

# Dating *after* divorce

THE DATING GAME IS TOUGH ENOUGH WITHOUT THE PAIN OF A DIVORCE TO CARRY ALONG WITH YOU. HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN YOU'RE READY TO TRY AGAIN? WHERE DO YOU MEET SOMEONE WHO SUITS YOU? AND HOW DO YOU TELL THE KIDS WHEN YOU'VE FOUND A NEW LOVE?

**N**obody can deny it: that fluttery feeling in your stomach when you're about to head off on that first date is exciting. But it's also terrifying – and even more so if you've just gone through a divorce. 'It's difficult to be an adolescent again – because that's really what's required of you,' says Liz Dooley, director of the Family and Marriage Association of SA (FAMSA). 'You get all those good feelings of excitement, but it's much trickier because you've lost some of the skills you had at handling those feelings.'

Those 'skills' amounted to a certain amount of naivety and more of a willingness to take risks. Now, with your self-esteem and optimism shattered, it's wise to take stock of where you are as an individual before you throw



replace your ex, not to 'show them' and not to heal yourself either.'

Also, having a few one-night stands may have its place in your healing process, but more often than not they're destructive – especially if your children become witnesses. If you're serious about finding a new long-term partner, focus on yourself first. Realise that you are an important person, that you are lovable,' she says.

It's vital, too, to realise the position you took in your failed marriage – whether you were too dominant or too submissive, for example – and how that contributed to its failure: 'You need to look at what you've learnt and put it into practice.' Such is the beauty of a second chance.

**O**nce you're ready, the next hurdle is where to meet somebody. 'People go to singles clubs or turn to the Internet,' says Liz. 'It's about where you feel comfortable.'

But give a thought to making some new friends. Don't ditch your married friends, but find some single friends to help you along the way – join a supper club, a wine club, or go travelling... do stuff that's not obviously dating-focused.

New friendships will provide the new beginning and support you're after – and the best part is that you're more likely to meet interesting potential partners through new circles than through anything else. 'New friendships are an integral part of reaching out again and learning to trust other relationships, not only romantic ones,' says Liz. With new friends, you also avoid the old alliances that may have formed among you and your ex's friends.

And at that magical moment of standing in front of the mirror looking gorgeous in a new dress on the big night, try a little self-talk: you are beautiful; you have lots of gifts to offer; be open-minded (as far as you're comfortable with); take it slow.

'It doesn't help to be too picky, but know what you're looking for,' says Dooley. If he's wrong for you, remember that you've already learned you can't change the way someone is. 'It's not worth going down this road again,' she says.



And try not to go overboard, either. Putting high expectations on a dating partner is sure to jinx your relationship early on. If he doesn't call you after the first date, don't take it personally. Just pick up and move on – it's not like you haven't done it before. Chances are you'll have to kiss a few frogs before you find your Mr/Ms Right. So keep an open mind, and be willing to try new things (that you're comfy with).

If your new relationship seems to be working out, try not to lose what you have gained in the time you've been alone. Maintaining your newfound balance in your life means you won't lose focus on your friends, family and interests – the all-important things that got you on the road to the new you in the first place.

**W**hen children are in the picture, things get much more complicated. There's no chance of those spontaneous 'your-place-or-mine?' invitations, and nights making love on

the soft rug in front of the fire are more likely to be replaced with nights behind hastily closed doors. It's not exactly conducive to romance.

But bringing someone else onto the scene can also be tough on your child's emotions. 'Dating or remarriage is often a loss for your children,' says Liz. 'They lose the special relationship they had with you – and they lose the hope that Mom and Dad will get back together someday.' Choosing to introduce your children to a new partner is a fraught decision: how will they respond? What happens if they don't want to meet the new person in your life?

'The key is to go slow,' says Dooley. Don't introduce the children to your partner if you can help it, unless you're sure this one may be around for a while. Casual partners can cause fear – and also nurture a deep-rooted suspicion of relationships in your child. If your child doesn't want to meet your partner, then wait.

When you've met someone and are falling in love with them, it's hard not to share your feelings with your children. But be careful of sharing too much:



## MANDY BEART, 40

**I've been divorced for five years** and the biggest challenge is still meeting men – in a huge city like Jo'burg! I'm not into hanging out in bars. Most men you meet socially are either married, gay, involved (but afraid of commitment), or just plain complicated.

Any man who has reached 40 and hasn't been married is going to present issues: financial, emotional or other. And I've got to a stage where I don't want hassles and baggage.

I've considered using the Internet but haven't yet. There seems to be too much dishonesty and room for speculation. I would rather meet someone face to face – that way, you know. Funnily enough, my married friends never try to set me up. I was married for eight and a half years and it was good. Our relationship was fun, loving, and exciting. I loved

being married and I loved my husband very much, but it simply dissolved.

After my divorce I felt sad and very low, but there was also a huge sense of relief. I was finally living more truthfully. Accepting the truth is very liberating.

All the negatives of the break-up were replaced by the positives of re-establishing 'Mandy'. I feel more whole than I have ever felt in my life.

My dad is an Anglican minister and he summed it up best. He said: 'Some marriages do die on earth'.

I'm glad I got married. It was a good life experience, and I would definitely do it again.

I've tried a blind date. It was the worst date I've had. He had just come through a very traumatic relationship so I spent the evening counselling him.

My best date was unexpected. I met a man at a function, and it grew into a very serious relationship that lasted for a long time.

If I don't meet Mr Right, I will most certainly consider adoption. I would love to give a life opportunity to a kid who has nothing.

There is no such thing as an ideal partner, but I would like a man who is fun, comfortable as my equal, tolerant, adventurous, self-assured and capable of great love. Men are fantastic!



## DEBBIE ROBERT, 38

**I was married for seven years** and the first two were fine. But when my son was born, my husband was either working or partying with friends. He drank too much. It became a huge problem.

Before going through a divorce you should be certain it's what you want. You've got to believe in yourself and your actions one hundred percent.

My sister was my pillar of strength. She still is. I don't know how I would have done it without her. Her comfort and support meant the world to me. After my divorce I felt unworthy, hurt, disillusioned. I had no self-confidence.

I want to meet a real gentleman, someone who is not interested in my past but interested in me as a person. A perfect date would be with someone who loves and is passionate about life. Someone who is confident about who he is. I don't like men who talk too much, who are self-obsessed and brag about their financial status. I like conversations without awkward silences.

The biggest challenge of dating after a divorce is finding your self-esteem and self-confidence – and above all, being able to trust again.

My son will be 13 soon and sometimes I feel sad that he is on his own. I have happy memories of growing up with siblings.

I believe there are some good men out there. You just have to look really hard to find one.



‘Gushing about your new partner can be very painful for your children,’ she says. ‘Rather gush to your friends.’ Keep your sex life out of their lives, especially if they are teenagers and are facing their own emerging sexuality at the same time.

When faced with a new person in your life, your children may feel very afraid: do your best to assure them that they will never lose you; that though your relationship with them will change with a new partner, they are still your top priority. Show them that you’re not going anywhere.

‘What often happens is that the children get moved between parents when a serious new dating partner comes onto the scene,’ says Dooley. ‘This is really hurtful for them: they can feel deeply rejected.’

Still, with the right amount of wisdom and time, these tricky situations can be resolved. ‘It’s good to strive for a working relationship with the biological father,’ says Liz. ‘And to really put yourself in your children’s shoes when making tricky decisions.’ ❀

## KIM STEVENS-TAYLOR, 29

I had Carolyn young. Things didn’t work out with her father. I chose to do it alone.

I’ve always had the most supportive friends around me. Anyone who does not understand the depth of love and commitment you have for your child should not be considered a friend.

When you have a child, you become more selective. I was always more comfortable dating someone that I knew as a friend first, or who knew a friend of mine.

My parents encouraged me to go out and meet new people, particularly in the first three years of Caro’s life. That way I could be a committed mom and a young single person.

Caro’s initial reaction to my dates wasn’t as important as her long-term relationship with them. Men were always known as friends of mommy’s. It was too complicated to explain boyfriends to her at such a young age.

After my one and only blind date, I went home and cried for hours. After that I thought I’d never get the dating thing right.

I had one very meaningful relationship, but we went our separate ways for good reasons and we remain friends.

Five years ago, when Caro was six, I met my husband, Jason. I was looking after two little girls (friends’ children) for a few weeks. We met through another single mom at Caro’s school and he invited me to a braai at his house. When I arrived at the braai with

three little girls and a nappy bag and he didn’t drop dead, I knew he was probably the one.

I didn’t always believe in marriage. Jay and I had our son Michael three years before tying the knot. But it suddenly became important to be married. It is wonderful to have that piece of paper with our commitment stamped on it.

Some of my friendships have fallen away because of my marriage. But my true friends remain true friends. I don’t belong to the ‘single mothers’ clique at my kids’ schools anymore, and sometimes I miss that camaraderie.

Caro was on holiday with my parents when Jason proposed. He phoned her and said, ‘Caro, I’m going to marry your mommy if that’s okay with you?’ And she turned to my mom and said, ‘Jay and Mommy are getting married; that means I have a real dad now.’ And everyone cried.

Single moms need men with a sense of humour. When a date is cancelled due to a tummy bug, a babysitter not pitching up or an urgent homework assignment, you need a man who won’t take it personally.

Dating moms should be honest with their kids. If ‘other men’ become a dark secret, your children will resent and fear the men you date.

Your kids are always going to be the most important factors in your life. The men you date must not only be able to deal with that, they must embrace it. If they can’t love your kids, then they can’t love you.