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Back in the game: Rules have changed, those returning to dating find

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Mercury News

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And so she typed:

``Single Hispanic female, two adult children, relationship oriented, in search of something more."''

Catherine Sandoval toyed with the words that would appear in her first online dating profile for hours, wondering if this was the right way to start dating after nearly three decades of being with one man.

Sandoval, 53, found herself single amid friends who were all married and without a so-called partner in crime who might help her meet men.

Bars were definitely out of the question for Sandoval -- the San Jose law firm executive assistant hadn't even done the bar thing before she met the man she married.

The athletic grandmother, a dead ringer for Sally Field, found most single men around her age don't flirt with women in places like the grocery store or gym.

Like so many men and women who find themselves single at a time in their lives when many of their friends are celebrating silver anniversaries, Sandoval turned to online dating as a way to meet men.

She, like others who start dating after a long relationship has ended, realized that everything she thought she knew had changed.

``Dating nowadays, is so different," said Sandoval, who divorced in 2004 after 25 years of marriage and started dating last year. ``There are so many things you never had to think about when you were dating as a younger person."''

Midlife singles have issues they didn't face when they were dating when they were younger -- exes, messy divorces, children and trying to identify themselves as being single after years of being part of a couple.

Then, there's the question of how to meet people, learning to write flirtatious e-mails and asking someone out on a first date when you've never met in person.

Easier for men

Men have it easier than women, according to bestselling author and relationship expert Ian Kerner. They have a larger dating pool that includes much younger women who find older men as desirable as men their own age.

"It's a better age than any to be looking for love," regardless of gender, because there's less of a rush to get to the altar and there's a confidence that comes with maturity, says Kerner, a New York couples and sex therapist and author of "Be Honest, You're Not That Into Him Either" (Regan Books, 192 pp., \$12.95).

A San Jose woman who is chronicling her midlife dating experience through a daily blog read by hundreds is a prime example.

She calls herself the Dating Goddess, a 51-year-old bestselling author of workplace effectiveness issues who started her dating blog (www.datinggoddess.com) last May after her 20-year marriage ended.

The Dating Goddess considers herself the real life Carrie Bradshaw from "Sex and the City" -- of course, it would be Carrie 15 years later, after she's been dumped by Mr. Big and replaced her Manolo stilettos with comfortable flats.

The goddess, who asked that her real name not be used because it might affect her dating life, has become a dating guru for fiftysomethings.

The 5-foot-10-inch brunette, who doesn't have children, says she's not one of those "well-preserved, gorgeous, marathon-running, middle-aged women" but has had no problem meeting a variety of men.

Her husband left in 2003, and a divorce followed. Once she set her mind to enter the dating scene, the goddess went into it with the simple goal of meeting men but not necessarily a marriage partner.

She created a list -- which she likens to Baskin-Robbins' 31 flavors -- of the types of different men she wanted to get the chance to know.

She likes smart men, so she wanted to date a lawyer, doctor, chief executive officer and a venture capitalist. She also likes large men, so she wanted an ex-pro football player and ex-pro basketball player.

Then she considered where to meet men, with friends suggesting that she take up hobbies, such as golf, "because that's what men do," she says.

"Why would I take up something I don't enjoy doing?" she says she wondered, scratching off places like bars because "who wants to compete with young girls who show cleavage down to their navels?"

One place to meet potential dates is a Silicon Valley twist on the grocery aisles.

"Fry's Electronics," the goddess says, noting that men are always willing to help out a woman lost amid electronics.

The goddess eventually chose to go online and first joined a site for plus-sized women and their admirers.

Some key points she learned: The first e-mail determines whether you get a date or get deleted. Grammar is important, but so is making a one-on-one connection through something in a profile that has nothing to do with the way a person looks in a picture.

Consider it a conversation, one that progresses over several days until a phone number is exchanged and a date set. Always keep that first date light, maybe over coffee, which would allow you to cut it short if there are no sparks.

The goddess went on what she calls a few "practice dates" -- dates with men she had no real interest in dating but found them interesting enough for a few hours. Those dates taught her how to talk to men again and made her comfortable enough to meet those she was more interested in.

It didn't take long for the engaging extrovert to go through the Baskin-Robbins list.

She jokingly says she started using Ben & Jerry's ice cream flavors to supplement the one she had quickly gone through, which included the attorneys, doctors and former professional athletes she had on the list. In two years she has gone on 73 dates with 73 different men, making her somewhat of a cyber-legend for her blog readers.

The list also gave her a positive outlook: Even if one of her flavors went bad, she had a few more flavors waiting right behind it, she jokes.

"I've had a lot fun," she says, adding that she doesn't give individual details about each date in her blog but writes about topics, such as who should pick up the check and the etiquette of walking her to the front door.

She expects her date to pick up the bill. When he doesn't go for the check, she pulls out her wallet and says something like: "How would you like to handle this?"

A date's offer to pay for a meal is "offering you a gift," she says, suggesting that it would be rude not to accept without coming across as ungrateful.

Walking her to her front door is expected, and if someone doesn't do it she sees it as a lack of common courtesy -- although some might argue such a thing is old-fashioned.

"It's a generational thing," she says, adding that it's about respect and that ignoring the simple gesture could be an indicator of other problems, including a clue that he may not appreciate your time.

What about family?

Perhaps one of the toughest issues midlife daters face is when to introduce a suitor to the family.

There are several considerations, including the children's ages, says Julie Paiva, a well-known Bay Area matchmaker.

Paiva, founder of the San Francisco-based Table for Six, which arranges dinner dates for three men and three women, believes people should only introduce their suitors to children who still live at home and only if the relationship becomes serious.

Older children, usually those over 22, are a different story and are usually happy if their parents find someone special, she says.

At 34, columnist and author Rachel Sarah, who just published the book "Single Mom Seeking," (Avalon/Seal Press, 200 pp., \$14.95) based on her dating experiences as a mom, is far younger than many of those who find themselves single after a long-term relationship. But the issues are often similar.

Her book is a spinoff of her single-mom dating columns, which she started in 2003 for www.literarymama.com and www.jewishsf.com. She chose the subject when she couldn't find anything else written about "someone in the trenches."

Sarah, a Berkeley resident who became single in 2000 when her daughter was an infant, has learned to juggle dating with motherhood. One of the big things she learned? Introducing her daughter only to men who could be there for the long haul.

In addition to online dating, she told all her married friends, particularly those whose marriages she admired, that she was up for being introduced to other singles.

Help from the 'tribe'

She also formed what she calls a "tribe," a group of family members and friends willing to take care of her daughter while she went out. They were also her "bogus detectors," screeners who drilled prospective boyfriends to determine if there were red

flags she couldn't see.

After five years and 100 dates, Sarah has a boyfriend. They've dated for about a year and recently moved in together.

Sandoval, the San Jose grandmother, is nowhere near the date count of the Dating Goddess or Sarah, but she's getting close. She goes on at least two dates a month with professional men she meets online but hasn't clicked with any of them enough to introduce them to her family.

She considers herself soulful and ended the most recent version of her profile by writing that she wants to meet a man ``with spirit."

``He's out there," she says, with a slight grin. ``I truly believe that."

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