

The Secrets of Senior Dating



Open
to
Love

Dr. Gloria Horsley & Dr. Frank Powers

CHAPTER TWO

Facing Relationship Fears

In our years of working as therapists, we have found that a number of our single clients have suffered what we have termed “relationship fears.” We’ve heard thousands of individual stories, each of them unique, but their core feelings of reluctance are similar. We’ve put together a list of the most common reasons we hear for staying home and steering clear of the dating world. Some of these might sound familiar.

We’ll take each one in turn and share our responses, which come from the stories of our clients, friends, and family, as well as our own considerable personal experience. Our hope is that by first identifying such fears, readers will be able to address them and begin taking steps to overcome them. Sometimes this can be hard, even when we’re motivated by loss and loneliness. Always remember that community and support are out there, whether from professionals like us or from others who have been through similar things and who have overcome similar fears.

Open to Love

Here is a list of 11 fears and concerns about dating that we've heard over and over from our clients:

1. What if I get hurt again?
2. My friends or family will be upset.
3. I'm not good dating material.
4. A scam artist will just take advantage of me!
5. A pet will be safer.
6. All the good people are already taken.
7. I feel I'm being disloyal to my deceased partner or spouse.
8. It's easier to stick with paid sex or pornography.
9. Seniors like me will just get sick and die—I don't want to be a caregiver!
10. Why be open to criticism?
11. What if I don't find the right person the first time?
Breaking up is difficult—I'll be stuck!

Which of these apply to you? It might be one, two, or several. Make a mental note, and don't worry! We'll take each fear in turn. They can be addressed—we've helped our clients through them, time and time again.

1. What if I get hurt again?

Losing a relationship can cause great pain. And while our personal trainers might encourage us with platitudes like, "No pain, no gain," this doesn't quite work in the world of dating. Here, we can't simply

forge ahead, knowing that our discomfort is only momentary and that we're making progress with each rep.

It may help here to connect with the alternative source of pain: the pain of loneliness. If you're reading these words, you're likely feeling some level of this. Perhaps it hits hardest when sitting alone in a restaurant, or when crawling into an empty bed. Connect with this feeling, and then compare it to the perceived pain of losing someone. Remember that this is just *perceived* pain. It's hypothetical. As with anxiety, this is a fear that something difficult *might* happen.

But it might not. You could find the love of your life. And you are in control of how far to take any possible connections.

Now ask which is greater: the pain of loneliness or the fear of what might happen if you date? If it's the pain of loneliness, and you're feeling unsettled without a partner, then you can prepare to meet another person with whom to share life.

This is not to downplay any anxiety. It's very real and we honor those feelings; yet consider this: we don't have to be 100 percent free of concerns before taking those first steps. In fact, you've already taken steps, even if all you've done is crack open this book for a few minutes while strolling through a bookstore or shopping online. Our goal with these chapters is to help overcome anxiety enough to take those first steps, each of which will bring you more comfort and confidence that you can succeed in finding "The One."

2. My friends or family will be upset.

We realize that upsetting friends and family is a big relationship

fear, as it was for us. In many cases, it's an issue that can't be avoided, because we can't make everyone happy. At such times, we like to think of the advice Gloria got from her old boss, Robert Sproull, the past president of the University of Rochester: "If you believe in it, go for it. Not everyone is going to agree with you anyway."

There are many reasons, both conscious and unconscious, for friends or family to be resistant to an attempt to find someone. It could simply be that they don't want to share you with an "outsider." Children might fear losing their inheritances to the newcomer, or seeing you get hurt. One thing is certain: they will have opinions, spoken or unspoken, one way or the other. Some of them will support the idea and some will not. The best approach is to prepare for their attitudes and opinions and remember, they're well-intentioned (usually, we hope).

In our case, the resistance from Gloria's three daughters came like a tsunami. While we did anticipate a reaction, we had no idea it would be that strong, and we were nowhere near as prepared as we are encouraging you to be! It was a hard lesson, which we will tell you more about in Chapter Six.

Each person's challenges will undoubtedly be different; yet be prepared to find out that not everyone will think that this dating thing is a good idea. It's your life, though, and as we'll repeat throughout this book, only you can decide what's right for you. There are ways to have the conversation that will honor the intentions of everyone involved, most of all your own.

We weathered the storm with Gloria's daughters and through some difficult discussions we found common ground. We all came

together. We believe that others will be able to do the same, but we suggest coming prepared with your most protective storm jacket. And if things get contentious, just realize that your loved ones are protective. Chances are they want you to be safe and they want you to remain available to them.

3. I'm not good dating material.

This thought is what the late psychologist Albert Ellis called “stinking thinking.” Ellis helped people to identify irrational beliefs and negative thought patterns such as these. We all do some stinking thinking. Such was the case with Sandy.

Sandy had tried to find someone through friends and family and recounted a number of boring dates. She had almost given up and said that her standard poodle, Sara, was enough. When we introduced her to the idea of stinking thinking, it gave her a great laugh, but she also saw the wisdom in it. She came to realize that her attitude was merely a bad mental habit and had nothing to do with who she actually was, or what she could bring to a relationship.

We then helped her to join an online dating service where she had more than 20 matches in her first week on the site. She began going out on dates again, having fun, but also maintaining what she calls “control” of her social life. With the recognition of her thought patterns, she took her power back and put herself in charge.

4. A scam artist will just take advantage of me!

Unfortunately, because so many people are looking for a connection with someone, there are also people who are looking to take

advantage of these situations. The best way to deal with this is to learn to be a “good consumer” in the dating marketplace and to approach interactions with potential dates with care. Once someone is of interest and they provide their name and other personal information, do some research.

Gloria and I used Google to look each other up. In our case, we both had websites that contained information about our professional backgrounds and interests. There are also services (such as *White Pages*) that will, for a fee, provide information from public sources about the person’s arrest records, residences, family, past marriages, and other public information. News articles and social media websites can provide other preliminary pieces of information. One caution here is to make sure to follow up after encountering a dead end with the person’s name. They may have changed their name for many reasons, some of them due to business or personal preference.

Don’t feel guilty about internet research—it’s not being sneaky or violating anyone’s privacy! This isn’t peering over someone’s fence or eavesdropping on their personal conversations. This is just being smart, making sure you know what information is out there in the public domain. It is very important for safety’s sake to know if the person is who they say they are. Similarly, encourage them to verify that you are who you say you are. Having them check you out makes it easier for you to make inquiries about them.

FRANK



Tom, a client in counseling, reported that he had met an interesting woman online who lived in another state. They struck up a lively conversation through texts and emails. Things seemed to be going along fine until she said that her mother had become ill and that she needed money to assist her. Tom became suspicious and with my encouragement, he checked her out. A thorough search for her name yielded no results, leaving him to conclude that she did not exist, and that this was indeed a scammer! I suggested he report this profile to the online service, and it was soon removed. Tom said the experience made him a better consumer of the service and he became determined to check people out earlier in the process.

Tom emerged pretty much unscathed, but we've seen people who are so blinded by "love" and the promise of companionship that they have avoided bad news about a potential partner. Such was the case with our friend Barbara, who lost her first husband through a divorce, and then a second one to a heart attack. After a couple of years, she signed up for an online service and then fell madly in love with a connection she'd made. Her new love was on a job assignment out of the country, though, so they would not be able to meet in person until he returned. Nevertheless, she felt she'd found the man of her dreams, and even went on to meet his kids online.

But then things took a turn. He told her he needed financial help. She started out by sending him small amounts of money, and then she sent a large sum to help him with travel back to the US. Her son tried to tell her that it was a scam, but she waved his concerns away. The man never appeared, though—just kept asking for money, and coming up with reasons why he couldn't return home. Finally, she had to accept that she'd been scammed. She stopped sending money and he disappeared. A report to the FBI went nowhere; she was told there was nothing they could do about it.

"I was just too in love to see it," she told us, after some years went by and she recovered from the heartbreak. She came away from the experience with four new rules for herself: to not let love blind her; to meet any potential partners in-person right away; to listen to her friends and family; and to never, never give anyone money.

In whatever way we meet a person of interest, checking out who they are is important for our safety. Scammers are indeed out there, and our best defense is to be good dating consumers and check for flaws before getting too involved.



GLORIA

5. A pet will be safer.

It is amazing how many of my widowed, divorced, or single friends have gotten dogs. While I love dogs and have had many, I did not have a dog when my husband died, and I made the decision then

not to get one. I didn't want the responsibility or the day-to-day chores. I was married at 21, and my marriage lasted for 60 years, so at the age of 81, I had finally discovered what it was like to not have a curfew or someone to be home for. I figured if I couldn't have my husband, I was going to enjoy the consolation of my freedom.

Furthermore, a divorced friend recommended that I say "yes" to any legitimate dating or outing opportunities for the next year, and I decided to follow her advice. Although it is nice to have a happy dog greet you at the door, it is also nice to be able to make a quick date decision or go to a movie or party on the spur of the moment. I don't have to worry about finding a dog sitter, and if I want to stay out late, I don't have to worry about what's happening to my rugs back home.

While it can be cozy to curl up with pets at night, I'd much rather have a human body in my bed. If you're of the same mindset, with a goal of finding love, then look for ways to simplify life in order to have the flexibility and time to search for "The One." If you currently have a dog, get a reliable dog sitter or a kennel, and embrace the opportunities that come along with dating.



GLORIA

6. All the good people are already taken.

I can relate to this one! I thought that all the good guys were taken,

and after my first couple of attempts at dating, I didn't have reason to believe otherwise. True, I'd seen my grandchildren and their friends go on dating sites with a good amount of success. I don't mean that every date led to something meaningful or serious, necessarily, but they had fun and met some wonderful people. So, I approached it a bit more casually, and the next thing I knew, I'd met Frank and discovered a world that I didn't know existed for us seniors. Frank, who has more experience in this department, has met quite a few talented and beautiful women online, including a college professor, an artist, a speech therapist, a beauty salon owner, a nurse, and now me, a psychologist. Online dating is the real thing; there are people out there looking for love—millions of them.

7. I feel I'm being disloyal to my deceased partner or spouse.

We often hear widows and widowers say, "I had such a wonderful partner that I could never be with another person." Friends and family members who are also missing this departed partner often see this outlook as a badge of honor and courage, and so they encourage it. Obviously, though, these attitudes focus on the past, and can keep us stuck there. And the people who applaud singlehood don't have to grapple with loneliness.

What do *you* want your future to look like? If indeed you had a great partner, it means that you know how to be a great partner as well, and there is likely another satisfying relationship out there. It can be a difficult transition, but we've had great success with a couple of therapeutic interventions that we have used with clients who

had these feelings of disloyalty. At the end of the chapter is an exercise we have found useful to deal with the feelings of being disloyal to a deceased partner and pursuing a new relationship. We sometimes need a way to resolve these feelings. The exercise helps to process our feelings and remind us that life is for living!

FRANK



8. It's easier to stick with paid sex or pornography.

This issue belongs overwhelmingly to men, who are far more likely to be drawn to sex workers or pornography as a substitute for dating. I've treated many men who found themselves in this category, and they had many experiences in common. For example, they'd stopped believing they could find someone whom they could trust and be close to emotionally. Several had stories about women being unfaithful or using them for their money. In such cases, their confidence had been badly shaken, and their primary goal was to protect themselves from experiencing that pain again.

To complicate the issue, our cultural norms say that men are supposed to be tough and not let things like this bother them. This is not the case, obviously, and it makes it more difficult for men to face or learn from a perceived failure. Many of us don't even have the ability to *admit* failure, let alone learn from it, so we will often

retreat from real relationships to the artificial relationships we find in porn or paid sex workers.

Both of these experiences are based in the illusion of having control and seem to suggest a safe sort of intimacy: sex without the danger of pain. But they're strictly fantasy. The real pain for many is that they have lost confidence in their ability to have a real relationship of mutual safety, love, and respect.

One of my clients, Phillip, developed an addiction to porn after a couple of failures with women who had taken advantage of him. Both had expensive tastes and ran up credit card bills that he had a hard time paying off. Shaken by his bad luck, he turned to porn to protect himself. His addiction continued even after he found a new love and married. A few months into their marriage she discovered his addiction and told him she would leave him if he could not break himself of it. That's when he came to see me. In the course of therapy, he came to realize that he would turn to porn when he was upset, particularly when his anger revolved around his wife's spending. Once he discovered this connection, he was able to confront the issue of their different spending habits and develop better coping skills, which led him to break his addiction.

If you struggle with a pornography issue, I recommend finding a therapist who specializes in sexual addiction. It's very important to talk to someone. Cognitive therapy can also be very helpful in breaking and understanding habitual behaviors. In addition, look online for programs such as Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA), which follows the same recovery model as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

**9. Seniors like me will just get sick and die—
I don't want to be a caregiver!**

Caregiving is a huge issue, especially for those of us who may have spent years as caregivers prior to losing a partner or spouse. This can happen to both men and women, but caregiving for a long-term partner prior to a death is much more likely to be “women’s work.” As we mentioned in the previous chapter, approximately 80 percent of women will be widowed. Long-term caregiving can lead to exhaustion and burnout, and the last thing many of us want when we return to dating is more of the same experience.

We were recently on a cruise ship from New York to England when we happened to sit down next to Nora, a well-groomed woman in her seventies. We quickly fell into conversation. Nora said that she was taking a ship to Europe rather than flying because she did not want to leave her dog, who had become her major companion after she’d lost her husband of 48 years to multiple sclerosis.

Over her husband’s final ten years of life, her main activity had been caregiving. She had been widowed for seven years at that point and was traveling to see her family in Switzerland. When we told her how we’d met through an online dating site and that we were writing a book about dating, she became very animated, and asked all about the project and where she could get a copy of the book. It was clear that she loved the idea of finding love again, but she admitted that she didn’t want another heavy round of caregiving responsibilities.

For women like Nora, being with a partner who does not have a

premorbid condition is a major factor. A reminder, though: nobody is immortal, and there are no guarantees! You might be healthy and active right now, but if you have a partner through your last decades, you will probably be assisting one another with inevitable health issues. Assume, then, that some level of caregiving, at some point, is a given.

With this in mind, it's important to gather as much information as possible about a potential partner's health issues prior to moving into an advanced relationship. Clues in that partner's family history can provide insight. Still, have an open, honest conversation about your respective levels of health and feelings about caregiving and create a plan for the future. (We'll cover more about this in Chapter Seven.)

FRANK



10. Why be open to criticism?

Criticism, especially from someone we care about, is painful, and too much criticism can destroy a relationship. But in the context of a long, close relationship, where partners are sharing your time and space, navigating health issues, and possibly juggling whole new sets of in-laws, some level of criticism is inevitable. We have great control over how we receive and respond to that criticism, however. One of the best professors I had at Columbia University once

offered a re-frame of criticism that has stayed with me for my entire adult life. Most criticism from people we are close to, he said, is just “information about how they want you to show them love. It is only information.”

If we think of criticism as information, then it can be helpful to show how to express love to a partner. Think of it as feedback from their perspective, from their personal experience. If we can keep from getting defensive and instead work to find the information about what our partner needs, then we’ll be able to show love more effectively.

My professor, in his wisdom, went on to differentiate between “constructive criticism” and “shaming criticism.” Constructive criticism is easier to hear as information. Shaming is an attack on someone’s basic character. A statement like, “You left the dishes in the sink, and I wish you would clean them and put them away,” is constructive: it’s something that a partner can respond to, and it’s not an attack on their fundamental character. “You are a jerk for leaving dishes in the sink,” on the other hand, is shaming. It implies that the person left the dishes in the sink *because* he or she is a jerk, and so will always leave dishes in the sink.

Very few relationships can tolerate shaming criticism, which is often experienced as abusive, and rightfully so. However, if our partner offers constructive criticism, and if we can receive it as guidance rather than an attack, it can help make our relationship stronger. Our partner can feel loved when we respond to their need for change by doing things differently.

11. What if I don't find the right person the first time?

Breaking up is difficult—I'll be stuck!

We refer to this as the fear of saying “no.” To be successful in dating, consider the viewpoint of one of our clients, who said, “I know I will have to kiss a lot of frogs to find my prince.” It's not likely to find a prince or princess on the very first date, so don't think about each suitor who doesn't turn into “The One” as a failure—instead, look at these dates as an inevitable part of the process. Make it a goal instead to have fun and learn a little more about what you want and don't want. If you can accomplish even one of those goals, then the date was a success. With this kind of thinking, we are more likely to spend less time with the wrong people.

Saying “no” to someone or having them say the same to us is difficult, but it's a very important life skill. If we can't say “no,” then our “yes” doesn't mean anything. And it goes even deeper than that. Who we are comes from our ability to say “yes” or “no” to people and things in our life. We are all the products of our decisions about what we like and want and what we do not. Dating is one of the most important exercises we can conduct in forming this statement about who we are. If we have not developed the skill to be able to say “no” to someone, then we aren't ready for dating. Too many “yeses” can get a person into a lot of trouble!

If this skill is lacking, then find an assertiveness training class. The local community college's adult education department will likely have classes in assertiveness training. There are also a number of podcasts and online courses available. Therapy can also help.

It's essential to be able to say "no" (both in dating and in life!), so find a way to practice this skill. When we have confidence in this important area, then we can leave another fear behind.

Wrap-up

At this point in our lives, we've all been through an awful lot. Most of us have lost a partner through divorce or death. Yet we have survived, and in many ways, we have thrived and have learned about compassion and love. Many of us have experienced posttraumatic growth (more on this in Chapter Ten). Despite our setbacks, we've learned many lessons that will help us go forward and build the future we really want. Sometimes, all it takes is some understanding to bring clarity on the next steps.

After reading this chapter, if all you did was identify your concerns, you've already accomplished something important. Naming things takes away their power, just as turning on the light banishes a child's fear of what might be lurking nearby. Once you identify your concerns, you can figure out how to take your power back. Simply by thinking about what has been holding you back, you've already taken the first step in looking for "The One."

Now it's time to get excited. Remember, our goal here is to help start the process of experiencing all the dating the world has to offer. With that in mind, let's have some fun by exploring the best ways to find a potential partner.

Journal questions

- Ask which is greater: The pain of loneliness or the fear of what might happen if you date?
- Having read this chapter, write down as many things as possible that have held you back from entering the dating world.

Practice conversation

As we mentioned earlier in the chapter, if you are concerned that you are not honoring your lost partner by wanting a new relationship, we suggest the following: write a letter to your former partner, telling them how you are feeling without them and stating that you have a desire to find another relationship. Now reverse rolls and write a letter from them responding as you think they might. Continue the process until you feel some resolution. You might be surprised what comes up.

If you prefer conversation to writing, use the same back-and-forth process with a pair of chairs. Put the chairs face to face with a few feet in between. Then take one of the chairs and visualize your lost partner in the opposite chair. We have had clients who even added a picture of their loved one to make it more real. Then talk to the imagined person, expressing your desire to be in a new relationship. Next, move to the empty chair to provide a response from your absent partner (a response that, knowing them, they would make “from their higher self”).

Facing Relationship Fears

We have found both methods to be very helpful to clients when processing their feelings and reminding them that life is for living!

