

To Click or Not to Click: Advice for Meeting Other Seniors on the Web

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It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that a single senior, in possession of reasonable health and wealth, must be in need of a partner, with due apologies to Jane Austen.

Reality:

As a society we're living longer. Consequently, people in their sixties seventies, eighties and even nineties, aren't sitting at home in the proverbial arm chair. We may have children, grandchildren, friends, but for some that one important ingredient is missing - a companion.

There is a long stretch of life ahead to fill with purposeful activity and a meaningful relationship. Especially if you have lost the delight of a spouse or significant other through death, divorce or a debilitating illness, such as Alzheimer's.

There's what I call "the empty chair."

If you are brave enough there are many web sites to peruse in search of new friends and companionship.

But What to Click?

After more than two years of widowhood, I curiously began to investigate some of the many sites. Some are free but encourage you to pay money to upgrade for more options. The best of them require, at a minimum, a current photo, a profile, and a willingness to be verified by the organization.

The profile will ask detailed questions regarding your background, personality and your desires in a relationship. Theoretically, that

should limit results. But despite my stating an age and geographic range, I received queries from as far away as Australia and from men decades younger than I. Don't they read? Or are some looking for "a nurse with a purse."

Surprises:

If you haven't had a social life recently, there are some staggering surprises.

The wishes and wants seen on the web are widely diversified. Some want a buddy, gender unimportant, with whom to go to dinner or a ball game or a traveling companion with whom to share expenses. Then there are those who have seriously ill spouses, who would simply like a friendship. Some want "friends with benefits," the benefits being sex. Others want a long term relationship or even marriage.

No one wants to be lonely. But the web is a scary place to shop. And before you sign up on any web site ask for feedback from people you trust. Then, if an activity or an individual is of interest you can pursue by clicking on it.

A Long Time Ago:

In your twenties it was easy. Most of us were single. So friends often introduced friends. Or Aunt Minnie would say with great enthusiasm, "You have to meet x." Or you'd meet at a party or a wedding or even a funeral. Following the respected Ann Landers' advice, you could join a local church or temple. But in all these instances it was face to face and you could quickly get an impression of the individual. But when you become a senior, retired from your 9-5 life, those opportunities are far less frequent. Even with a multitude of clubs and activities seeking companionship via the web can feel like a minefield.

Signing on:

Once you sign up with web sites you are assigned a code number and requested to select a code name. Before you ever meet x, there may be a string of e-mails or phone calls. But is the person honest? Is the photograph current? Be particularly wary of an absence of a photograph or an unfulfilled promise to supply one and question the snapshot of appealing dog or two darling little boys- with nary an adult in sight.

Physical Aspects:

If physical intimacy is not your prime objective be cautious about any inappropriate virtual overtures with a stranger. Notify the sponsor immediately. If you consider romance a plus after a deepening friendship, you still may be in for a shock. For some older people, especially males, the diminishing libido is of tremendous and terrifying concern. Add to that the aging process in a woman's body after menopause. If it becomes "the elephant in the room" medical advice and counseling may be helpful.

Baggage:

Anyone over fifty is bound to have issues: medical, emotional, psychological. We all come with baggage. As with the airlines, ask what's the limit? Avoid taking on more than you can carry. It's not that there won't be difficulties as well as joys. But the latter should outweigh the former.

Issues:

Ideally your new-found acquaintance lives nearby. But then you don't pick friends because they live next door. Shared interests are vital, and you have to consider financial limitations. If you plan to get a season subscription to the opera or travel to the Greek islands, can the other person easily do the same?

Whomever you meet will have a history, and since you haven't met through a mutual friend be sure to investigate critical details significant to you. e.g. marital history and current marital status

(if it's an "open marriage" does the spouse know?) level of education, religious affiliation, political leanings, professional career and work in retirement. Unlike a prospective employee, you can't request references, but you can ascertain if you want to become better acquainted with that person. Yes, it's possible to glean a great deal from how people present themselves. The expression on the face and the choice of attire all reveal clues. So do puzzling comments, like the following "I am well above average in intelligence but almost all of my friends are not." Is that meant to encourage you?

Money:

Who pays for what? A thorny issue. If you divide the bill, then you're not beholden to a stranger. But for some men it's a point of honor to pick up the check. If that's the case you might provide a picnic or home cooked meals. Or buy two tickets to an event. It depends what's comfortable for both of you. But under no circumstances loan money to someone you just met no matter how urgent the issue appears. Con artists are clever. Consequently, there are zillions of scam victims. Don't be counted among them.

Safety:

You like to think everyone is honorable and upright. But when you are dealing with cyberspace it pays to be careful. Maybe you're about to meet someone fabulous. Maybe not. So, meet in a public place, such as a coffee shop. Let a relative know the full name of the person you are going to meet, at what time and where. Arrange to call your relative at a given time to say that you're home or what your plans are. If you live alone it's wise to let someone responsible know your whereabouts. Take your own car or public transportation. But if early on if you accept a ride with this website acquaintance, as a general precaution, jot down the license plate and car description and text it to that same relative. If you have the person's name, age and city you can also check on such sites as Spyfly to ascertain if the person has

any legal irregularities.

Websites:

There are many websites now for seniors to consider e.g. Plenty of Fish, Stitch, Match.com. Some are geared to religions: J Date, Catholic Senior Dating. Some are geared strictly to seniors: Zoosk, Our Time, Senior People Meet.

Angst of Adolescence:

If you do become involved with someone, be warned that you can quickly become a teenager all over again. When the phone doesn't ring or there's no email or text or the person isn't on time, what does it mean? Heavy traffic? Worse, sickness? Worst of all, disinterest? Suddenly there's an abundance of anxiety, and your self-confidence can be stripped away in seconds on a rollercoaster ride of emotions.

And then, lo and behold, the doorbell rings. And when you answer, you can't stop smiling.

Why not?

So, why not sign up first for the free plan on several web sites and try each one out? Later, you can narrow choices and, if you wish, pay more to upgrade.

If you are brand new to the game, keep your options open. Try going to different group activities at least once.

And should you wind up with two invitations for New Year's Eve you can have the giddy decision of which to accept.

Sure, there is risk involved in searching for a potential match on the web.

But instead of spending years staring at an empty chair, you may discover a delightful companion with whom to share

appealing adventures.