



Cougars and Their Cubs

By: Jessica Leshnoff | Source: AARP.org

**Editor's note: Names of some of the interviewees have been changed for privacy.*

Annette Wheeler* didn't recall the exact moment she first heard the term "cougar," but she did remember dashing to her computer to look it up. To her shock and bemusement, there was a new term to describe what she had been doing most of her life—dating younger men.

Wheeler, a fiery redhead who lives outside Baltimore, leaned back in her chair and sighed. "I adore younger men," the 60-year-old purred. "I liked younger guys even when I was in high school—like a year or two younger. I was a cougar before there were cougars."

Indeed, Wheeler's pre-marriage and post-divorce dating history reads like a steamy screenplay. She listed a string of young men with whom she had various relationships, occasionally punching numbers into a calculator to determine age differences she had never considered in the first place. She never analyzed her attraction to younger men (or their attraction to her), but with "cougar" an increasingly popular term used to describe older women dating significantly younger men, her longtime preference is suddenly in the spotlight.

For Wheeler and other women like her, younger men—many of them 15 years or more their juniors—are a natural fit. Boomer women are looking and feeling better than ever. Widowed, separated, or divorced, a growing number seek young men for dating and companionship. And since men have been dating younger women for ages, why are so many of us surprised—shocked, even—that women would follow suit?

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Valerie Gibson, author of "Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men," is all too familiar with this double standard. The self-proclaimed cougar wrote her first book on the topic—"Younger Men: How to Find Them, Date Them, Mate Them, and Marry Them"—14 years ago, "and let me tell you something," she said in a whisper. "It caused an awful stir—and not a good one. People were horrified. They were absolutely horrified that older women should be having sex with younger men."

When many of us think "cougar," we picture the ultimate cougar of the big screen: The Graduate's legendary, martini-sipping Mrs. Robinson. These days, real-life cougars are stars like Demi Moore (who, in her 40s, married then-twenty-something heartthrob Ashton Kutcher), the coiffed reality-show cast of The Real Housewives of Orange County, and, yes, everyday women—suburbanites and city-slickers alike.

While there's no denying that cougars are slinking into the mainstream, there's still an element of taboo surrounding these age-spanning relationships.

"It's definitely considered creepier for women to go out with younger men," admitted Junie Smith*, a 52-year-old cougar who lives on Manhattan's Lower East Side. "For a 70-year-old guy to go out with a 40-year-old woman, as opposed to a 70-year-old woman going out with a 40-year-old guy? A 70-year-old woman going out with a 40-year-old guy is considered creepy."

Why the double standard? Smith figured it comes down to science: "It probably has something to do with the concentration of the species on procreation," she quipped.

All scientific notions aside, older women opt for younger men for the same reasons that older men select younger women.

"The mentality of having a youthful person on your arm who makes you feel good, who makes you feel ageless, makes you feel desired and desirable," Gibson said.

Statistics compiled by AARP The Magazine back up the trend.

A whopping 34 percent of women over 40 are dating younger men, [according to a 2003 survey](#). The same poll, which surveyed 3,500 single people (both women and men) aged 40 to 69 year old found that

56 percent are currently separated or divorced from a spouse, 31 percent have never been married, and seven in 10 (74 percent) of formerly married singles in their 50s have been single for five years or more.

The study stated that the divorce rate now, compared to when cougars were married some 25 years ago, has contributed to the amount of single, 50+ women, said to be "on the prowl" in today's dating pool.

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For Wheeler, younger men have been a natural fit for an energetic lifestyle that her male peers have never quite matched.

"I can't explain why, but I've always been," she said, pausing. "Without even knowing someone's age, you can be sure I'm going to gravitate toward the younger guy. And I don't know if it's a function of I'm attracted to younger guys or younger guys are attracted to me. It's just their energy, their enthusiasm" and—the biggie—"less baggage."

In fact, the stuff of the past may be what keeps her from dating men closer to her age altogether. That and music, of course.

"They're always going on and on about their exes and the kids," she said of her male peers. "The baggage, the baggage, is the main thing. And being stuck in the music they listened to in college. I want to know what's new. I want to hear what's new. Younger guys seem to have more to contribute to my life, and they're just adorable."

The AARP study concludes that the No. 1 complaint from both single men and single women—42 percent and 35 percent, respectively—dating in their 50s was the history a partner of the same age carried into a relationship.

Men, of course, have their reasons for dating older women, too. In the fast-paced world of Los Angeles, "dating" may mean going out a few times or spending just one night together. "This isn't about dating," said Kevin Mercer* candidly. The 27-year-old works in L.A.'s entertainment industry and isn't shy discussing his city's cougar phenomenon. "It's a total transactional situation."

And that works out just fine for these young men, who often prefer relationships—whether fleeting or long-term—with cougars.

"These older women are confident, sexually mature, they don't have inhibitions, they know what they like, and they know what they want," said Nancy D. O'Reilly, clinical psychologist, researcher, author and host of Voice America's radio program "Timeless WomenSpeak." Cougars are independent, career-oriented women who have a been-there-done-that attitude towards marriage and "don't need anyone to take care of them," she said. "They're looking for companionship, sexual contact, and someone good to talk to and spend time with. So be it if the relationship goes further."

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While women aren't exactly shouting their cougar status from the rooftops ("Women never want to be called a "cougar," because it implies they're older," Mercer explained nonchalantly), men aren't shy about their relationships with older women. On the contrary, they'll even boast about them, wearing them, in the words of Mercer, "as a badge of honor."

According to Gibson, young men are driving the trend, sometimes even calling themselves "cougar hunters" when they're out on the town looking for sexy older women. "Younger men have no problem whatsoever in approaching an older woman who's single or obviously not wearing a wedding ring anyway," she said. "They don't mind at all what age she is as long as she's vital and gorgeous or something attracts them. Young men have no fear now of being put down by their peers when there's cougars like Demi Moore and all these beautiful women around, and they say, 'My gosh, I would love to bed her!'"

Smith has found young men to be quite enthusiastic about spending time with her, and she definitely enjoys the attention. After all, she has worked hard for it, with ample sessions of yoga, calculated vitamin concoctions, a good diet, and even a little Botox here and there.

And while she's not thrilled with the term "cougar" ("slightly dangerous and prone to wearing animal-print clothes," was her initial cougar visual), she's certainly not changing her dating habits anytime soon. Wheeler isn't either, but she's warming up to the term—slowly.

"It's silly," she said laughing. "But I use it. I use it now."

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