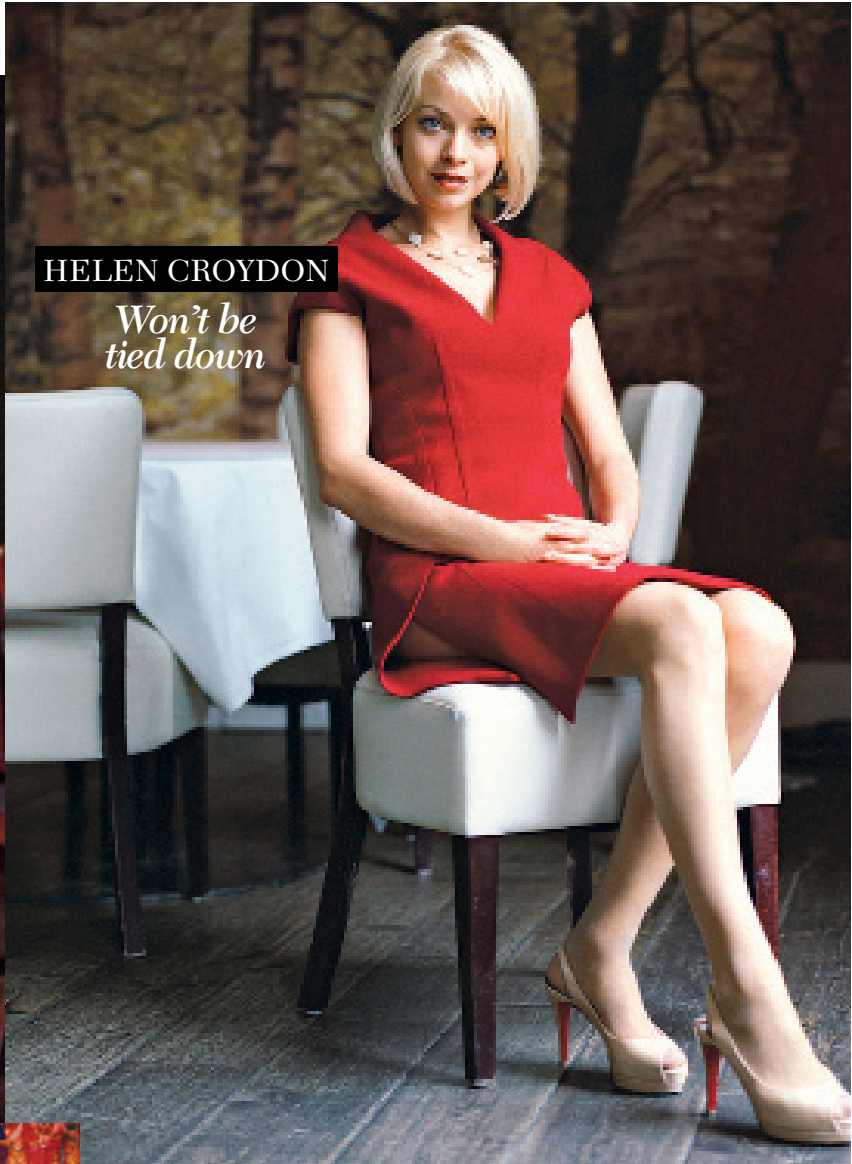




JANE CZYZELSKA

Dating without drinking



HELEN CROYDON

Won't be tied down



LIZA CAMPBELL

Older, wiser... but happier?



MARIA ROBERTS

Trying to fit men around motherhood

The dating diaries

CAN YOU FLIRT WITHOUT DRINKING? HOW DO YOU MEET MEN IF YOU'RE A SINGLE MOTHER? FOUR WOMEN SHARE THEIR WILDLY DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO DATING

HELEN CROYDON, 33

"I've never pretended to offer commitment"

I find it frustrating when friends assume that because I date I must be desperately searching for a soulmate. When I divulge that I'm only interested in casual dating they think that means drunk, baseless sex with a stranger. There's a huge area between those two extremes that is overlooked and which I've found rewarding, enjoyable and far less complicated than what some of my single female peers put themselves through.

After coming out of a two-and-a-half-year relationship, I have been happily single for three years. I am not at all interested in casual sex with someone I have just met, but neither do I want to invest in a full-time relationship where I feel obliged to meet his family, learn his friends' names and plan every weekend together. I've found several dating companions, either through friends, colleagues, evenings out or internet dating. We will typically meet three to four times a month and consider ourselves free to date other people at the same time. I call it a low-maintenance relationship. It's based on genuine chemistry and physical attraction, but we don't have the dreaded, unspoken question looming over us as to where the relationship is heading.

The key to any relationship is honesty, whether it's a friendship, a fling or a serious relationship. I've never pretended to offer a high level of commitment. Yet I know men and women who see no longevity in a new relationship, but continue to give the impression that they do, simply to keep the other person's affections alive.

I acknowledge, though, that because I am not prepared to invest a great deal of time in a relationship, I cannot expect a lot back. I definitely can't call on any of my low-maintenance dates to deal with a DIY emergency, for instance, nor expect them to be an on-demand shoulder to cry on. But that doesn't mean I can't enjoy the things they can offer – stimulating conversation, fun and a level of friendship. As long as neither of us deludes

ourselves that our relationship is more than what it is, we have an honest and respectful union.

I spoke to a girlfriend recently who was putting herself through torture, weighing up the positive and negatives of a guy she had seen four times. If she enjoys his company she should continue to see him, but she shouldn't have her heart set on moulding him into husband material. I have never felt a strong urge to start a family, which may be why a less involved style of dating suits me. But I think even people seeking a long-term relationship can benefit from my approach.

I don't suggest that every singleton should give up looking for a secure, trusting relationship and take up casual dating. But I do think the dating scene should be open to other options outside the conventional model. It is very difficult to find someone who can wear all the hats of passionate lover, trusted confidant, pillar of support, life coach and domestic helper. High expectations will only lead to anguish. Dating is far more rewarding if we define the kind of role we want a partner to play in our lives.

JANE CZYZSELSKA, 41

"I asked her if I could kiss her. She said no"

Like swans, lesbians are supposed to mate for life. At least that's the myth. I'm not quite sure where this came from because gay girls have enjoyed such a rich and ribald history of polyamory. Right up until my mid-30s, I strayed from the path of monogamous righteousness, sometimes with the blessing of my partner and on the odd, shameful occasion, without.

These days I prefer to keep it simple; I'm a serial monogamist. Lord knows lesbian dating is complicated enough. It's not just the multi-partnering that I've given up; I finally called time on drinking in April 2004 after a nasty 15-year bender. Dating without a drink was a hurdle, at first. Fortunately, a friend introduced me to a beautiful woman and, hallelujah, she was teetotal, too.

Sadly, that relationship didn't work out, but in the few years since then I've discovered that alcohol isn't a prerequisite to dating, although lesbians do tend to drink more than our straight counterparts. On my first date with V, the →

aforementioned woman, I was dreading the thought of making a move on her. Casting my mind back, I realised this was the first time I'd been sober with a girl since I kissed Sally Hopkins in the playground, aged 15. I'd invited V round to mine for dinner and I talked all manner of gibberish until midnight, by which time I'd summoned up the courage to ask if I could kiss her. She said no, but it didn't take long to persuade her.

I've tended to choose older women as partners – that sexy, experienced thing – but there have been issues. One gorgeous creature said her anxiety about her own body interfered with our sexual relationship. I'm not sure whether that was the sole cause of our break-up, but an intimate, uninhibited sex life is crucial to me. Sometimes it's simpler to focus on one *bête noire* than look at the big picture. There were lovely moments – beautiful words we uttered in limerence like lesbian John Donnes. But in truth, I don't think I was ever confident enough in us to give myself to her in full and perhaps she sensed that and reciprocated.

There's a part of me that, until recently, has resisted the other lesbian myth of “merging”. Men and women are different by design, so there's a helpful emotional distance created by the gender divide in heterosexual relationships. Some lesbian couples can end up like mini-mes, especially those close in age. You can often spot the long-term couple by the shared wardrobe, hairstyle and mannerisms. It's enough to send an emotional ostrich like me running in the opposite direction.

Things have started to shift, though. I've been dating a little closer to my age. In fact, the woman I've just started seeing is a good eight years younger. It's early days but I have a good feeling. I used to think that shared interests and similarities were basic requirements for a successful relationship, but I've realised those things aren't necessarily that important – it's a sunny approach to life that really clinches it for me. “How much do you think we have in common?” my new girl asked me recently. “Enough to keep us both interested,” I replied. And that seems as good a reason as any to give this a shot.

MARIA ROBERTS, 33

“My son hurt his leg. I cut short the date”



My dating patterns as a single mother are so different to those of my childless friends. Sunday mornings followed by long lunches and slow evenings watching a film simply don't happen. The mobile can't be switched off. When on a date, I want it to move quickly. He either likes me, or he doesn't. Time is in short supply and I can't be languid with my affections – that probably explains why one past boyfriend called me intense.

I wouldn't label myself single, but rather “between boyfriends”. Single is too decisive a word and I figure that if I've managed to bag boyfriends in the past, I can do it again.

I've met them on work assignments, through friends or at events. The common thread is that I've met men when I've been doing things I'm interested in, not on a blind date, at a party or on the internet.

Including my son Jack's father, whom I dated on and off for four years, I have had five relationships that Jack has known about, and many he has not. As he approaches his teenage years, I don't want my son to think it's okay to be promiscuous. Nor do I want him to lose respect for me as a mother. It now feels wrong to introduce him to yet another boyfriend who will not turn into my significant other. In the past six years I've had two relationships with men who became a presence in Jack's life. The first, Rhodri, was my age, and worked as a carer. Like us, he was dark-haired with brown eyes, so it was often assumed he was Jack's father. Rhodri was slow and careful with his involvement with my son. “I don't want to be his replacement dad,” he said. Two years later he moved in with us and the long journey to meld them together began. Rhodri had been happy to take a back seat, but children do not allow adults to choose when to opt in and out of parenting and Jack didn't always accept his authority.

The second, and most recent boyfriend, Harry, was a blond, blue-eyed, 34-year-old academic. I shed a tear when we first kissed. I thought he was my soulmate. He said that if he was going to be with me, then he would make great efforts with my son. I had only dated Harry for two months when he met Jack.

Wow – what a disaster.

Because I felt certain of Harry, I let my barriers down. We didn't date so much as spend all our time together as a freshly made family. Jack's struggle to use a knife and fork neatly really irritated Harry; in my opinion he had a totally unrealistic view of what “a well-mannered” child was. I wasn't prepared to force Jack to change to please someone who might not stick around.

Harry wanted to backtrack and so we tried to “date”, but that didn't work because I needed to be a mum, too. On one such night Jack fell and hurt his leg. I cut short the date and went to him. Harry said this indicated things to come, if we had children. And so we broke up. I did wonder if it had everything to do with me being a single mum.

I am not weary of dating, but am becoming more cautious of it. I'm trying to find the “right” way of dating as a single mother. I suspect there isn't one. I have dated many different types of men, but never a single or co-parenting father. Perhaps I should start.

LIZA CAMPBELL, 51

“I have ended an affair because of the way he slurped coffee”



At 51, “on the dating scene” is a slightly ludicrous description of being “alone”; maybe more precisely it means “alone, but not chatting to myself out loud yet”. I have two almost grown-up children, one ex-husband and a bouquet of ex-boyfriends, all of whom are people I'm pleased to see. I have only ever once been

asked out “on a date” by someone using those words, to the theatre. The guy pulled that teenage arm-across-the-back-of-the-seat stunt as we sat down. Over dinner we quarrelled about

HOW WE DATE AROUND THE WORLD

FROM PUB DATES IN ENGLAND TO KARAOKE AND BBQs IN THE PACIFIC RIM, CLAIR WEAVER EXPLORES HOW LOVE BLOSSOMS AROUND THE GLOBE

USA

Americans don't shy away from asking someone they just met if they'd like to go on a date – man or woman – and are more open about their intentions, actively finding out about each other to determine if they want to take things further.

MEXICO

Romance is paramount: men strive to be macho, suggesting a date, paying the bill, giving compliments and opening doors, while women are taught to accentuate their femininity.

UK

Historically, reserved Brits are more likely to ask a prospective partner to “go for a drink” at a pub rather than ask them on an official date. That's because the alcohol, as you might have guessed, often helps both parties to relax.

ITALY

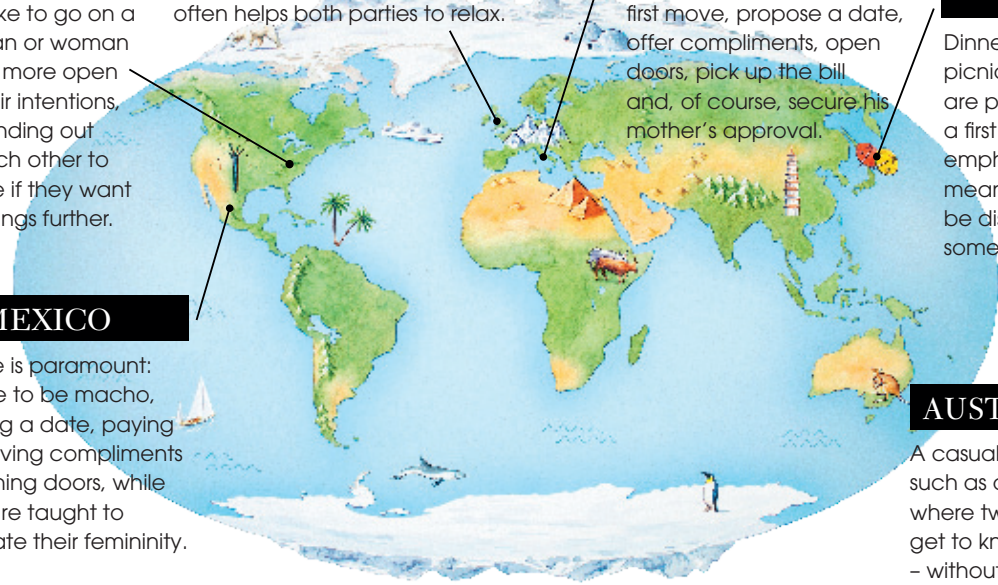
Flirting is virtually a national pastime, though it remains a heavily patriarchal society. As such, the man is expected to make the first move, propose a date, offer compliments, open doors, pick up the bill and, of course, secure his mother's approval.

JAPAN

Dinner and a movie, picnics or karaoke nights are popular choices for a first date, but a cultural emphasis on modesty means it's important to be discreet when asking someone out.

AUSTRALIA

A casual group environment such as a party or barbecue where two people can get to know one another – without the pressure of a formal date – is often the springboard for romance.



Lenin; the date was not repeated. Every other date I've been on I've sat across the table thinking, “Are we ‘on a date’? Or is this ‘just dinner’? Is it a date, even if it's never referred to as such?”

In America there are much clearer rules about all this. For example, I've heard that accepting the third date is tacitly agreeing to the relationship becoming physical. Here, there's a morbid dread about admitting you're sizing someone up as a mate.

My track record in this area is less Formula One than safari rally in the wet season. At my age it helps that one is less enslaved to rampaging hormones. Aware of my myriad imperfections, I now also make a much bigger effort to be tolerant. In the past I have ended an affair because of the way he slurped his coffee, another after he played “air oboe” to a piece of music – as if air guitar wasn't crime enough.

I look back at my teens as a kind of Dark Ages of glorious chaos, followed by the big love affairs of my 20s – one of which led to marriage. By my 30s, I was suddenly a single parent with a baby and a toddler. Dating while bringing up children is complicated; however, over the past 16 years I managed several relationships of differing depths. Now my children are flying the nest and I can approach dating with a more carefree attitude.

The problem is, if the statistics are to be believed, the odds of finding a partner are stacked against me. The newly coined “cougars”, 40- or 50-something divorcees who attract droves of younger men, appear to be the exception rather than the rule. Most of my single girlfriends find it slim

pickings out there and, though they joke about it, they tend to blame themselves. I find this lack of confidence strange because, in all other aspects, women in their 50s are self-possessed and poised, and when I look around at parties they look fabulous while most of the men the same age look like crumpled paper bags.

At least once a day I'm asked if I've “found someone”; it feels as if I'll be considered a freak until I say yes. Friends often try to matchmake, but that's an art in itself; one in which the matchmaker's ego has to be removed from the equation. People need to be put together without knowing what the matchmaker is up to – that way the pair can talk without the pressure of expectations.

What I miss about having a boyfriend is sharing the details of my life, the nattering, the intimacy, the solace of touching someone else's flesh without a second thought. Sometimes the whole idea of making an effort to meet someone new seems exhausting and yet it's as if I'm hardwired to keep having a go at this monumentally inexact science.

Much has changed for me in the way I regard men, myself and romance. A man is going to have to tick an awful lot of boxes before I hand him the T-shirt. It may be a contradiction in terms, but at this stage in my life, while I may still be “on the dating scene”, I'm no longer sure I'm looking for a mate. There is no happy ever after, only happy here and now. **m**

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