other. This kind of behavior really makes no sense. Cell phone addiction is evidence of that need for speed and urgency thing, always having to be in touch and feeling like you might be missing something if you're not connected. I actually once did a story about countries where a person having sex is more likely to answer his or her cell phone. If this is you, stop! Get up from the couch, go look in the mirror, and ask yourself, "What are my priorities? When did I become so addicted to being that in touch?"

Another problem with cell phones is that everything on your cell phone bill is going to be listed by phone number. Anybody opening your cell phone bill is going to know exactly who you've been talking to, what time of day, and for how long. Caller ID has also made both stalking and cheating something that you really can't do with much success anymore. If you're dating more than one person and being less than candid with either, chances are you'll be busted by your trusty cell bill.

Use the disposability and portability of cells to your advantage by giving out only your cell number until you've had a number of face-to-face dates, and then only when you feel really secure.

## *Money matters*

The days of men expecting or being expected to pay for everything have come and gone. It makes a women look modern, generous, and interested to at least offer and be willing to pick up the check, especially if she's making a decent living. Even if you're making a mere pittance, offer to do what you can — even if it's a picnic in the park! Guys, offering to split the check makes you look cheap — I know she looks generous, but you'll be labeled chintzy. Times are changing — but not overnight.

## *Sex*

Ah, sex. The fundamental things apply, except that we're not quite so basic anymore when you add in earlier puberty, longer lives, sexually transmitted diseases, birth control, hooking up, women being more sexually aggressive and assertive, drugs, and rock and roll. Relax, go at your own pace, always use protection, and remind yourself to be respectful of your partner and yourself since both of you are susceptible to — but not controlled by — hormones. Discuss exclusivity and commitment before hitting the sheets so you're both on the



same page that isn't being blurred by lust. When in doubt, wait! Choice is complicating but eventually empowering!

## *Safety*

Be reasonable and cautious. Dating should be fun — not a walk on the wild side — so make sure you meet a stranger in a public place, make sure someone knows where you are, and use your cell phone initially — don't give your home address or business phone number or address until you know each other really well. Wait to have sex until you feel safe enough to give out a home number. Use protection and floss after meals.

## *Dating in the Age of Facebook*

Facebook is the most successful of the social networking sites and at this moment has over 500 million members and generates more than \$2 billion per year in revenues. Love it or hate it, it's a fact of life in this day and age, and if it's a fact of life, it's a fact of dating life. Facebook hasn't changed how people date, but it has changed who knows what and how soon and for how long. It is a voluntary loss of privacy, which can seem very appealing in the first throws of passion. Is Facebook the place to look for dates? The occasional hookup occurs when people check out their friends' hookups, but by and large, the more established dating sites like Match.com and eHarmony have maintained their position of dominance.

## *Privacy versus publicity: Protection or prudery?*

Most young people still date the old fashioned way — through friends, classes, and social events — and the new old fashioned way — through online dating services. Most use social networking for keeping in touch with friends and sharing information about their social lives rather than for finding mates.

However, the uncensored flow of information certainly affects how we date. It changes what we know (or think we know) about one another and how we get our information; we used to acquire knowledge about a person within a relationship, but now we get it online. In the old days, when you broke up with someone you hoped that person would keep his or her big mouth shut and not badmouth you to friends. Now the relationship news is all online: all the hopes, dreams, idiosyncrasies, pet names, favorite places, silly pictures, ad nauseum. Sharing it all seems fun at the time, but it's hard to have it trailing along behind you for the rest of your life.

## Facebook: Fame, fantasy, familiarity, and me

In the good old days, classy folks had their names in the newspaper three times: when they were born, when they got married, and when they died. At some point, society recognized that we need heroes and that heroes should be celebrated for good deeds and heroic conquests. Even then, famous people understood that the public was going to want to know more about them than they were willing to share, and the tabloids were invented. Folks who wanted to do good realized that fame was sometimes the cost and sometimes the reward of their work.

At some point, somebody decided that fame could be translated into value — sometimes societal, occasionally political, and often financial. The upset came when those same people realized that notoriety for doing bad actually lasted longer than for doing good, and then all bets were off. Daytime television of the '80s and

'90s expanded the concept of evil so that no matter how disreputable one's own behavior, a worse example could be found on television getting nationwide publicity and a free trip to New York and a fancy hotel room to boot. Reality shows became daytime TV on steroids. Some young people today actually aspire to be reality television stars. They have no sense of direction or accomplishment; they just want fame.

Which brings us to social networking sites and the idea of lives lived publicly — again, without restraint, direction, or meaning. The idea obviously appeals not only to the young and inexperienced but also to folks who should probably know better (although the grownups would argue they are only trying to reconnect with old friends, especially those from high school or college). I don't think it's coincidental that this wish to re-experience youth is a ubiquitous (if often unacknowledged) motivating factor.



The perfect storm of Facebook notoriety and celebrity might have been NFL player Jeremy Shockey's 2010 Facebook page contest. Here's what he wrote: "Ok LADIES heres the contest. Post a video on the 'just fans' sectin of my fbk page explaining why u deserve to have me take u on a date 1 nite this offseason...Contest ends sun night 4/18 at 8 pm est...Lets have fun w this so be creative but just be careful its not too inappropriate where fbk deletes it!! Good luck!!" Shockey claims that he wasn't looking to pick up a girl; he was just doing it for the fans. But did some young woman post a video that contained her heart and soul just to be rejected, publicly humiliated, or (even if chosen) treated like a fan? Nothing posted in response to such a "contest" would be private. Obviously, this is an extreme example of "dating" on Facebook, or is it? The assumption that Shockey was looking to meet someone to date isn't so far-fetched, yet in reality has nothing to do with his motives whatsoever. You might argue that this was merely a publicity stunt, and I wouldn't disagree, but you begin to see the issues.



Social networking sites are about connecting in a public way. Most dating is about connecting in a private way.

## *Avoiding the nostalgia trip trap*

Facebook has had the largest effect on dating behavior among those who ought not to be dating at all: the married and nominally committed. The idea of keeping up with classmates has morphed from the innocent every-five-year reunion option with (hopefully) a bored spouse in tow, to a private, intimate opportunity to catch up, complain, fantasize, and generally disrupt ongoing relationships without having to confront the consequences 'til disaster has struck.

Tracking old loves on Facebook shouldn't be a back door to infidelity, and that's the problem: There is a veneer of high school innocence that allows for predators, unexplored motives, and impulses that are facilitated by the extreme anonymity on one end (sitting alone in front of a blank screen) and the extreme intimacy and familiarity of a posting on something as universally available as the Internet. Yeah, I know about private chats, but they require opting out of the default setting and aren't the norm for social networking sites.

## *Computer common sense*

Let's face it: These days people are getting used to exposing everything online, including their physical locations, which can be shared using a GPS-like monitoring service that can be downloaded to a smart phone. Given the fact that nearly one-third of Facebook users access the site via their cell phones, *Katie, bar the door!* because everyone can now find Katie's door easily and directly. (If you haven't heard that expression before, it means "be cautious"!) Users admit there are privacy issues with this smart phone app but continue to use it anyway. Which is exactly my point. Folks, use a little common sense here. Realize that if you wouldn't want your parents to know or have the info on the front page of your local paper, you don't put it on a social networking site. Period.



I am not a Facebook hater: I'm just saying that it's important to see Facebook in the way businesses see Facebook — as an opportunity to advertise a product to a huge, undifferentiated audience and then be able to focus on a particular demographic. It's a lovely sales tool if you're selling toothpaste but a bit more problematic if what you're advertising (selling) is yourself to a large, undifferentiated audience. As a seller of toothpaste, I don't really care if you've lied about your age, your sex, or your motives since there is no harm to befall me either way. If I'm looking for love, companionship, or involvement, trust becomes a huge issue and there is no way of sorting that out.

A documentary made in 2010 called *Catfish* deals with just such a situation, in which a lonely married woman constructs not only an imaginary profile but a whole family including an 8-year-old daughter, a 19-year-old sister, cousins,

and friends. The profile entices a smart, educated 28-year-old photographer to travel cross country to meet a woman he has fallen in “love” with on Facebook — only to find she doesn’t exist. His brother just happens to be a videographer who documents the pain involved with both his brother and the sad, lonely woman and her husband, who has been completely unaware of the deception.

Personal information is the coin of the Facebook realm, whether for advertising toothpaste or your new hairdo, and the fact that a blank computer screen encourages intimacy has been repeatedly and well documented. “Check out my Facebook page” has become the new calling card. (The latest numbers suggest that people spend three times longer checking out their Facebook account and contacts than they spend on all of Google services *combined*, including YouTube, Gmail, and Google news.) The fact that there is a community on the page gives you a sense of safety, but it’s illusory. In the old days you could check out a relative or a classmate and in theory you can do that here, but what are you asking and whom are you asking and do you really want to be the topic of discussion among strangers? If the answer is yes, can we talk?

## *Being aware of the pitfalls of “friending” a date*

For those of you who think that “friending” a potential date on Facebook is a way of getting to know one another, realize that doing so actually increases jealousy and a sense of over-familiarity that can doom a relationship and take away some of the mystery in the early days of dating, according to a study in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*.

Checking out Facebook encourages over-analyzing without the option of time and space to reflect. After a date, you may think about each other, but you shouldn’t be sorting through pictures, trying to decipher old photos, or checking out what your date is doing online. You shouldn’t be trying to second-guess who blabs first about the relationship by changing their status or figuring out whether this date is following a pattern (doing what’s been done in previous relationships); those kinds of comparisons are odious and painful. And who needs to be confronted with the thumbs up or down of other FF (Facebook Friends)?

## *Dealing with Specialized Dating Situations*

The purpose of *Dating For Dummies* is to give you the basics on dating, but there are a lot of situations that make the dating experience a bit different for certain folks. The point of this section is to explain the things that can impact specialized dating situations. Find your special definition and then integrate those rules with the basic rules for a custom fit.

### *One of you is a lot older or younger*

In theory, an age difference is the thing over which you have the least control in a relationship. It's the given from day one and shouldn't matter all that much. The younger one of the partners, the more any age difference matters. High school freshmen dating seniors makes parents nervous, and that's only three years. The difference between a 15-year-old and an 18-year-old may mean a jail sentence, whereas the difference between a 70-year-old and a 73-year-old is irrelevant, so part of the issue with age is the starting point.

The issues between age-challenged partners fall into six distinct categories.

#### *Tradition and actuarial tables*

Traditionally, in our society and many others, older men marry younger women, which perpetuates the “daddy” school of relationships — that a man should be older, wiser, smarter, better educated, stronger, more powerful, richer, and, in general, higher on the food chain.

As women act more responsible and mature, these distinctions become less relevant and politically viable, but the tradition remains. There is a wonderful movie called *Harold and Maude* in which an 80-year-old Ruth Gordon is pursued by an amorous 18-year-old Bud Cort. No, that wasn't a typo. The woman is 80; her suitor, 18. The movie was made as satire to demonstrate how rigid our rules are for dating, and it's as relevant today as when it was made 40 years ago. (Watch it on Netflix; you'll love it.)

## Tradition, tradition: “I do” (and “I don’t”)

The divorce rate has remained steady at around 40 percent. (The 50 percent statistic often bandied about was a computational error that was admitted in 2005 because it divided the number of marriages by the number of divorces without taking population fluctuations into account.)

But folks are still marrying like crazy — at a rate of 2.5 million per year in the United States.

However, people are marrying later: The average age for a man’s first marriage is 27; for women it is 24. The average age of remarriage after divorce is 42 for men and 39 for women.

Movies and tradition aside, age can and does make a difference. If we all mated on a logical basis, women would marry men at least seven to ten years younger so that everybody would end up living their lives out together since men’s life expectancy is still that much less than women’s.

### *Sexual viability*

One of the major drawbacks of large age differences deals with the age-old problem of childbearing years. An older woman who is through childbearing with a younger man who decides he wants children is going to create chaos, as is a younger woman who wants children with an older man who doesn’t. (I recently read a news story about a woman who gave birth at 79. That’s not a typo: 79 years of age. Truly terrifying. Science and technology are offering all sorts of possibilities heretofore unknown. Can you say Viagra?)

Since we know that men can procreate until their last rattly little breath, and women (usually) only for the years between about 13 and 50, men who are interested in procreating should choose women in this age bracket. Of course, most states appropriately frown on dating between adults and children, so if we wipe out the lower end of the spectrum up to 18 or so, we’re talking viable dating partners between the ages of 18 and 50. Biologically, we know that birth defects are more common at both ends of the spectrum, with both the very young and the very old eggs (not women, just eggs), so we’re actually talking ages 20 to 40 here, more or less.

Many men on second marriages decide that they can trade a 40-year-old in for the proverbial two 20-year-olds, which makes some biological sense. But a 40-year-old man with a 20-year-old woman will become a 60-year-old man with a 40-year-old wife, and if you go on to the next section, you will see the potential problem with that formula.

### *Sexual compatibility*

Sexually, men are at their peak at 18, women at around 40 or so. So if sexual compatibility were the issue, women should marry significantly younger men. A woman named Anne Cummings, known as the Randy Granny (a Brit

no less), was one of the early “cougar” dating proponents. She actually advocates this kind of pairing — although not necessarily marriage — so that young men can learn about sex from an experienced partner who is less likely to get pregnant and more likely to be sensible rather than lust driven.

If sex were all there was to it, maybe. (In case you’re gasping for breath here, remember that a 40-year-old man with an 18-year-old woman would be considered a stud.) Beyond sex is a wider look at biology.

### ***Health***

These days, when people are taking better care of themselves and living longer and more productive lives, the idea of an age difference resulting in obligatory nursing duties at the end of one partner’s life has diminished. I refuse to deal with the idea of serial marriages here: the idea that you marry one person for one stage of your life and another for another. Since none of us is able to see the future, in theory, it is possible that the older person in a relationship may outlive the younger, but it is wise to at least consider issues of health, energy, and life stages when dating.

### ***Common interests***

One of the often overlooked issues of major age differences is what the two of you have in common, not only in terms of life experiences, but friends, perspectives, and whether one of you thinks that the Beatles are bugs or that Nine Inch Nails refers to a Chinese emperor’s hands.

These differences at the outset of a relationship can seem charming and fun and don’t have to be divisive if the two of you can find some areas of communality to share that are likely to last the length of the relationship. But be aware of pitfalls that can be predicted but that aren’t always initially obvious. I know one couple with major age differences who ran into trouble when he retired and wanted to play and she was just hitting her career peak and wanted to spend a lot of time at work.

### ***Personal preference***

Issues of control and crushes on mommy figures or daddy figures are going to enter into the age equation. Obviously, all other things being equal, similarity of ages probably makes the most sense, but all other things are never equal. People are as individual as snowflakes and likely to be just as flaky when it comes to matters of the heart. Be aware of the advantages and disadvantages, the potential fun stuff and pitfalls of major differences in birth years. If one of you is ten or more years older, you’re talking half a generation here. At 80, who cares? But at 18, everyone will.

Fortunately — or maybe unfortunately — we don’t fall in love with birth certificates but with flesh and blood individuals. If you’re looking to date someone who is significantly older or younger than you are, ask yourself why and whether it makes any long-term sense. Are you looking to shock or advertise,

brag or control? As long as you know what you're doing, you'll get no argument from me, but make sure you've taken your own emotional pulse here; I don't care how old you are.

## *You're different*

In theory, the more similar you are, the more you have in common and the easier the relationship, assuming you can avoid competition. I view relationships as Velcro: The more points of contact that the two of you have with one another, the more likely the relationship is to survive the storm-tossed seas of the tempest of life together. The more points of contact — religion, ethnicity, education, social class, and community of interests — the more likely the relationship will survive. Does this mean that you have to date only people who have the same religion, ethnicity, social status, education, or income you do? Of course not. But it means that you need to be aware of the differences, their importance, and the ramifications of the differences if the two of you are going to survive together.

Some foolish souls believe that dating is all about soul mates. You've undoubtedly figured out that I am certainly not one of them. Working on the assumption that opposites attract and they aggravate the daylights out of one another, I explore some of the more common differences. This is one area that may be obvious or subtle, clear or obscure, depending on your own convictions.

### *Religion*

In theory, in the early stages of dating, religion can be finessed and therefore can be benign, especially if you both assume the relationship is pretty casual. But as the two of you get to know each other better and begin thinking on a long-term basis, religious differences may begin to be disruptive.

First, let's be painfully honest. If you feel strongly that you will absolutely *not* marry outside of your religion, *do not date outside of your religion!* The heart often has its own rhythms and paths and doesn't really understand casual dating. (This is one of the areas where niche online dating sites serving singles in particular religions can be beneficial.)

On the other hand, if you have a preference but no strong commitment and are willing to entertain long-term involvement with someone practicing another faith, try taking turns going to each other's synagogue or mosque or church, take turns sleeping in while the other trots off to services, or schedule golf dates or brunch while your friend is in synagogue. If the two of you can tolerate compromise while dating, you may be able to do so in the future, at least until the wedding or children require more clarity.

You can and should discuss religious differences instead of making the assumption that the differences will go away. Depending on how important religion is to you or your date, there are multiple possibilities. If your two



religions are not far apart, you may want to experience each other's religious customs and festivals as a pleasant part of getting to know one another. Or maybe you'll find a third mutually accepted religion. On the other hand, you may find absolutely no room for compromise — meaning that neither one of you will convert (actually or informally) or attend the other's place of worship. Even if the two of you are relaxed about your religious differences, remember that your parents may or may not be as open minded, so be prepared to explain the situation to them.

### ***Ethnicity***

Living in a country that prides itself on being a melting pot means that different ethnicities are common almost everywhere you go — reflected in jokes, sitcoms, and songs: the Irish man and the Italian woman, the French man and the German woman, all the way back to Pocahontas and John Smith. The Internet, colleges, big cities, and bars are all venues in which different ethnicities can meet, greet, and hook up. Again, if you're certain that you're unwilling to marry outside your tribe, do yourself and everyone else a favor and don't convince yourself that it's okay to date but not marry outside of your own ethnic group. This is a prescription for heartache for all concerned, including a whole lot of problems with your parents.

The lure of the exotic may be initially attractive, but don't overlook the potential fallouts, including traditions and inborn racial conflict, because even though the two of you may feel very much in love, the people who are in your sphere of influence (your family, friends, neighborhood, grandparents, and country of origin) are going to influence you. To what extent is not entirely obvious, but it is something to be aware of.

We've been talking about differences that you were born with that you may take for granted; the next three issues that I'm going to talk about are ones that you achieve.

### ***Social status***

I know that the United States pretends that it has no class system. If you believe that, I have a bridge to sell you. The good news about class in this society is that it doesn't go back very far, probably only a couple hundred years, as opposed to other countries where it goes back thousands of years. The idea that somebody comes from a completely different background socioeconomically than you do and has been in that situation for generation after generation very well may influence how you view friendships, vacations, money, child rearing, naming your children, and traditions. The notion that money is the great leveler — even more so than love — is the stuff of media pipe dreams, but the notion doesn't work very well once the cameras stop rolling.

Be aware that people have all sorts of different expectations depending on their socioeconomic background. I am not suggesting that people from different socioeconomic backgrounds not marry, but you need to understand that there are going to be repercussions, perhaps within the relationship

eventually, and certainly within the general society. I have no particular reason to uphold the social order by making sure that people of a certain socioeconomic class marry only one another. But be aware that there are different expectations, including whether it's true love or greed, the ability to fit in, community acceptance, and being snubbed at Thanksgiving.

### ***Education***

As a radio psychologist, I often remind callers that, traditionally, American women marry men who are father figures: older, wiser, taller, richer, and better educated than they are. While that is changing, historically it certainly has created some problems, with men feeling that they outgrew their wives, even those wives who may have put them through school.

Although more subtle than race, religion, or age, differences in education in the long run may be divisive because one of you is going to feel inferior to the other, and that inferiority may make you defensive or angry or argumentative. The nice thing about living in this country is that education is available, but it may not solve everything. Don't misunderstand me: As a seriously educated woman, I am a great fan of education. But face it: Some really smart people aren't well-educated. So having matching degrees isn't necessarily a requirement for compatibility.

What is crucial is the respect you have for one another's intelligence. However, your friends and associates can complicate things. I have a friend who is a lawyer, and her boyfriend is a high school dropout. They're having massive problems — not within the relationship itself but because he refuses to accompany her anywhere and keeps referring to her friends as “those lawyer jerks.” He feels intimidated and defensive, which translates into rudeness and unpleasantness toward them, and in return she is defensive. This difference can definitely undermine a relationship.

### ***Income***

Our society has been set up to accept the fact that as men got wealthier, they could get more beautiful — not necessarily brighter, but more beautiful — younger women. As women have entered the work force and become more successful, the fact that a woman earns more than her partner is no longer remarkable. We know that while these well-heeled women may be thought of as desirable and sexy while dating, once married, the relationship can be threatened by the very financial discrepancy that was enchanting during courtship. This situation is much more disruptive than the converse, which is much more in line with the expectation that the man provides for the woman. When the woman makes more money, the man may initially feel unmanly, which will result in problems in the bedroom as well as the kitchen, living room, and garden and may lead to arguments due to his need to “prove” himself.

I'm not suggesting that women hide their income or their power, especially in second marriages in which women have accumulated (through hard work, inheritance, or a divorce settlement) vast sums of money. That's why prenups

were invented. If the two of you have a lot of positive things going for you, a difference in income doesn't have to be destructive, but it will always be disruptive. Does this mean women are limited to guys who currently or will eventually out-earn them? Absolutely not, but it means the two of you need to be aware of the long-term turbulence and even the short-term upset that this inadvertent challenging of the social norm offers.

## *You're gay*

I am one of those people who thinks that we can and should be defined on the totality of our being rather than our race or hair color or height or sex or religion. I believe that all of us would have much easier lives if we could choose who would turn us on (the person who is nice and is crazy about us, our next-door neighbor, our mom's best friend's offspring, the boss's son or daughter, our best friend). Unfortunately, that's not how sex works. We can choose our behavior, not our feelings. It has always seemed unnecessarily limiting to define a person's entire life on the basis of who turns them on. I still opt for sex as being a private behavior, and in the long run, I care more about a person's manners or breath than I do about their sexual preference unless they happen to turn me on.

One of the assumptions of this book is that you are straight, meaning heterosexual. However, gays and straights face many of the same issues with respect to dating.

In my years as a psychologist both on and off the air, I have dealt with lots of folks who were in or out of the closet, gay or straight, and I am struck by the similarities in their dating problems, not the differences. If you are a gay person reading this book and feel that something I have said as a universal statement doesn't apply to you because you're gay, please write and let me know. I may include it in a future edition or write a new book or explain to you why I disagree.

My only real warning here is know thyself. If you're gay, don't date straight people, and if you're straight, don't date someone who's gay. You're both just asking for heartache, and there are enough disappointments in life without a need to go out of your way to ask for that kind of trouble.

If you're muttering, "What about bi's?" I would say get a therapist or a piece of paper or a mirror and get your act together and decide who you are and what you want. Wanting it all is okay; trying to have it all is often both greedy and futile. Sometimes you have to decide the real you: chocolate or vanilla, Christian or Jew, New York or California (all of which you can change); male or female (which can be changed with great difficulty); or straight or gay (a preordained biological orientation like curly hair or left-handedness that you can't change).

## *You're in a long-distance relationship*

You meet someone on vacation or at a friend's wedding, and it's instant fireworks. Will it work? Maybe, maybe not. But if you're more than an hour away and see each other less than a couple times a month, you're talking fantasy. Long-distance relationships can certainly be fun but shouldn't be confused with a reality-based relationship, which is the only way to have sanity in your love life.

Sometimes a couple who has been together for a long time has to be apart for a specified length of time: One has to finish school, a military commitment has to be fulfilled, a job transfer looms. If the two of you have been together for a year or more, you may be able to sustain the relationship over a period of certainly not more than a year (otherwise, you will have been apart longer than together, and people change over a period of a year). Work out the ground rules (basically, don't ask and don't tell about other social engagements, and *don't* commit to one another until the end of the separation).

If you've been together six months to a year, you're best served to believe in fate. Plan to get together at the end of the separation and see what's what. But a lot of visits, if they're less than weekly, are likely to prolong the agony without offering much in return.

If you're sexual, you're both likely to feel used and spend most of the time in bed — without acknowledging how both of you are growing and changing. Relationships that get stuck like a bug in amber are quite brittle. If you're not having sex, it will be easier to maintain the distance, but what about the intimacy?

In general, lots of time apart is hard on a relationship. It doesn't mean you're doomed, but it means things will be and feel different when you reunite. Why not start over then, without ghosts and baggage, secrets or lies, and see where both of you are rather than having to finesse or pretend?

## *You're involved in an office romance*

Americans believe in the *M.A.S.H.* philosophy of life, which suggests that we can have all our goodies in one place: love, family, friends, work, rivalries, food, housing, recreation, flirtations. Nonsense. *M.A.S.H.* is a TV show that hasn't even had original episodes since 1983 (though it thrives in reruns). *The Office* is a more modern cautionary tale. While there is a certain efficiency to the idea of finding someone to love at work (think of how much you'll have in common), what is most likely is that one or both of you will lose your jobs.

Work is about competence, and dating is about compatibility. They have very little to do with one another, and if you think no one will know, think of how obvious it was when that secretary over in Accounting was having an affair

with his boss. *Everybody knows*. If for no other reason, keeping your work and love life separate is a good idea so that, if one goes sour, you can throw yourself into the other. If you've got the hots for someone at work, wait until one of you leaves or transfers, and trade phone numbers at the going-away party, unless it would be a long-distance relationship. (And if that's the case, just confess your crush, wax nostalgic, and chalk the whole thing up to what might have been until one of you moves back into the area.)

## *You're a single parent*

Nowadays, nearly two-thirds of all children are being raised in single-parent households, which means there are a lot of parents dating. The number of single mothers (9.8 million) has remained constant (84 percent of children living with one parent are living with mom), while the number of single fathers is growing: Men now comprise one-sixth of the nation's single parents.

As if dating weren't complicated enough, having your child ask *you* what time you're going to be home adds agony to embarrassment. By the way, what time *do* you plan to be home?



Let me make one thing absolutely clear: Young kids don't get dating, and neither do older ones when it comes to a parent. Trying to combine parenting with early stage dating is like walking a tightrope while wrestling a dolphin: highly slippery, inadvisable, and just plain dangerous. Take a look at the possibilities:

- ✔ You like your date, your date likes you, the kids hate your date: Problem.
- ✔ You like your date, your date likes you, the kids love your date: Problem (believe it or not).
- ✔ You like your date, your date hates you, the kids hate your date: No problem.
- ✔ You like your date, your date hates you, the kids love your date: Problem.
- ✔ You like your date, your date likes you, your date hates your kids: Problem.
- ✔ You like your date, your date hates you, your date loves the kids: Big problem.
- ✔ You hate your date, your date likes you, the kids hate your date: No problem.
- ✔ You hate your date, your date hates you, the kids hate your date: No problem.
- ✔ You hate your date, your date hates you, the kids love your date: Medium-sized problem.

I think those are all the possibilities, but the point is that the only times kids and dating aren't a problem is when everybody hates everybody. And best-case scenario — when there is a genuine love-fest going on — can still be trouble, since this book only covers the first six to nine months of dating and lots of things change. I haven't even mentioned trouble with exes and the confused roles between dating and parenting for you.

It's a common problem that's not going to go away, but you are well advised to keep your kids and your dates separate until you're sure of your date, which takes a while because:

- ✓ Introducing a date too soon can make kids either clingy or anxious or both, and unhappy kids do a lot of *acting out*, which is psycho-babble for acting like creeps: hanging up when your date calls, telling your ex, hitting, crying, clinging, telling the teacher your date hit you or the child or kicked the dog . . . you get the point.
- ✓ Kids get attached and don't really get hanging out for a while to see how things work.
- ✓ The adults need time to see if they're strong enough to be together before they test the do-the-kids-like-me waters.
- ✓ Adult sexuality can be really confusing for kids of any age. (Do you like the idea of your parents "doing it"? — and look at how old you are!)



This doesn't mean you have to be celibate or put yourself on house arrest until the kids are married, but you *do* have to be discreet and really good at juggling time and responsibilities, and have reliable babysitters at the ready.

## *You're dating your best friend's ex*



You and your best friend share lots of secrets and have lots in common, but an ex shouldn't be one of them. I don't advise dating your best friend's ex unless it's been a long, long time, and even then, I guarantee your friend is going to feel you're being disloyal.

The Everly Brothers had a song about *bird dogging* (which is dating your friend's date), and the song, not the concept, was a big hit. I know it makes some kind of logical sense. After all, you and your friend do share a similar sense of humor, a fondness for James Bond flicks, and a willingness to cover for each other when necessary, but sharing a love interest, even serially, only works in Hollywood movies, and even Hollywood admits it can get pretty sticky.

You don't have to believe me. Just think about how you'd feel if your best friend started dating one of your exes. Are they talking about you? Comparing notes? What if you come in second? If nothing else, if your friend starts dating your ex, you'll either end up saying, "See, I told you so" or feeling that your friend has something you don't . . . like your ex.

If you're bound and determined to date your friend's ex:

- ✔ **Wait at least a year or so after the break-up.** Any earlier, you're talking rebound: You'll lose a date, a friend, and your mind.
- ✔ **Don't ask permission.** The first date can be kept quiet (after all, who knows how things will go?), but if it seems to have some potential, tell, don't ask. Just explain that you bumped into one another and plan to go out for coffee (you can finesse that first date), but keep the details to yourself, whether it's going very well or very badly.
- ✔ **Ask yourself, "Is it worth the friendship?"** That will very likely be the cost.

## *You're dating your relative's ex*

This is just a specialized and potentially even more toxic case of dating a best friend's ex. I actually know a man who married the sister of his girlfriend of seven years. You can imagine family Thanksgivings are more than a little strained.

Again, if the two of you feel star-crossed, at least wait a while, and then don't share the details but do tell the relative before that person finds out via the family grapevine. If at all possible, avoid this plight. If you can't avoid it, make sure that your motives are pure, and you're not acting out of some ancient feud or competition.

## *You're a senior*

As we get older and wiser, dating should get easier, but I'm not sure it ever really does. If you're a senior (65 or older), this book may be particularly useful to figure out what's changed and what's the same old story.

If you're divorced, it's a good idea to keep your kids in the dark for as long as possible. Don't wait until the wedding or the funeral, but reading the section on single parent dating applies regardless of the age of the "child."

If you're widowed, don't be surprised to find your offspring fairly resistant to a new date. When it comes to our parents, we're kinda frozen in amber. If Mom and Dad can't be together, then the survivor can be a living monument to how things used to be. Besides, if Mom or Dad is dating, she or he may be having sex . . . yech. . . .

If you've never been married, ask yourself why not and what you're looking for now (see the following Part I chapters for information on how to find out about yourself and what you want).

Having said all that, there are several huge advantages to senior dating:

- ✔ Women don't have to worry about getting pregnant. The woman cited earlier in this chapter was and is incredibly unusual. You do, however, still need to use protection to avoid STDs, which are a problem at any age.
- ✔ Men don't have to worry about borrowing the family car.
- ✔ You don't have to ask your parents what time you have to be home (although you may end up answering to your kids).
- ✔ You don't have to worry about your braces locking when you kiss (although you may have to worry about your canes knocking).
- ✔ Long-term commitment has a whole different meaning.
- ✔ You can shop together for eternal housing — a really long-term commitment.
- ✔ You don't have to worry what religion to raise the kids in.
- ✔ One word: Viagra.

## You're married



I put this specialized situation last because if you're married, you cannot, must not, dare not date — or I'll haunt you. Got it? Good. If you don't want to be married, get a lawyer and a divorce, but under no circumstances are you allowed to date.

You are married unless you are divorced or widowed. Period. Separated? Still married. Staying together for the sake of the kids? Still married. Getting through the holidays? Still married. Waiting for the kids to go off to college (your collie to die, your parents to move to Florida, your stock option to be exercised)? *Still married*. If you're married, you don't date, and if your date is married, don't date your date.

Not only can you not date one another if either of you is married, but you have to wait one year until the divorce — let me repeat, the *divorce* — is final, *one full year*. Not the separation, not when sex stopped, not when one got sick. (If separation was the same as divorce, they would both be the same word, “sivorce” or “deparation” or something. Two different words mean two different things.)

If there is any question in your mind as to why waiting a full year is terribly necessary and important, read Chapter 19, and it will become painfully clear. I know the temptation is common and strong, but resist. Your relationship and your soul and your conscience will be the better for it.

If you feel your relationship is beyond redemption, so be it. If you're not sure, you may want to try dating your spouse. For real. Remind yourself that at some point, you couldn't keep your hands off each other, and it may be that by following along in the footsteps described here you can rekindle and



rediscover not only what made your spouse terrific, but yourself as well. What do you have to lose?



Not only is dating your spouse allowed, but it's encouraged. If you spend the time and effort to woo one another, to pretend that it's a first date, to spend the time and energy that is implied and detailed in the early chapters of this book, I guarantee your marriage will benefit. If we took a job and then never worked hard at it or changed any of our work habits and did the same thing day after day, year after year, we would get bored and fired. So don't treat your marriage that way. Date each other if you are married.

## *Keeping a Dating Notebook*

Throughout this book, I include exercises you can do to find out more about yourself and what you want, as well as suggestions for noting your feelings and impressions. Treat this as both an opportunity and a project to find out more about yourself.

Buy yourself a spiral notebook and a pen and write down specifics. (Be sure to write in ink because it's useful to go back and see what you were saying as opposed to erasing it, if you didn't like it, because your musings can be a work in progress, a reflection of who you were and who you're becoming.) Instead of writing in this text (I still haven't recovered from the fact that my second grade teacher would never let me so much as underline in my book), I want you to provide your own notebook. Keep it with *Dating For Dummies*, but make sure no one else can casually pick it up and be privy to thoughts you might want to keep a bit more private. (Actually, as long as you bought this book, you're welcome to underline in it as you see fit. But a separate notebook is necessary as well.)

### **The undivorced**

This is an increasingly growing category of people who are not living together but not yet divorced. I don't care if your prospective date has been separated for decades; the person is still not divorced, and believe me, there's a reason. Do you really need the aggravation of finding out why?

A lot of folks who are really commitment-shy find the limbo of separated but not divorced

quite comfortable because it means they are unable to commit to someone new — "I'm not able to marry you because technically, I'm still married." Do you really want to take up with someone who is unable to fish or cut bait, either be married or be divorced? Not a great idea and often a great recipe for heartache down the road.

When you write something down, include information that will help you remember who you were at the time of notation, your feelings, your job, your wishes and dreams, as well as the date, the time of day, who you were dating at the time, how old you were, and where you were living. This info can really be an ongoing log (sort of like Captain Kirk StarDate log as if your dating is entering a strange, new world, encountering exotic new species!).

I know you're thinking, why not blog or keep the record online? But there truly is value in using the old fashioned route: You get privacy, as well as reflection, and no need to reboot.