

Relationships can overcome age gap

BY ANNE REBAR
Columnist

Cougar, puma, gold-digger, cradle-robber, grave-robber, silver fox, sugar daddy — the list could go on and on. So many labels have been created to describe those in relationships with a considerable age gap that one runs the risk of earning one, however undesired it might be.

Dating someone years younger or older than you might raise a few eyebrows, but how much does it really matter in a relationship? The answer, like pretty much all matters of the heart, depends. Age is certainly a factor — although the older we get the less the actual number means — but there are many other things to consider besides age itself.

Diana Vilibert, editor at Marie Claire, wrote in a column that elements like maturity, life experience, future goals, background and career all can hold just as much or more importance than age in how well a relationship might work out.

Sure, maturity and life experience generally come with age

— I must say I know some 22- and 23-year-olds with equal or greater maturity than some 35-year-olds, while others' personal growth seems to have been stunted around age 18.

It's much more likely those with higher maturity levels would have more luck dating someone older than sticking within their own age group and dealing with an overgrown teenager.

Couples with an age gap do have many more hurdles to overcome than the average couple. People of different ages are often at different

places in their lives — someone older might be ready to settle

down and start a family, while that thought might send a carefree college student into a fit of cold sweats and heart palpitations.

Talking about what each person in the relationship wants is important, and if it differs greatly, no matter if you were born in the same year or different decades, you're going to have to compromise or part ways. I know people my age who would get married tomorrow if given the chance and others

who want to wait until they finish medical school or law school before even looking for a signifi-

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cant other. Like maturity, I don't think age can be a concrete factor in determining which people are ready for relationships.

Couples like Jay-Z and Beyoncé Knowles (a 12-year age difference), Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones (a 35-year age difference), and Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore (a 16-year age difference) demonstrate that a significant age gap does not inherently spell doom for a relationship. Psychiatrist Dr. Gail Saltz said that relationships always will be about managing hurdles, and if it's not the age difference, there's guaranteed to be something else.

While an age difference shouldn't be a deal breaker for a relationship, differences become especially apparent the younger

one member of the couple is. The age difference between a 20- and a 30-year-old is usually much more noticeable than the difference between a 30- and a 40-year old, so it's likely to be a much more challenging hurdle to overcome.

The bottom line is this: While age is a factor in a relationship, by no means is it the biggest or hardest obstacle to overcome. A good relationship has a lot to do with what you have in common. If a couple is like-minded, intellectually compatible, in love and one of the few things they don't have in common is a birth date, what's really more important? Being close in age, or close in those other ways that really make a relationship work? I'd have to say, in this case, the heart wins out.



BY ELIZABETH NECKA
Columnist

The typical Saturday dancing at Wrongdaddy's is more than a night out on the town — it's an evolutionarily-driven mating call.

A male friend and I frequently try to decode each others' dating woes. He gets into the brains of the guys I'm interested in, and I try to explain what women might mean through their mixed messages.

For example, consider the woman who pays him excessive flirty attention but is involved in a steady relationship. Sometimes I can't justify or explain the mixed messages because I myself don't even understand why she might send them.

Maybe it's not something she's conscious of doing. Although we think that only we can explain our actions, it's easy to forget that there's a force bigger than ourselves working on us: evolution. Although Darwin's original theory has started to accumulate dust, psychologists still are finding ways in which it applies to the brain every day.

Evolutionarily speaking, animals are driven to pass their genes on to a new generation through reproduction. Recently, psychologists at the University of Vienna, Austria demonstrated that women

The Truman Experiment: Evolutionary biology affects women's dating behavior

pull out their most effective flirting behavior when they are most fertile and apt to conceive. Compared to women across different stages of their menstruation cycle, women in ovulation dressed to show the most amount of skin and danced with the most exaggerated arm movements.

Researchers used photographs and videos of actual women from night clubs in Vienna who consented to participate in the study. After taking a swab of spit to determine where they were in their cycle, the psychologists analyzed the percentage of skin that the women showed. Using computer-programming, they deciphered the degree of movement in their dancing. Another study from researchers at the University of Aberdeen suggested that during ovulation, slight imperfections in a woman's face, such as asymmetry or skin tone irregularities, correct themselves naturally so that she seems prettier. The women who were physically most ready to conceive a child were the ones whose behavior and appearance were most likely to attract attention from men.

Similarly, lap dancers earned significantly more tips when they were ovulating than when they were not ovulating, according to psychologists at the University of New Mexico. Unfortunately for lap dancers on contraceptives, which inhibit ovulation, they did not experience any increase in tips at all throughout the study. Whether the women's dance patterns were more suggestive while they were ovulating or their ovulation hormones induced a more positive reaction from men,

female reproductive biology had clear implications on the way they behaved socially.

Where the mixed signals come in is the surprising catch in the Vienna nightclub research. Of the women ovulating, those whose behavior was the most inviting were the ones who were in long-term committed relationships. These women had left their beau at home for a night out with the girls but seemed to be open to approaches from strangers. Perhaps they thought they could dance freely in a flirty manner, knowing that nothing could come of the innocent flirting because their boyfriends were at home. Maybe the women liked to feel desired by strangers. Or, according to the researchers, perhaps they were helping to promote sexual competition.

During ovulation, women are most attracted to men with extremely polarized masculine features, even in spite of their general preferences. This is because highly masculine faces signify high levels of testosterone, which promote healthy sperm and increase a woman's likelihood to conceive. Women in ovulation place more importance on a man's status and ability to provide for their future children when considering attractiveness. Although the women themselves might deny having even the remotest desire for children, female evolutionary biology indicates otherwise. Healthy competition between males means the women have a better chance of choosing the best mate.

I'm an optimist and would like to think that the women at the club weren't all be-

ing unfaithful to their significant others. Rather, their behavior was inexplicable because of a force that's been rolling for billions of years. Although these women probably were not intentionally trying to conceive that night or even anytime soon, their behavior was not entirely in their control.

Evolutionary psychology, though informative, certainly makes women out to be vicious and competitive. It speaks true to the fact that we send mixed signals (oops). Sometimes I wish dating were as simple as finding the best genes that would potentially produce the healthiest offspring. It would take away a lot of the charade and confusion that befuddles my dating life.

But then again, evolutionary psychology completely throws romance, chivalry and love out the window. It's lucky that, though we are animal in our primal instincts, humans have evolved to a more sophisticated level of interaction. If we didn't have any reason for dating other than for the fittest to survive, then the world might become eerily similar to Hitler's Aryan race.

Next time I go out dancing, you can be sure that I will be very aware of the way that I move and what I indicate to the opposite sex. It will take a conscious effort to overcome the power of my evolutionary biology and avoid sending mixed signals. Then again, maybe what's out of my control will work to my advantage, and I'll attract the attention of the hot guy I have my eye on across the room.

MEDITATIONS OF MICHELLE: Enneagram targets root of ego

BY MICHELLE MARTIN
Columnist

Maybe back in the playground days, the kid you really wanted to be best friends with shot you down in rejection. Maybe you had a tumultuous home life that molded you into a peacemaker who would never cause trouble for others. Maybe you could never measure up to your dad's standards, or maybe you always felt endangered.

When we are young, we put our whole trust in people, and at some point, someone fails us. Your parents or friends spurn you, the world bores or scares you or someone takes advantage of you. You unconsciously build up a protective guard so this will not happen again. Thus, most people spend their lives developing an entire personality around defending themselves from these fears. This is your ego: a set of defense mechanisms and insecurities designed to satisfy your desire for security. The ego is your individuality and self-image. It's the part of you that contains wants and needs, and it rages when these aren't met.

Enter the Enneagram, a psycho-spiritual personality typing system rooted in the mystical

traditions of Sufism and the Kabbalah. Maybe you took the MBTI or the Big Five in psych class, but unlike these systems, which measure your thought processes, Enneagram hits the root of your troubles, the heart of your motivations. And once you pinpoint your type, Enneagram doesn't box you into some category. It identifies your own automatic ego tendencies so you can free yourself from them.

Enneagram views your personality as a constant cycle of wants and needs that twists and turns forever without ever satisfying you on a deeper level. But have faith, because this system does not limit you to these tendencies. You can be liberated from the constant clinging and worry by learning to see through your harmful instincts and drives — a long but infinitely rewarding process. Although we will have an ego for as long as we live, I think we can learn to see through its tricks so they no longer control our actions.

Enneagram has helped me immensely. Since I discovered it in a workshop more than four years ago, I have had a pretty firm idea of what I've spent my life hiding from — fear of rejection stemming from elementary and mid-

dle school experiences. Because I believed I was inadequately different and therefore rejectable, I tried to prove my worth to others and myself by emphasizing my uniqueness and living in an inner world of emotions. The constant effort I spent maintaining this image was not worth the few moments of triumph I felt when my vision was satisfied.

I'm learning to see myself as a continuous process rather than a fixed entity, which ideally means I no longer have to define my worth to anyone. I'm still trekking the road to liberation and will be for a while, but so far the process of letting go has been infinitely rewarding.

There are nine different Enneagram types: the perfectionist, the giver, the achiever, the romantic, the observer, the loyal-

ist, the enthusiast, the challenger and the peacemaker.

All types are connected. Each one displays tendencies of other types when stressed or secure. For

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example, when an observer becomes stressed, he or she could take on the negative traits of the enthusiast — like procrastination and bad focus — and when secure, the withdrawn observer develops the commanding presence of a challenger. You will see bits and pieces of yourself within the entire Enneagram, but pay attention to how well you identify with the root dilemma of each type rather than the traits.

What's causing the turmoil? The best way to discover your Enneagram type is to talk with someone who knows a lot about Enneagram. The second best way is to read about the differ-



ent type descriptions, which you can find at enneagraminstitute.com. Taking a test probably is one of the least effective ways to discover your type (tests measure traits while Enneagram measures root impulses), but it can point you in the right direction. Free tests are available at enneagram.net.

Chances are you won't like your type at first because no one likes to face their shadow side. Pay attention to that. Once, I diagnosed another romantic, and when I talked about the underlying sense of shame felt by most romantics, he exclaimed (while turning red), "We don't talk about those!"

Eventually you start to see your patterns of emotions, thought and instinct surfacing, and you stop riding up and down the waves. You start seeing them just as patterns, not as a roller coaster you constantly have to ride.