

## It's Never Too Late to Learn How to Date

Recently, I celebrated my 62<sup>nd</sup> birthday. Well, maybe celebrated is too strong of a characterization. I *acknowledged* my birthday. I *admitted* to my age. I no longer *denied* that I was getting older. It's actually written all over my face. It still surprises me some days, when I'm feeling like a 35 or 40-year-old *inside* and I look in the mirror and I'm quickly reminded about the laws of gravity. In the spirit of complete disclosure, I must admit that at heart I'm a very youthful person, most of my friends are, and partners have been, younger than me. It wasn't until the last couple of years when I turned 60 that I began to realize that my body was beginning to betray me and when in public, I started to become invisible. Yes, there's a strange phenomenon that occurs in our Western youth culture, age is not valued and many people stop looking and paying attention to you. Basically, I stopped turning heads and sales clerks began looking right past me.

Now, I typically don't like to whine. I'm a glass half-full kind of girl, so when I also became single a few years ago, yes I said few, not a month, not a year, but four years ago, I was a little surprised that after a 15 year relationship, I'd have to learn how to date all over again. And, when I thought about it for a moment, I realized, I never did a whole lot of dating, I was pretty practiced at serial monogamy and didn't leave much time pass in between relationships. In fact, I've spent many years in therapy and sat in circles recovering from addictions, behaviors and compulsions that didn't serve me that it wasn't until recently that I truly became a suitable candidate for an emotionally healthy relationship. Now as luck would have it, and I do consider myself a lucky person despite the fact I was born on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, I won a complimentary registration to the Madison Lesbian and Queer Women's Dating Seminar and Salon.

The timing was perfect. I was finished grieving my last relationship and learned how to live as a single person again; in fact, I truly enjoy most aspects of my solitary life. I have intimate friendships, good relations with family, a home, job and avocations that feed my spirit. My life is full, well almost full. I discovered there's still a space in my heart, my day-to-day life *and my bed* to share with another person. Off to the dating seminar I went.

Close to two dozen single women met on a sunny January, Saturday afternoon at a coffeehouse in Madison. The café was closed to the public for our seminar but a barista was on hand to get us all sufficiently caffeinated. Amber our coach and seminar leader was prepared for our arrival with nametags and easel with pad and markers. There was also a box of stuffed animals which momentarily gave me pause. Amber encouraged us to get something to drink and mingle until everyone arrived.

Now, before I go any further let me reassure you that I will not disclose any confidences and my sister seminar participants shall remain anonymous. What I will share is that I discovered ***it's never too late to learn how to date.***

I grabbed a cappuccino, filled out a nametag and began circulating with the women who would share the afternoon, learning how to date. I soon realized, as is often the case in our LGBTQ community, just

how small it is here in Madison. Though we are lucky to live in a predominately tolerant, open, and supportive city, and some would say we even have our own zip code, “Let me hear it now — “5-3-7-0-4,” the dating pool here is pretty dinky. And, for some of us, if you’ve lived here awhile as I have, you’re bound to bump into people you know and share a history.

By the time all the participants arrived, I determined I knew, or at least met, half of the women in the room before. There was a friend I’ve known for more than 25 years, women who’ve attended social groups with me, others who I may have been introduced to once or twice out and about in the community, someone who dated a friend of mine, and even a fan, who greeted me with, “Haven’t I seen you on stage before?” Needless to say, I was both reminded of how long I’ve lived in Madison and how visible I am in the community, and at the same time, could probably diagram one of those charts of “Six degrees of Linda.” When attempting to date this poses a challenge, all my relationship history, yes, the good, the bad, and the ugly, follows me around town and was present in this café today.

I soon learned the purpose of the box of plush animals. After introductions and an overview of the seminar sessions and follow-up consult with our dating coach, we participated in one of those exercises to get us moving around to help learn each other’s names and interact while we tossed the pastel-colored, cuddly creatures back and forth to each other in a circle. We talked about relationship deal-breakers, activities and hobbies we’d like to share with dates, and places we might go to meet potential partners. We completed surveys and shared our lists in round robin, one-on-ones. We tried to define a date, shared our experiences, and identified the challenges we’ve encountered. I was surprised at how quickly the two hours passed. It was energizing.

Amber gave us our assignments for the next week, yes, we had homework to do. We were to design the “Perfect Date,” draft our online profile, and complete our dating readiness questionnaire. We gave each other hugs, expressed our desire to compile a contact list for the group, said our good-byes and were out the door.

The next week, Session II seemed to fly by lickety-split as well. Amber and her partner role-played the dos and don’ts of how to ask someone on a date. We shared the “Perfect Dates” we each designed, read our online profiles and discussed the pros, cons, pitfalls and success stories of online dating. We reviewed our activity lists to help each other with where to connect with women who had the same interests. Before we said our final good-byes, we completed the obligatory seminar evaluation and made plans with each other to have dinner and see a movie together in the coming week. Amber thanked us for our participation, and we her, for her coaching and instruction. She would follow-up with each of us, to schedule a one-on-one consult.

First, if you would ask me if I’d recommend the Madison Lesbian and Queer Women’s Dating Seminar and Salon, I would respond with an enthusiastic, yes. Did I get any dates out of the experience? No. Did I learn anything? Absolutely!

My take-away from the experience is dating, like most worthwhile endeavors in life, requires preparation, practice, identifying what you want and don't want, the ability to develop an effective public relations and marketing plan, knowing when you're ready to date, and most importantly doing what you love and showing up at the places where you can meet others of a like mind.

For me, personally, I learned for the first time in my life, that I'm happy as a single person; I'm not looking for the woman who will "complete me," and I'm pickier than I've ever been. That's probably a good thing. With age, comes wisdom. When Valentine's Day approached, did I have a date for that day? No, but that's okay. I have a life, a life full of myself and as advertised in the dating seminar and the theme of a popular lesbian film, I'm hopeful, "The girl is out there!"