

HOME & FAMILY (/HOME-FAMILY/)

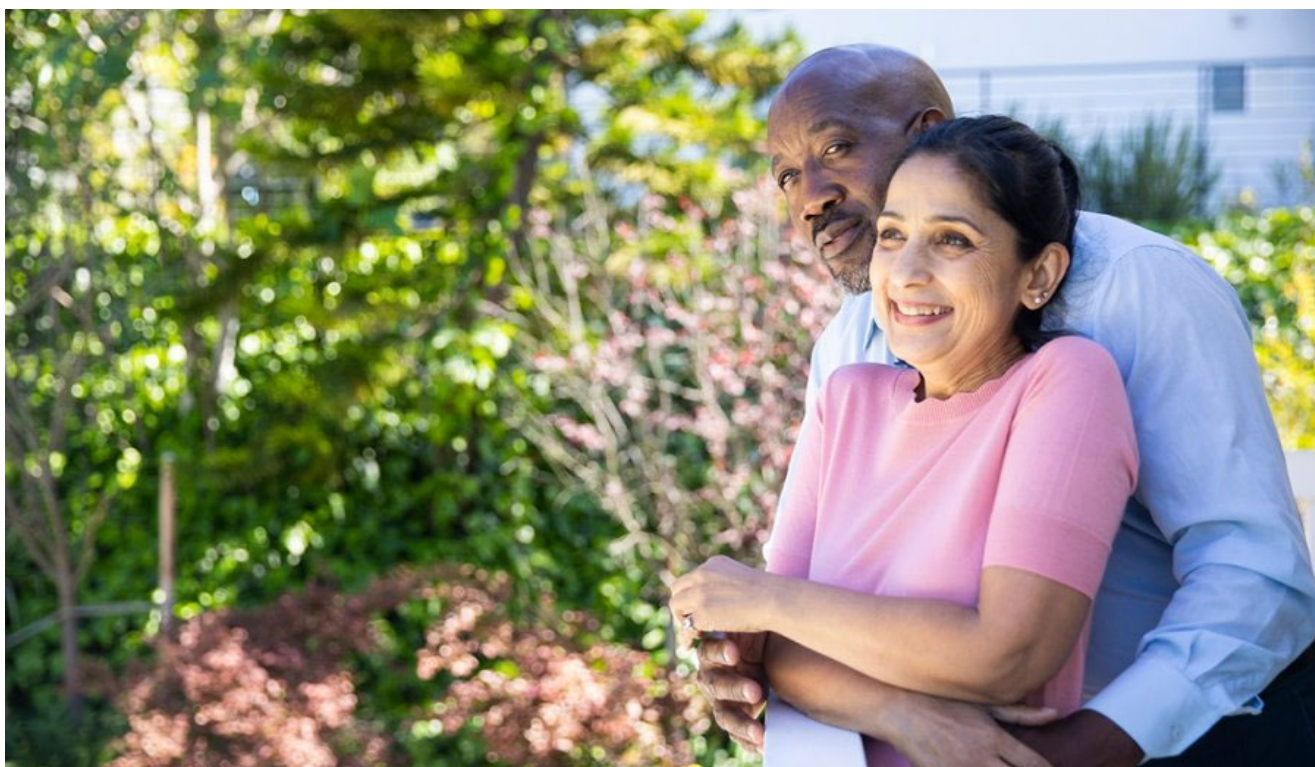
Family & Friends



5 Tips for Dating a Widow or Widower

A romance with someone who has lost a spouse may progress at a different pace

by Robin L. Flanigan, [AARP \(http://www.aarp.org\)](http://www.aarp.org), February 16, 2021 | Comments: 1



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It can be hard to interpret the signals when diving into the dating pool at an older age. But when romance involves someone whose spouse has died, confusion may come with the territory.

A widow or widower's reactions to the dating process don't always follow the same patterns as

those of people who are divorced or have never married. Surviving spouses may feel torn between honoring the memory of their deceased loved one and pursuing their own happiness. They may wrestle with feelings of guilt — not only about being alive, but for “cheating” on their spouse who has passed away.

Dating a widow or widower may take patience, a willingness to embrace the spouse who has died, and a commitment to step gingerly when it comes to introductions to friends and family. And it's not right for everyone. The result, though, can be a positive, successful bond.

"The wound is deep but it can be healed," says Maureen Bobo, 52, chief executive of public relations for [Hope for Widows Foundation \(https://hopeforwidows.org/\)](https://hopeforwidows.org/), an international organization based in Forney, Texas. "You just want to make sure that you tread lightly."

1. Assess the circumstances

Maureen Bobo

COURTESY MAUREEN BOBO

Taking

things slowly, emphasizing deep conversations, and communication are keys to allow the relationship to progress at its own pace, Bobo says.

But because not all grief is alike, finding out how the former spouse died may shed light on what you're getting into. "Sudden and unexpected losses produce more intense traumatic reactions and have more pronounced [grief symptoms \(/home-family/caregiving/info-2014/caregiving-grieving-death-bereavement.html\)](/home-family/caregiving/info-2014/caregiving-grieving-death-bereavement.html)," notes Peter A. Lichtenberg, a clinical psychologist and gerontologist at Wayne State University in Detroit. He has been a widower twice.

And even when a widow or widower is open to another romantic partnership, that doesn't mean the deceased spouse has been forgotten.

"The relationship never goes away," and that may be difficult for a potential partner to accept, says Lichtenberg, 61.

His current wife, of two years, Debra, recognizes that Lichtenberg will always maintain emotional ties to Becky, who died suddenly of undiagnosed heart disease, and Susan, who died after a nearly four-year battle with breast cancer.

Fred Colby, 72, author of *Widower to Widower: Surviving the End of Your Most Important Relationship*, says that a woman who encourages a widower to share his story fully — and that includes insight on his relationship with his spouse — will be much more apt to have a successful future with him.

Fred Colby

COURTESY FRED COLBY

"Widowers have fewer opportunities to tell their story than widows," because they typically have fewer close friends than women have and divulge much less, explains Colby, of Fort Collins, Colorado. "So, they are often more desperate to tell it when they have a willing partner."

2. Watch for red flags

It can be hard for a widow or widower to feel comfortable introducing a new partner to family and friends — or, for some, even to be seen in the community. There's often a concern that people will think they must not have loved their spouse if they're seen dating a new partner.

Abel Keogh, of Saratoga Springs, Utah, remembers holding off on telling people he'd started dating after losing his wife to suicide. Since then he has written four books on widower relationships, including *Dating a Widower*.

Keogh says that while taking some time to get used to the idea of a new partner is normal, a few telltale signs suggest that the widow or widower is not quite ready to date. Some examples might be:

- Over time you're consistently not invited to the widow or widower's family gatherings because, you're told, "They're not ready to meet you."
- You're in a serious relationship but introduced as a "friend" to someone your partner runs into in public.
- You're asked to hide or leave the room when someone drops by your partner's place unexpectedly.

3. Communicate your relationship needs and goals

If you've got questions about where your relationship stands — or is heading — simply ask.

"If the widow or widower sees an actual future with you, they should be able to define to some degree what that is," Keogh says.

Can the person visualize you two being exclusive? Or taking things to the next level, whatever that is?

"It's when they balk and can't define what they want — that's usually a sign that they maybe don't even know what they want," Keogh adds. "Maybe they're just kind of happy to have someone in their life."

4. Don't let yourself be a consolation prize

Similarities to the deceased spouse seen in photos around the house might be a tip-off that a new partner is doing little else than filling a void. Also, notice if conversations routinely revert to memories that start with "We used to ..."

If the new significant other starts feeling more like a consolation prize than a romantic partner, it's

time for a heart-to-heart.

Just be sure not to nag, get angry, cry, make demands or complain about being hurt.

You don't want to negotiate for first place, says Denise Medany, author of *One Heart Too Many: Facing the Challenges of Loving a Widower*.

Medany offers this advice for those starting this conversation: "Calmly tell the widower what it feels like to be on the receiving end of these issues and then wait and watch to see what he does with this information. If nothing changes, then it's best to withdraw and make yourself scarce, which gives him a chance to realize what he could be losing in the present because of his inability to let go of the past."

Keogh agrees.

"The mistake I see is that people say, 'Well, I'll get used to it. It'll get better.' And then they're a year or two in and nothing's changed," he points out. If you're dating a widow or widower and haven't gotten comfortable with the parameters of the relationship within 90 days, "it's probably not going to get better."

5. Tread lightly when it comes to children

Parenthood can complicate matters. Getting children on board with a new relationship can be tricky — another reason to take things slowly. You don't want children — whether young or adults — to feel like you're trying to replace their mother or father.

A lot of the concern, on everyone's part, is rooted in doubt and fear. That's not automatically a problem, as long as the surviving spouse ultimately is truly ready for another relationship.

For instance, Sharon Walsh had no intentions of dating six months after losing her husband unexpectedly. But that's what happened. The 53-year-old, who lives in Canandaigua, New York, initially thought she wasn't going to be open to another relationship [out of fear of another loss](/home-family/friends-family/info-2021/death-cafes.html) (</home-family/friends-family/info-2021/death-cafes.html>).

Through therapy, contemplation and a few dates with a "sweet, gentle and understanding" man, however, she realized she needed to be more open.

"I am learning to stop imagining dire outcomes and to just let the future unfold," she says. "It's rarely as scary as my active imagination predicts it to be. I feel as if I can handle anything now."

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[A collage of couples - dating during the pandemic](/home-family/friends-family/info-2021/dating-profiles-pandemic.html)
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