

## Dating Older Women: Does Age Matter?

**If Hollywood is any indication, the pairing of older women and younger men is hot -- and getting more popular every day. But does it hold true in real life?**

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WebMD Feature

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From movies like *Something's Gotta Give* and *Because I Said So* to reality dating shows that pit older women against younger gals, the pairing of older women and younger men is becoming increasingly common.

In fact, there is even a new classification for older women who actively seek out younger men. They're called "cougars," and they're seen by some as the epitome of liberation in post-feminist times.

But has the once-taboo pairing of older women and younger men really become as common and carefree a choice as Hollywood would have us believe? And more importantly, has society finally blessed this controversial union?

If you are using celebrity couples as your barometer, the answer appears to be yes. But go just a little east of Beverly Hills, and you're likely to read a different story.

"It's not exactly the way it's being portrayed in the media," says Sandy Caron, PhD, co-author, with Nichole Proulx, PhD, of a study on the implications of marriages involving women a decade or more older than their mates.

In their research, published in the *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy* in 2006, Caron says that while the number of older woman-younger man pairings appears to be increasing to some degree, society has far from embraced the idea. Moreover, the bulk of our "scorn" still seems directed squarely at the reputation of the older woman.

"I think one of the most surprising things we found in our study was that most older women still feel the same societal pressures about pairing with a younger man that were evident in studies conducted more than 30 years ago," says Caron, professor of family relations and human sexuality at the University of Maine.

While she says the world seems slightly more accepting of a younger man falling for an older gal, the image of the older woman as the wayward seductress -- or in Hollywood terms, "Mrs. Robinson" -- still prevails.

"Pretty much all the couples in our study cautioned that you have to be prepared to deal with the social stigmas, because they are still here, and they can be particularly cruel to women," says Caron.

So considering relationship waters are already pretty hard to navigate, even without societal pressures, what's the attraction? The answers might surprise you.

(What are your thoughts about [older woman/younger man](#) relationships? Talk with others on WebMD's [Couples Coping Support Group](#) message board.)

### What's in It for Older Women?

As any middle-aged woman who's ever swooned over the hot, hard body of Jake Gyllenhaal or Matthew McConaughey can tell you, a younger man can be hard to resist -- particularly when it comes to sexual desire.

"Men's testosterone levels go down in their 40s, while women's sexuality peaks in their 30s and stays there for quite awhile. So, by age 50 or so, men have far more sexual problems than women, which is reason enough for an older woman to consider a younger man, with whom the sex can be just spectacular for quite some time," says social anthropologist Helen E. Fisher, PhD, professor at Rutgers University and chief scientific advisor of

Chemistry.com.

But sex appeal aside, gender expert Susan Shapiro Barash says younger men also offer a cultural understanding of older women that they just don't get from men their own age or older.

"When it comes to issues like careers, money, even traditional female roles, men in their 50s often have a different mind-set about women than women have about themselves, mostly because the world hasn't changed as much for men in relation to how it's changed for women," says Barash, an instructor at Sarah Lawrence College and author of *Tripping the Prom Queen: The Truth About Women and Rivalry*.

And oh, how it's changed! When the hit show *All in the Family* became part of our culture in 1971, the middle-aged woman of the day was brilliantly portrayed in the character of Edith Bunker – a dotting, sexually inhibited housewife who lived to bring Archie his beer.

Fast forward some 30 years, and your TV dial lands on *Sex and the City*. Here, middle age took on a whole different meaning in the career-oriented, younger-man-loving character of Samantha.

What many viewers of both shows never realized: The characters of Edith and Samantha were approximately the same age!

And while 40-something women today are more likely to relate to the likes of Samantha, Barash says for many middle-aged and older men, Edith still has a foothold in their minds.

"In this respect, a younger man may be far more in tune with how an older woman in 2007 sees herself, particularly her goals, her dreams, her view of the world and of herself and her sexuality, than any man her own age will ever see her," says Barash.

And of course, no matter how a woman sees herself, who can resist the ego-boost that comes from discovering that not only do men still find you attractive, but that a younger man is interested in what you have to offer!

"At a time when a woman may feel she is losing her vitality, not to mention her looks, what could be better, or more appealing, or more energizing, than having the attention of a younger man, particularly if she has already walked away from one or more failed marriages with someone her own age," says Nancy O'Reilly, PsyD, founder and director of WomenSpeak.com.

### What's in It for Younger Men?

While the perks for women may be clear, the waters get a little murky when it comes to nailing down what's in it for the younger guy. Experts say that's because at least in part, the desire for a younger, healthy, fertile partner is pretty much hardwired into men's DNA.

"From an [evolutionary] perspective, men are attracted to women who show signs of health, youth, and fertility; they always have, they always will. And in fact, if a man of 35 is going to choose from among a group of women aged 45, he's still going to go for the one who looks the youngest and the most spry," says Fisher.

That said, Fisher also reminds us that wants and needs can frequently override even hardwiring.

"And there are many things an older woman can offer a younger man that can short-circuit that hardwiring; things he wants and even craves, that he simply can't get from someone his own age," says Fisher.

Not only does this include the excitement of sexual experience and sexual confidence (a middle-aged woman pretty much knows what she wants, says Fisher), but also the excitement of just being around someone who has achieved a certain level of experience and sophistication.

Barash says she has the studies to prove this can be a turn-on for many young men.

"This goes right to the heart of two of my studies. In research for my book *A Passion for More* I found that younger men were involved with an older woman simply because she was so sophisticated and worldly and because she knew herself sexually and in terms of her emotional needs. It felt very safe for him, and he didn't have to figure out as much on his own, and he liked that," says Barash.

Fisher says that this, in combination with the financial freedom that coupling with an older woman can provide, is a powerful aphrodisiac for many young men.

"Fifty years ago, the only choice a young man had was to marry a younger woman and be the breadwinner.

Today, by choosing a woman five or 10 years older who has her own career, he can take time to pursue his dreams. He can go to med school or become a concert violinist or start his own business, all without having to worry about being the breadwinner," says Fisher.

### Is There a Downside?

As glorious as older woman-younger man relationships can be, they are not without problems. Among those most often cited in studies: the woman's fear of growing physically old long before her partner, and how that fear eventually affects their intimate life.

"Women clearly have more doubts about entering into these relationships because of concerns they will age sooner. And some women also reported that intimacy was affected by the age difference, particularly as it related to attractiveness," says Caron. And while younger men expressed less concern over this issue, Caron says even women who were in good shape expressed worry about how they might stack up to younger women as time went on.

Another issue: the ticking biological clock.

"Either the woman's biological clock has run out or, as is often the case, this is a second marriage for her, so she already has children and doesn't want more," says Caron. Either way, if the man is young he may want the experience of fathering a child, and that can be a sticking point in the relationship down the road.

Moreover, in addition to whatever pressure society puts on the couple, there can also be internal pressures from friends and family, including adult children and parents, who may find the relationship difficult to understand or accept. This often forces couples to "go underground" for quite some time, which can also put a strain on the relationship.

Still, couples in Caron's study have endured, defending and highly recommending their choice. They say if a couple is willing to confront the difficulties, the rewards are great.

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