



“Natalie,” a widow, is worried about being lonely on Valentine’s Day.

“I’m in my ‘70s, attractive, enthusiastic, fun,” says the woman, whose name isn’t really Natalie and who wants to remain anonymous. “I had a really happy marriage and want to find a man with whom to share my life while I am still healthy. I’m not sure how to proceed. The casserole brigade won’t work for me — I don’t cook.”

Natalie represents a growing number of people living longer than ever before.

“During the 20th century, the number of persons in the United States under age 65 has tripled — and the number aged 65 or over has jumped by a factor of 11,” according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And those over 85 are the fastest growing group. In addition, after age 84, women outnumber men 5 to 2.

That fact led Natalie to tell her ailing husband, “You have to fight to stay alive. You are demographically irreplaceable.”

The fact that people are living longer partially explains the conclusion

reached in AARP The Magazine that we are in the midst of a loneliness epidemic. A survey of its members indicated that “35 percent are chronically lonely ... compared with 20 percent ... a decade ago.”

Robert Putnam, a Harvard professor and author of “Bowling Alone,” attributes the loneliness epidemic to the decline of civic engagement. One antidote to loneliness is to become involved in community activities, volunteering or learning something new. In our area, you can identify such opportunities by linking to the Gulf Coast Community Foun-

dation’s website, [Youdbeperfectforthis.org](http://Youdbeperfectforthis.org). For others, the solution can be the company of someone of the opposite sex.

#### Looking for romance?

Our stereotypes of aging men and women often include going out for shuffleboard, watching TV and early bird specials, but not a lot of first dates, romance or sexual encounters.

In the article entitled “Never Too Old” in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, reporter Deborah Todd writes that “seniors — are looking for companionship, and many are looking for a partner to spend the rest of their life with.” It could be about a meaningful connection, which often includes sex or physical intimacy, she says. It could be about comfort and security, a close friendship, even marriage. But whatever the particular outcome, the importance of having a special relationship beyond close friends and family is important for many.

AARP’s “Lifestyles, Dating and Romance: A Study of Midlife Singles” pin-

points some gender differences: Women want companionship, and men want companionship and sex.

Mary Ann, a widow and friend of mine who lives in Maryland, seemed perfectly content working, volunteering and coordinating a widows' group in her over-55 community. She was retired and gradually spent more time visiting children and grandchildren. Like so many new widows, the last thing she had on her mind was entering into another serious relationship.

Mary Ann kept in touch with a friend who had introduced her to her late husband. Last October, that friend invited her to Hilton Head for a six-day visit. Her friend didn't mention that she also had invited a widower, John, and another couple.

Soon after the vacation, John called Mary Ann to confess, "I'm too old to waste time, so if you're interested, I would love to see you again." They arranged for John to visit. Mary Ann described how nervous she was. To try and hide her anxiety, she kept jumping up and down, getting things from the kitchen and taking walks. The weekend was followed by many more as they developed a nice friendship.

"I felt I could trust him, and we both shared similar values. He would kiss me on the cheek, with an occasional hug," she says. "The turning point came several months later when we were both invited to a party. That night he gave me a romantic kiss. I have not had feelings like this since I was a teenager."

Mary Ann was not looking for romance, but she is absolutely thrilled to have found "true love" at this stage in her life. The relationship escalated; they became engaged in May and married in November.

Mary Ann met through a close friend. But what about all those people having

trouble meeting others? How do they do it? How can they strategize to increase their chances of making connections?

The bottom line is that people meet in all kinds of expected and unexpected ways. They meet through shared activities, at the checkout counter of a grocery store, in an elevator, at a political event, a dinner party, in a retirement community, on Facebook and online.

One woman, a longtime friend, met someone her daughter worked with.

"I never expected to meet someone special and certainly did not think my daughter would be my matchmaker!"

No matter how you meet, it usually involves networking.

Malcolm Gladwell, author of "The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Difference," underscores the importance of connecting through "strong ties," where you would find jobs (or dates) through personal connections, and through "weak ties," with people you barely know. Both are critical. But if you are only using strong ties, you probably already know the same people. It is through weak ties that you encounter new people and groups.

### Some examples

Barbara and Bill, not their real names, of Sarasota knew each other when they were both married to other people. Then they each lost their spouses within the same year. And, coincidentally, Barbara had just moved into the retirement community where Bill and his wife had lived. Before long, they started eating dinner together. Bill wanted to get serious. Barbara wasn't as sure. As time went on, Barbara became equally committed. She feels very lucky.

"All we do is play," she says. "I feel like a teenager all over again." Bill adds, "When my wife died, I felt so alone." These days, neither of them feels alone.

Alice, not her real name, met a man while waiting in the lottery line at the grocery store.

"Want to go halves if one of us wins?" she asked. When she actually won \$11, they split it and went to Starbucks for coffee. They discovered they lived two blocks from each other in Sarasota, and both had owned horses.

They exchanged phone numbers. She called him and they went to the Italian movie, "Do We Have a Pope?" They held hands, and she loved it. Then, when they drove home, he kissed her and gave her a full-body hug. She told herself, "Oh my God, I am not ready for this." And she has not seen him since.

For those who have not met someone either by chance or intention, it may be time to go online. Many, but by no means all, older people have reservations about the Internet.

As one friend, who chose to remain anonymous, said, "Going online has a negative connotation. It implies that you could not get someone on your own. And you really don't know the background of those you are meeting."

When she finally succumbed to her friend's encouragement to go online and registered with J Date, she found it amusing how people presented themselves in unrealistic ways. Short people say they are tall; fat people underestimate their weight. There is a great deal of exaggeration.

She decided to buck the trend and told the truth about her age and weight on her profile. She wrote that she likes to travel first class. She received many messages from 30-year-olds thinking she was rich and would take care of them. Such is the problem with being so honest and, perhaps, with going online.

Despite her reservations, she met someone of a reasonable age who, she said, "looked stylish." She arranged to

## resources



♥ **Dr. Pepper Schwartz**, AARP's relationships expert Dr. Pepper Schwartz, left, offers advice for older couples and singles about love, sex, marriage and dating. [www.aarp.org/relationships/experts/pepper\\_schwartz](http://www.aarp.org/relationships/experts/pepper_schwartz)

♥ **Sex, Romance and Relationships**, an AARP survey of midlife and older adults. [www.assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/general/srr\\_09.pdf](http://www.assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/general/srr_09.pdf)



♥ **Dating tips**, a guide to finding a quality man by Lisa Copeland, right. [www.findaqualityman.com](http://www.findaqualityman.com)

♥ **Romantic Tips for Couples**, a list of unique and budget-friendly ways for older couples and singles to celebrate Valentine's Day. [www.aarp.org/relationships/love-sex/info-01-2011/15\\_unique\\_valentine\\_ideas\\_naked\\_truth.html](http://www.aarp.org/relationships/love-sex/info-01-2011/15_unique_valentine_ideas_naked_truth.html)



*"I knew a knight  
on a white horse would not come  
and sweep me off my feet.  
I knew if I wanted something  
to happen, I'd have to do  
something about it."*

— Molly, age 90



meet him in a bar; one of her friends went to the same bar to be there, just for security. They met and got along. He would like it to be for life, but she is happy with the arrangement as it is. They see each other exclusively.

Another Internet example, cited by representatives of match.com, are Molly, age 90, and Ed, age 82.

"I knew a knight on a white horse would not come and sweep me off my feet," Molly said in her story. "I knew if I wanted something to happen, I'd have to do something about it." She applied to match.com, even though she felt foolish doing so. It worked. Ed answered her ad, and they found they both love Scotch and Shakespeare. The link to the interview with Molly and Ed reveals romance, enthusiasm, and happiness (<http://blog.match.com/2011/11/16/molly-and-ed-love-is-still-in-the-air-at-90-and-82/>).

### **Elephants in the room**

Whether you meet through strong or weak ties, some issues emerge.

Sex is clearly the No. 1 elephant in the room. One 82-year-old man exclaimed

that he is now a sex object — women are coming onto him all the time. Mel, a 70-year-old widower who lives in California, explained to a friend of mine that one barrier to his dating, especially younger women, is that he can't always perform sexually because of health issues. His wife understood, but if any other women entered his life down the road, it would be a potential obstacle.

Amy, not her real name, a woman in her 70s who lives in Sarasota, sees a man exclusively whom she met through shared political activities. They have no intention of living together and they agreed to forego sex. They like their platonic relationship.

When it comes to sex, men generally worry about being impotent and women are concerned about how their bodies look undressed. Women I have encountered agree that sex would have to be in total darkness — at least at the beginning. One expressed a different point of view.

"I feel more at home with my body now than when I was younger and large-breasted women were idealized," says Mary Ann. "So perhaps I won't undress

in the dark."

Children's reactions can be another elephant in the room.

One son became agitated when he realized his mother was dating. He was worried someone would take advantage of her, give her bad advice or even scam her. He knew of a case where the mother of his friend started dating, met a man, married him and then found out that "he was a scoundrel." She divorced him and put her wedding ring back on so men would assume that she was married. She is absolutely through with men and dating.

Children also are afraid that money will be given to the new person, or that the parents will not have as much time for them or their grandchildren. Whatever the fears, adult children definitely can interfere with their parents' romantic lives. One man felt that the cause of the delay in his relationship proceeding smoothly was a result of his children's protectiveness of their mother. Another man felt that part of the reason for his breakup was the adult children's need for their mother's attention — financially and emotionally.

On the other hand, many children are delighted that their parent has found someone. It relieves them of worry and makes them happy.

**The takeaway**

There are some things that connect all ages: the need to matter to someone else, the need to love and be loved, the need to be appreciated.

To make this happen, it is necessary to identify your connectors — those people you know with whom you can discuss your interest in meeting someone. Then consider how you will access people you do not know, possibly through social media. Every contact does not end in immediate success. Sometimes it takes contacting two or three connectors. It is a “what’s next” strategy that can work.

So don’t let Valentine’s Day be the loneliest day of your life and Saturday the loneliest night in the week.

As for Natalie, the widow who doesn’t cook, she has made a decision to be proactive. She has identified what she wants and is strategizing how to get it. She plans to talk to all her friends — her strong connectors — and if that does not work, she will go online or hire a matchmaking service. Her current mantra — don’t give up!

Sarasota resident Nancy K. Schlossberg, a former professor of counseling at the University of Maryland, College Park, writes self-help books, blogs, lectures and runs workshops on coping with change. You can contact her through [www.transitionsthroughlife.com](http://www.transitionsthroughlife.com) or at [nancyks4@gmail.com](mailto:nancyks4@gmail.com).



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