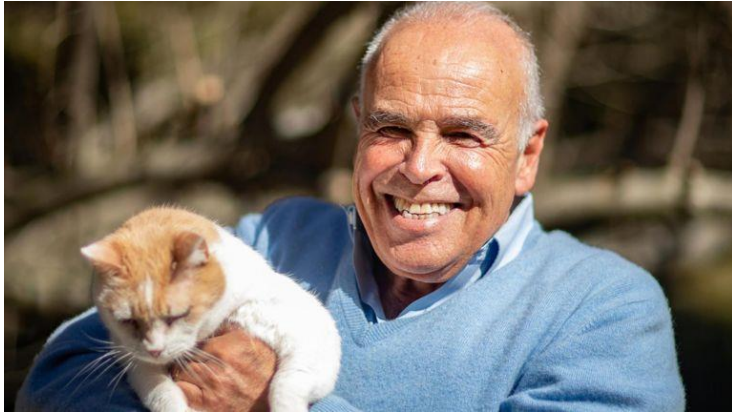


Newsday

Finding love over 50 during the pandemic

By Deidre S. Greben

March 19, 2021



Like many Long Islanders who found themselves furloughed from jobs and homebound because of the novel coronavirus, Laurie Bellocchio turned her attention toward a long-ignored to-do list.

"I painted every room in my house, put down flooring in the living room, made an office into a yoga retreat, and then I joined a group of women in my town and started sewing masks," she said, naming a few newly popular pursuits. What Bellocchio, who is divorced, certainly didn't expect during these unprecedented times was to see a Sprinter van limo pull up outside her Huntington home.

"I'm still amazed by it," she said of the lavish set of wheels her found-in-lockdown beau and now-fiance, Tommy Horan of Upper Brookville, rented in May for their first date. "This way we could be far apart. I thought it was an amazing, sweet idea. We drove out to Orient, had a picnic dinner and watched the sunset."

While COVID-19 has impeded nearly every aspect of daily life, it has, counterintuitively, been a boon for adult singles looking for love and companionship. "The pandemic has given Cupid a leg up," said Helen Fisher, who has a doctorate in biological anthropology and is the chief scientific advisor of the online dating conglomerate Match Group, which includes such apps as Match, Hinge, Tinder, Plenty of Fish and OurTime (designed specifically for the over-50 crowd).

There has been a significant surge in the number of dating-app users since the "lockdown" era began. According to the Brookings Institution, for the second quarter of 2020, Match Group reported a 15% increase in new subscribers and a single-day record of 3 billion Tinder swipes. An increasing number of those swipers, the Pew Research Center reported, are senior adults, one of the fastest-growing segments of online romance seekers.

"OurTime is booming," noted Fisher, 75, who counts herself among those finding love later in life, tying the knot last summer. "Even 30 years ago, people my age were expected to move in with their children. More and more, they are behaving like younger people. It's our basic brain system. You can feel scared at age 2 and 92. Romantic love is the same."

Video here to stay

A defining trend of the recent dating renaissance, according to Fisher, is the dramatic rise of video chatting in the online courtship process, with the dating app feature shifting from 6% of users before the pandemic to 19% since.

Deciding to take a break from the endless texting and ghosting (suddenly ending all communication without explanation) that comes with online dating, Bellocchio said she clicked one final time on a "like" she received on the dating app Bumble. "Greetings from the fun and fabulous world of quarantined online dating!" she responded. The exchange quickly moved to text then phone. "We talked every night, then switched to FaceTime," she said. "There were nights that we talked for six hours, but it felt like 30 minutes. You truly get to know someone this way."

"It's more intimate," explained Fisher of video chatting. "People are having longer, more meaningful conversations. It is less about asking how many siblings you have and more about inquiring, 'How are you coping?' 'What are you doing?' "

It's also practical. With video chatting, there is no need to wear a mask that conceals half your face or stand six feet apart. And, noted Fisher, "you don't waste a lot of time, money and sex in the vetting process." If an in-person meeting is ultimately arranged, it is generally more relaxed, she contended. "You already know what their homes look like, the way they dress, the way they laugh."

Michael Barcham of Woodbury said he prefers Zoom events over dating apps as a way to meet potential love interests. "I am one of those people who love social interaction and Zoom is a wonderful, easy way to attain it. If you look, meetings are plentiful," said the 71-year-old, who has been virtually attending programs sponsored by SAGE-LI, a division of the LGBT Network that serves members age 50 and up. "I attend at least one Zoom meeting per day, usually two, occasionally three. I am sure that due to these meetings, when it is healthy and safe, we will have more personal contact."

'A screening tool'

Heidi Krantz, a certified life and dating coach based in Plainview, also noted the increase and value of video-chat use. "To a certain degree, it's a screening tool with which you can save yourself from disappointment — and time and energy." Like Fisher, Krantz predicts live video will endure past the pandemic as a vital step of modern-day wooing. "It has its advantages. It slows down the physical element and allows you time to evaluate if the person has the traits you are looking for in a partner," she explained. "When there is a real connection, people will get tested for the virus and isolate in order to see each other. Holding hands, a kiss or putting an arm around one another requires a lot of forethought."

The top traits valued in a partner, it turns out, are the same for both older and younger people looking for love. According to Fisher, studies reveal that a person who exhibits respect, trust and humor, as well as makes enough money to support themselves and is seen as physically attractive, is considered the ideal sweetheart. "No one wants to be with a lazy, cheap, depressed drama queen," she said. "It doesn't change with age."

Two years into her search for that special someone after the breakup of her 37-year marriage, Pat Castillo of East Islip met her dream guy. "Just when I was ready to give up, in the middle of this pandemic, I found my soul mate who checked off every box and then some," said Castillo, 67.

A veteran of online and speed dating, singles support groups and matchmakers, she credited her success to doing her "homework" — that is, identifying and sticking to a list of must-haves and deal-breakers in a prospective companion, an exercise Krantz promotes.

Though with the restrictions of social-distancing, putting the lessons Castillo learned into practice was considerably more challenging. Then a "like" she received on Facebook Dating led to a 20-minute text conversation, a phone call, a five-hour in-person talk by the water in Freeport — and a wedding planned for August to Al Perreca, 71, of Farmingdale. "It's never too late to live happily ever after," she said.

"I see a lot of determination. People are reaching out to break the isolation and loneliness," said Krantz, who also hosts a dating podcast and television series, and is a regular guest speaker at singles events.

"If you are of like minds, I think you can maneuver [within the restrictions of the pandemic]," said Jackie B., a divorced 64-year-old who preferred not to disclose her last name as it is in her dating profile. "You can walk in a park. The plan doesn't have to be elaborate. Being with a person is the important thing."

Jackie has looked to Krantz for occasional advice since she saw her at a pre-pandemic speaking engagement at a Long Island restaurant, the location of one of many workshops and activities Jackie has gone to arranged by 7 in Heaven Singles Events (7 for the number of minutes per "date" at its events) across Nassau and Suffolk counties.

Gail Adams, who started 7 in Heaven in 2008 (and met her second husband seven years in, ironically, at one of its outings), noted the comfort many over-50 singles feel attending group events. "We are more vulnerable," explained Adams. "A lot of us have been married many years, and this is all new territory."

Just getting out

While in the early and winter months of pandemic isolation, Adams was forced to cancel all of 7 in Heaven's programs, she has been able to offer COVID-friendly outdoor activities — golfing, kayaking, horseback riding, ziplining — as weather and infection rates have permitted.

"There has been a notably different attitude," Adams said of the response to these events. "There used to be a fair amount of nitpicking, but now everyone is just grateful to be able to get out and meet people again."

The desire "to get out" was what Jay Rosensweig had in mind when he pivoted his Long Island Speed Dating, launched in Merrick in 2003, to both virtual speed dating — rotating participants through different breakout rooms — and "speed-date walking."

"People are so grateful for the socialization," he said, describing how he sends pairs of attendees on walks around the perimeter of parks, and after five to seven minutes has the pair split to meet with the next "date" — wearing masks and remaining six feet apart. "In the past the goal was focused on connecting with someone, but now people are also really happy for the exercise," he said.

Organized outdoor walks prompted by COVID-19, said Wendy K. (who preferred not to use her full name), are what connected — or rather, reconnected — the Old Bethpage resident with Alan R. of

Plainview, whom she had dated a handful of times but the timing, it turned out, wasn't right. The coronavirus, however, provided the perfect moment. "In early spring we found ourselves on a group hiking excursion and spent much of the time chatting. We began meeting for marathon hikes in Trail View park [in Woodbury], which evolved into walks along the beach at Tobay," she said. "In the midst of an unprecedented pandemic that rendered overwhelming feelings of isolation, loneliness and despair, I found my soul mate."

Social isolation, LGBT Network President and CEO David Kilmnick pointed out, is something LGBT elders have more experience navigating. "When growing up they could lose their lives — their jobs and housing — seeking companionship and love," he said. They have also experienced the AIDS crisis.

Noting a message worthy of us all, Kilmnick said: "They are not going to let a pandemic slow them down. They have learned through a lifetime of having to struggle that when it comes to finding love, there is no time to waste."

Dating tips for the pandemic era

A year ago, according to WebMD, the majority of senior citizens wanted to wait until after the pandemic to date in-person. Months later, that number significantly decreased. Here are some guidelines for staying safe.

- Be selective and clarify the qualities that matter to you most in a potential partner.
- Spend time video chatting: For dating at any age, it's the new normal.
- If you are going to meet in person, be creative about the outing and consult local COVID-19 protocols.
- Discuss your preferences about protection from the virus beforehand.
- Never send money to someone you have only met online.

— **Deidre S. Greben**