

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS WORKBOOK

Dating Again

A practical workbook for dating after divorce and dating in your 40s and beyond

Client-Facing Workbook

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Version 1.0, January 2025

A note before you begin

Dating again can bring hope, grief, excitement, awkwardness, desire, fear, and fatigue, sometimes in the same week. You do not need to erase your history or become fearless before meeting someone. This workbook is designed to help you date without losing contact with yourself.

It was written for adults in their forties and fifties who are dating after divorce, after loss, or for the first time in a long while. It is not a list of tips. It walks you through the inside work first, because one of the most common mistakes people make at this stage is getting the profile right while the heart is still somewhere else. Then it gets practical: where to look, what to say, how to stay safe, how to pace a new connection, and how to protect your children and your money while you do it.

Use with care

This workbook is educational and is not a substitute for therapy, medical care, legal advice, or emergency support. If someone is threatening, controlling, stalking, coercing, or harming you, put safety first and seek local professional support. You do not owe continued access or an in-person conversation when safety is uncertain.

If you are in crisis or thinking about harming yourself, call or text 988 in the United States, or go to the nearest emergency room. Outside the United States, contact your local emergency or crisis service. The National Domestic Violence Hotline (US) is 1-800-799-7233.

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Two ways to use this

With a therapist. Your therapist will assign chapters and talk them through with you. Do the writing before the session. Bring what surprised you.

On your own. Go in order. Do not skip Chapters 2 through 5 even though Chapter 6 is where the apps are. Give yourself at least a week per chapter. If a chapter brings up more than you can carry, that is information, not failure. The last pages tell you when it is time to bring in a professional.

A few ground rules

- Write in the book, or in a notebook if you would rather. The writing is the work. Reading it is not.
- Be honest with yourself here. Nobody is grading it.
- You are allowed to be angry and hopeful and turned on in the same afternoon. None of those mean you are doing this wrong.
- If you have children, they are in this workbook because they are in your life. That is not a burden to apologize for.
- Nothing here assumes you want to get married again. Some people do. Some want a companion and their own kitchen. Both count.

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Followed by: when to bring in a professional, and sources and further reading.

Chapter 1: What am I ready for?

What this chapter will help you do

Replace the pressure to be ready in every way with a clearer understanding of what you are ready for now.

Readiness is not one switch. You might be ready to meet people but not ready for exclusivity. You might be open to affection but not ready to introduce someone to your children. Grief does not mean you must wait, and loneliness does not mean you must rush. Take a reading of where you are today. You will come back to this page later to see what moved.

1.1 The basics

How long ago did your marriage or relationship end? When did it end in your head, which may be a different date?

Who ended it, and how? One or two sentences is fine for now. Chapter 2 gives you more room.

Have you dated since? What happened?

What made you pick up this workbook this week, rather than last month or next year?

1.2 My readiness map

I am interested in dating because...

I feel pressure to date because...

I am hoping a relationship will add...

I may be hoping a relationship will take away...

I have emotional space right now for...

I do not have space right now for...

1.3 Readiness by area

Rate each area from 0 (not ready) to 5 (ready enough to begin with care). Circle the number and add a note.

Area	Rating	Notes
Messaging or talking	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Meeting in person	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Physical affection	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Sexual activity	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Dating more than one person	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Exclusivity	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Introducing children or family	0 1 2 3 4 5	
Changing routines or making future plans	0 1 2 3 4 5	

What are you ready for, under what conditions, and what is still tender?

1.4 Quick self-check

Rate each of these from 0 to 10. There are no right answers.

How often does your former partner show up in your head on an ordinary day?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = almost never, 10 = most of the day

How often do you check their social media, location, or what they are up to?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = never, 10 = daily or more

If someone you liked stopped texting back, how hard would it hit you this week?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = a shrug, 10 = a lost weekend

How clear are you on who you are, outside of your job and your family roles?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = no idea, 10 = very clear

How full is your life right now without a partner in it: friends, activities, rest, pleasure?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = work and chores, 10 = full

How much do you want to date, on a gut level?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = not at all, 10 = ready tonight

How much do you feel you should date, because of age, friends, or the calendar?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

0 = no pressure, 10 = a lot of pressure

If your first three numbers are high, your nervous system is still pointed at the person you lost. That is normal, and it is the reason Chapter 2 comes before Chapter 6. If the fourth and fifth are low, Chapter 3 will be the most useful thing in this book. If the last number is much higher than the one before it, pay attention: dating because you should is a hard way to start.

1.5 Why you want this

Check every one that applies. Then look at the list and be honest about which ones are driving.

- ☐ I miss having a partner to share life with.
- ☐ I want sex and physical closeness.
- ☐ I am lonely, most of all on the nights the kids are away.
- ☐ My friends and family think it is time.
- ☐ I want to prove to my ex, or to myself, that someone would want me.

- ☐ I want a distraction from how I feel.
- ☐ I want to remarry or live with someone again.
- ☐ I want companionship but not a shared household.
- ☐ I do not want to be alone when I am old.
- ☐ I am curious who I am with someone new.

Which two are the strongest? What do you notice about them?

A word about readiness

You have almost certainly been told that you need to be completely healed before you date again. I do not think that is true, and I have watched it keep people on the sidelines for years. Healing does not have a finish line. You can still carry grief or anger about what ended and be capable of something good with someone new. The better question is whether you can stay connected to yourself while you date. Can you sit with not knowing? Can you say what you mean? Can you hold a line when someone pushes it? Can you notice when a new person is a way to stop hurting, or a way to prove you are still wanted? Those are the things this workbook helps with. None of them require you to be finished grieving.

2.2 Version two: the story your ex would tell

This one is hard and it matters. Write the story as your former partner would tell it, in their voice, with as much fairness as you can manage. You do not have to agree with it. You just have to be able to write it.

2.3 Version three: the fair observer

Now imagine someone wise who watched the whole relationship from the beginning, who liked you both, and who has no stake in who was right. Write what they saw. Include what each of you did and did not do, and when things started to turn.

[illegible]

What was in the third version that was not in the first?

2.4 What I learned

What did my marriage or long-term relationship teach me about love?

What did I learn about conflict, dependence, sex, trust, and asking for what I need?

What part of myself became smaller in that relationship?

What strengths did I develop?

What do I want to do another way, without overcorrecting? Make it specific and doable, like "I would say I was unhappy in the first month instead of the fifth year."

2.5 The rebound in either direction

After a painful relationship, people sometimes choose the exact opposite. This can feel safer, but "different from my ex" is not the same as "right for me."

Qualities I may be idealizing because they are the opposite of my former partner:

The deeper need beneath those qualities may be:

2.6 The losses nobody brought a casserole for

Divorce is a loss without a funeral. Even if you chose it, even if you are relieved, you lost things. Some of them are obvious. Some of them you may not have let yourself count. List them here, including the future you expected. Include the small ones.

What I lost	Have I let myself grieve it? (yes, some, no)
The future we planned	
Being someone's person	
My in-laws, or some of them	
Holidays the way they were	
Friends who picked a side	
The house, the neighborhood	
Half of my children's childhood	
Being married, as an identity	
Financial security	

what they are about: notice the trigger, put a delay between the urge and the action, and do something else with your hands.

When do you check? What happens right before? (The kids come home from their house, a quiet evening, after a drink.)

What could you do instead in that moment? Pick something you can do in under two minutes.

Week	Times I checked	What triggered it	What I did instead (if anything)

2.9 If there was betrayal

If your relationship ended in an affair or another kind of betrayal, the story above may have been almost impossible to write in three versions, and that is expected. Betrayal is an injury, not just a loss. It is worth working with a therapist on this piece, and if EMDR is available to you, it is often helpful for the memory of finding out. For now, write the unsent letter. Say everything. Do not send it.

Chapter 3: My life, identity, and values now

What this chapter will help you do

Date from the person you are now, not from the role you once held.

When a long relationship ends, the answer to "who am I" goes blurry. You were half of a "we." You were the one who handled the money, or the one who did not. You were somebody's spouse at every party. Many of those roles are gone, and what is left can feel like a stranger. This chapter is about getting to know that person, because they are the one who is going to be dating. Do not rush it. People who skip this chapter write dating profiles that could belong to anyone, and then attract people who could be anyone.

3.1 Who I am now

Outside of being someone's partner, I am...

I feel most like myself when...

The parts of my life I want to protect are...

The parts of my life I would enjoy sharing are...

In this season, intimacy means...

I tend to abandon myself in relationships by...

3.2 Small preferences

For one week, notice what you choose when nobody else is choosing. What you eat when you cook only for yourself. What you watch when the house is empty. Which way you turn on a walk. Write them here as you notice them. Small is the point.

3.3 The inventory

Fill in each line with something that is true of you now, not something that was true of you as a spouse or that you think a partner would want to hear.

Three things I love doing, that I would do even if nobody ever knew:

Three things I am good at (be specific, not modest):

Three things I used to love that I stopped doing during the relationship:

Three things I believe about how people should treat each other:

Something about me that my ex never understood or valued:

Something about me that I am not proud of and would like to work on:

What I want my life to feel like, most days, five years from now:

3.4 The parts you put away

Most people set parts of themselves aside in a long relationship. Sometimes to keep the peace, sometimes because there was no room. Some of those parts want back in.

Part of me I put away	Why I put it away	Do I want it back? (Y/N)

3.5 Your body

Your body is different than it was the last time you dated. So is everyone's. Perimenopause, erectile changes, weight, scars, illness, medication, a bad knee. Most people carry more shame about this than they need to, and most of that shame gets in the way of dating long before a date ever happens.

What has changed about your body since you last dated, and how do you feel about it?

Is there anything medical that affects sex or intimacy for you that you have not had checked? (Pain, dryness, erection changes, low desire, a health condition.) Write it here and then make the appointment.

When was the last time you thought of yourself as a sexual person? What would help you feel that way again, on your own, before anyone else is involved?

3.6 The life you have without a partner

The best thing you can do for your dating life is build a single life that is good. Not as a consolation prize. As a foundation. People who date from a full life choose better and survive rejection better. People who date from an empty week take whoever fills it. Map a normal week. Then add two things: one that involves other people and one that is just for you.

Day	What is already there	What I will add
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		

Day	What is already there	What I will add
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Who knows you are thinking about dating? If the answer is nobody, who could you tell this week?

3.7 What I will not abandon again

List routines, friendships, goals, values, parenting commitments, spiritual practices, health needs, or parts of your identity that deserve protection no matter who comes along.

Chapter 4: How I love: patterns and activation

What this chapter will help you do

Know your own moves under closeness and distance so you can catch them at week three instead of year three.

Everyone has a pattern in relationships. It comes from childhood and gets shaped by every relationship since, including the one that just ended. The pattern is a set of moves your nervous system makes when it feels close to someone or afraid of losing them. You did not choose it and it is not a character defect.

One thing I see again and again with adults dating in midlife: you run a career, a household, and a custody calendar, and none of that competence transfers to the moment a text goes unanswered for four hours. Your attachment system can make you feel much younger and far less steady than you do in the rest of your life. That gap between how capable you are everywhere else and how unsteady you feel here is not a sign that something is wrong with you. It is a common experience for people who have been hurt, and knowing your pattern is one way to narrow the gap.

4.1 The four patterns, in plain language

Pattern	When you feel distance from someone you love, you tend to...	In dating, it looks like...
Anxious	Reach harder. Text more, ask for reassurance, read tone into delays, worry they are pulling away.	Over-texting, needing to define things early, feeling sick when they take hours to reply, mistaking intensity for connection.
Avoidant	Pull back. Get busy, find flaws, feel crowded, tell yourself you do not need anyone.	Canceling dates, losing interest right when it gets close, preferring texting to meeting, picking people who are unavailable.
Fearful	Both at once. Want closeness and fear it. Pursue, then flee.	Hot and cold, drawn to people who are also hot and cold, exhausted by your own reactions.
Secure	Notice, name it, ask. Trust that it will be all right either way.	Pacing that feels comfortable, saying what you want, walking away from what does not fit without a crisis.

Which one is closest to you? Which one was closest to your ex?

4.2 The cycle you had

Most couples have a cycle, a loop they get stuck in. One pulls, the other pushes, and both feel alone. Write yours. Be honest about your half.

When I felt far from my partner, what did I do? (Get quiet, get busy, get critical, get clingy, get controlling, get out of the house.)

What did my partner do in response?

And then what did I do?

How did it end, most times? Who broke the loop, and how?

4.3 My activation patterns

When attraction or uncertainty shows up, most of us run one of these. Check the ones you recognize.

- ☐ **Move closer fast:** more messages, reassurance seeking, fantasy, over-disclosure.
- ☐ **Move away fast:** numbness, criticism, disappearing, sudden loss of interest.
- ☐ **Perform:** become more agreeable than you are, more impressive, sexual, useful, or low-needs.
- ☐ **Rescue:** take responsibility for the other person's feelings, problems, or potential.
- ☐ **Replace:** return to swiping to avoid disappointment or vulnerability.

My most common pattern is...

What it is trying to protect me from...

Why this matters

That cycle will try to happen again with someone new. It will start small: a text that takes too long, a night they seem distant. You will feel the pull to do what you always did. You will not stop feeling the pull. What you can do is notice it, name it, and do one thing another way.

4.4 Lessons, not verdicts

People come out of divorce with verdicts: "I pick the wrong people." "I am too much." "I cannot trust anyone." Verdicts are useless because they give you nothing to do. Lessons are different. A lesson is specific, about you, and points forward. Turn each verdict into a lesson. Example: "I am too much" becomes "I asked for reassurance instead of saying what I was afraid of; next time I will name the fear."

Verdict I have been carrying	The lesson underneath it

4.5 What I will do another way

Three to five things. Behavioral. Things you could do in a first month, not a fifth year.

Chapter 5: My dating compass

What this chapter will help you do

Separate chemistry from compatibility, character, and capacity.

Compass point	Questions to ask
Chemistry	Am I attracted, curious, energized, comfortable, or turned on?
Compatibility	Could our values, lifestyle, time, sex, money, family, and future direction work together?
Character	Do I observe honesty, accountability, kindness, respect, and repair?
Capacity	Does this person have the time, emotional availability, stability, and willingness to build?

Remember

Chemistry is real information. It is not the whole decision. A person can be exciting and unavailable, kind and incompatible, or a strong match on paper without creating desire.

A client once said to me, about a long relationship, "If I met him today, I would not choose him." She was not describing a bad marriage. She was describing the distance between who she had been when she chose and who she had become. The compass exists so that you choose as the person you are now. The question worth asking of anyone you date is not only whether you love them. It is whether the person you have become would still choose this, a year in, five years in. That question can hold grief and honesty and incompatibility and growth all at once, and it is worth asking early.

5.1 Essential, preferred, flexible

Essential for a healthy relationship:

Preferred, and I would feel the absence:

Flexible or negotiable:

Deal breakers or safety concerns:

Review each "essential." Is it the true need, or a shortcut for the need? Example: "advanced degree" might be a shortcut for curiosity and respect for learning. "Tall" might be a shortcut for feeling protected. Rewrite the shortcuts as the need underneath.

5.2 What shape do you want?

Not everyone at this age wants to remarry or share a house. Some people want a partner and their own front door. Some want to live together without marriage. Some want marriage. Some, after a long monogamous marriage, are considering an open or consensually nonmonogamous arrangement, and that is a legitimate thing to think through with care rather than drift into. All of these are real relationships. Decide what you want, rather than what your parents, your faith community, or your friends expect.

If you are dating within the LGBTQ+ community, some of this workbook will fit and some will need translating. You may be dating in your own community for the first time after a heterosexual marriage, which makes you a beginner and an experienced adult at the same time. Disclosure carries extra weight: to whom, when, and how much of your history and identity you share with a new person, with your children, with family, and with a community that may be small. Use the disclosure map in Chapter 9 with those questions in mind.

If I could design the shape of a relationship for the next ten years, it would look like:

Chapter 6: Getting out there, and apps without losing myself

What this chapter will help you do

Widen where connection can happen, and build an app practice that protects your time, attention, privacy, and nervous system.

6.1 Where connection happens

The apps are one option. They are not the only one, and for many people over 40 they are not the best one. About one in six Americans over 50 has ever used a dating app, and a lot of midlife couples still meet through friends, work, faith communities, and shared activities. Widen the field. Check the ones you would consider, then circle two you will try this month.

- ☐ A dating app or site (see 6.2 for choosing one)
- ☐ Asking friends to introduce me to someone
- ☐ A group built around something I like: hiking, running, cooking, book club, volunteering, a sport
- ☐ My faith community or a group within it
- ☐ An adult education class
- ☐ Events for divorced or single people in my area
- ☐ Saying yes to invitations I tend to decline
- ☐ Being visible at things I already go to, instead of leaving early

6.2 If you use an app

A few honest things about apps at this age. They work for some people and they are hard on almost everyone. Women over 50 report negative experiences more often than men. Ghosting is common enough that it says nothing about you. Many conversations never become dates, and many first dates do not lead to a second. That is how the numbers tend to run, not a report card on you.

Choose an app by who is on it. The ones aimed at younger users skew toward casual. The ones with longer profiles and a paid tier skew toward people who want something. Ask friends your age what they use. Do not run three apps at once when you are starting; one is plenty.

6.3 My app agreement

I will use dating apps on these days and times:

My maximum number of active conversations is:

My maximum number of first dates per month before I pause and reassess is:

Information I will not share early includes:

My signs that I need a break are:

Before I delete the app on impulse or swipe for reassurance, I will:

My goal for the next two weeks is a behavior I control, such as:

6.4 Your profile

A good profile at this age is specific and warm, and it tells the truth about your life. It sounds like you, not like a résumé and not like a list of demands. It does not mention your ex. It does not say what you do not want. It uses recent photos, including at least one that shows your whole body and one where you are laughing at something real. Build it here.

Two things I love doing (specific: "Saturday hikes with bad coffee," not "the outdoors"):

One thing that shows my sense of humor or a quirk:

One or two things I am looking for, stated in the positive ("someone who notices when I go quiet," not "no drama"):

The honest facts: kids, what I want (serious, companionship, open to seeing), anything a match should know early:

Draft it. Then read it out loud. Does it sound like you? Would a friend recognize you from it?

Profile check

- ☐ My photos are recent and recognizable.
- ☐ My profile shows something about my real life.
- ☐ I name what I want without demanding certainty from a stranger.
- ☐ I have not included identifying information about my children, home, workplace, finances, or routines.
- ☐ I am not misrepresenting my age, relationship status, body, or intentions.

The two most common profile mistakes

The first is a profile written to avoid rejection. It is pleasant and says nothing, and it attracts people who also say nothing. The second is a profile written by the wound: a list of what you will not tolerate. It reads as anger, because it is. If either of those is you, that is fine. Go back to Chapter 2 or Chapter 3 for a week and come back.

6.5 Before and after app check-in

Use this any time you open the app for the first few weeks. It takes thirty seconds and it keeps the app from using you.

Before	After
What am I feeling?	What am I feeling now?
What am I seeking?	Did my behavior match that need?
How long will I use the app?	What do I want to do next?

6.6 Safety

Read this even if you think you do not need it. Above all then.

- ☐ Video chat before meeting in person. If they will not, do not meet.
- ☐ First meeting in a public place, daytime or early evening, for a set length of time.
- ☐ Drive yourself or take your own ride. Do not get picked up.
- ☐ Tell a friend who you are meeting, where, and when you will check in.
- ☐ Keep your last name, workplace, and home address to yourself until you have met a few times.
- ☐ Do a reverse image search on their photos. It takes two minutes.
- ☐ Trust discomfort. You do not need a reason to leave.

6.7 Romance scams

People in the United States report losing hundreds of millions of dollars to romance and confidence scams each year, and the real losses are likely higher because many people never report what happened. Scammers target people who are newly divorced or widowed on purpose. They are patient and skilled, and the people they fool are not foolish. Learn the pattern so you can see it. Common elements of the pattern include:

- Fast intimacy. Declarations of love or deep connection within days.
- A reason they cannot meet or video chat: overseas for work, on an oil rig, deployed, a bad camera.
- A move off the app to text, WhatsApp, or email early on.
- A crisis. A medical bill, a customs fee, a frozen account, a plane ticket.
- A request for money, gift cards, or cryptocurrency, often with a promise to pay it back.

The rule

Never send money, gift cards, or crypto to anyone you have not met in person, for any reason, no matter how real it feels. If you think you may be talking to a scammer, show the messages to someone you trust. If you have already sent money, report it at reportfraud.ftc.gov and tell someone. You are not the first and it is not your fault.

Chapter 7: First dates, pacing, and uncertainty

What this chapter will help you do

Stay open while allowing enough time for reality to become visible.

A first date is ninety minutes of finding out whether you want a second one. It is not an audition, though it will feel like one, and most of them will not lead anywhere. That is what they are for.

7.1 Before the date

- ☐ I know where we are meeting, and I chose somewhere I feel comfortable.
- ☐ I know when it ends. I have somewhere to be after.
- ☐ A friend knows where I am.
- ☐ I have decided what I will and will not share about my divorce (short version: it ended, here is one sentence, moving on).
- ☐ I have decided in advance about physical contact tonight.
- ☐ I have something planned for after, whether it goes well or not.

What am I most nervous about? What would I tell a friend who was nervous about the same thing?

7.2 During the date

Three things to pay attention to, in this order.

- **What you notice about them.** How they talk about their ex. How they treat the server. Whether they ask you anything. Whether they listen to the answer.
- **What you notice about yourself.** Are you performing? Are you interviewing? Are you braced for something? Are you able to be curious?
- **What your body does.** Restless, calm, tight, warm, checked out. Your body is often ahead of your head, and it is worth learning its language.

7.3 The debrief

Do this within a day of every date, at least for the first several. It takes five minutes and it teaches you more than the date did.

Date	What I noticed about them	What I noticed about me	What my body did	Second date? (Y/N/maybe)

After three or four dates, look at the "what I noticed about me" column. Is there a pattern?

7.4 Event, story, urge, choice

When something happens that stirs you up, a slow reply, a great second date, a cancelled plan, walk it through these six steps before you act.

What happened that a camera could record?

What story did my mind add?

What did I feel in my body?

What did I want to do right away?

What response would protect both openness and self-respect?

What additional information can time provide?

Pacing statement

I can like someone without knowing where this will go. I can gather information without forcing certainty. I can keep living my life while a connection develops.

The strongest opinion in this workbook is here. Pace by evidence, not by intensity. How strongly you feel about someone tells you about you. What they do across weeks, under small stresses, when you say no to something, tells you about them. I have sat with many people untangling a life that became shared before trust had time to form: leases, children who had grown attached, money that could not be separated without a fight. I would much rather help you tolerate the discomfort of a slow pace. It is the easier problem by a wide margin.

7.5 Rejection, ghosting, and the numbers

Someone will not text back. Someone will say they did not feel a connection. Someone will vanish after a good date. All of this will happen and none of it is a verdict on you. Decide now what you will do in the first hour after it happens, because in the moment you will not decide well.

When it happens, in the first hour I will:

I will call or text:

I will not: (message them again, check their profile, open a bottle of wine alone, decide I am unlovable)

The math

Many conversations do not become dates. Many first dates do not become second dates. Many second dates do not become relationships. If you are doing everything right, you will still go on a lot of dates that lead nowhere. That is the cost of finding someone. It was always the cost. You just did not have to pay it for a long time.

7.6 When to take a break

Dating fatigue is real. If you notice that you are dreading the app, that every profile looks the same, or that you are saying yes to people you do not like because you are tired, stop for a month. Fill the month with the things from Chapter 3. Come back when you are curious again.

Chapter 8: Communication and boundaries

What this chapter will help you do

Use direct, proportionate language instead of guessing, testing, hinting, or over-explaining.

A great deal of the pain in early dating comes from things that were never said. Complete these scripts in your own voice so the words are ready before you need them.

8.1 Scripts in my own words

Intentions: "I am dating because... What I hope to build is..."

Pacing: "I enjoy spending time with you, and I want to..."

Contact: "The amount of contact that works for me is..."

Privacy: "I am not comfortable sharing..."

Clarity: "We have been seeing each other for... I would like to talk about..."

Boundary: "I am not available for... If that continues, I will..."

8.2 The exclusivity conversation

Do not assume. People at this age often think they are exclusive and discover their partner is still on the apps. When you know you want it, say so in plain words, and treat their answer as information.

How I will say it: (Try: "I have stopped seeing other people and I would like us to be exclusive. Where are you with that?")

If they are not ready, what does that mean to me, and what will I do?

8.3 Boundary check

Before you set a boundary, run it through these five questions.

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1. What am I protecting?
2. Is my request clear and specific about behavior?
3. What will I do if the boundary is not respected?
4. Am I setting a boundary or trying to control the other person?
5. Does it feel safe to say this out loud?

A boundary I need to set, run through the five questions:

8.4 Repair

Every relationship has ruptures. What predicts whether it lasts is not the absence of conflict but whether you can repair. The moves are simple: name what happened, own your part, ask what they need, and do not let it sit for days. Practice on the small ones so you can do it on the big ones.

The last rupture, small or large, and how it was repaired or not:

Chapter 9: Consent, sex, and sexual health

What this chapter will help you do

Make room for pleasure, honesty, safety, body changes, and ongoing consent.

Adult sexuality changes with stress, aging, menopause, medications, illness, pain, body image, caregiving, and relationship history. There is no single correct pace and no requirement that sex follow a particular script. Consent is specific, ongoing, informed, given without pressure, and reversible. This chapter is about decisions that go better when they are made at your kitchen table on a Tuesday than in a parking lot at eleven at night.

9.1 Your pace

Some people want to wait for exclusivity. Some want to find out early whether there is chemistry. Some want to wait for marriage. What does not work is not deciding, and then feeling used or feeling like you missed something. One more thing, and I do not bend on it: watch for sex being asked to do a job it cannot do. It cannot secure a commitment. It cannot prove you are over your divorce. It cannot settle a doubt you have about the relationship. If you notice it being used for any of those, that is worth a pause, whatever the chemistry says.

I want to be physical with someone when: (after a number of dates, after we have talked about exclusivity, after we have talked about health, when it feels right, some combination)

What I need to know about someone before I am physical with them:

How I will say this out loud, in my own words, if the moment comes before I am ready:

9.2 Before sexual contact, I want to be able to discuss

- ☐ What each of us wants and does not want.
- ☐ STI testing, results, barrier use, and contraception when relevant.
- ☐ Whether either of us is sexually active with others.
- ☐ What exclusivity means and whether we have agreed to it out loud.
- ☐ Pain, health needs, medications, accessibility, or trauma-sensitive boundaries.
- ☐ Photos, recordings, sexting, and digital privacy.
- ☐ How we will respond if someone changes their mind.

9.3 Sexual health, for real

Rates of several sexually transmitted infections have increased substantially among adults over 55. Dating after a long monogamous relationship may mean returning to conversations about testing, protection, and sexual health after many years. You are not too old for this conversation, and neither is anyone you date.

- ☐ I have had a full STI screening since my last relationship ended.
- ☐ I know what I want to ask a new partner about their status, and I can say it out loud.
- ☐ I have decided about barrier methods and I have them, rather than hoping they will.
- ☐ I have talked to a doctor about anything that affects sex for me: pain, dryness, erections, desire, medication.
- ☐ I know how I want to tell a partner about any of those, and when.

Conversation starter

"I am attracted to you. Before we have sex, I want us to talk about testing, protection, whether we are seeing other people, and what helps each of us feel comfortable."

9.4 Knowing my own yes

I feel most present and comfortable when...

My signs of real desire are...

My signs that I am agreeing from pressure, fear, or performance are...

Words I can use to slow down or stop are...

What I want a partner to understand about my body or sexual history...

Questions I want to ask before sex...

9.5 What to tell, and when

People worry about when to disclose the divorce, the kids, a health condition, a past scam, a mental health history, money trouble, or that they have never been married. The principle is that what you share should match how close you are. Basic facts go early. Anything a partner needs to know before being physical goes before that. Deeper history goes when the relationship is becoming real.

Share in the profile or first conversation	Share before being physical	Share when it is getting serious
Divorced or widowed, and about how long ago	STI status and screening	The fuller story of the marriage and why it ended
Children, and that they come first	Anything that affects sex: pain, ED, medication, a condition	Mental health history that a partner would need to understand you
What you are looking for	Whether you are seeing other people	Financial situation in detail: debt, alimony, obligations
Anything a match would feel misled about later		Past betrayals or a past scam, if they still shape you

My own disclosure map. What I will share when:

9.6 The one-sentence divorce story

You need a version of your divorce that fits in a sentence or two, that is honest, and that does not make the person across the table feel like a therapist. Write it. Practice it. Examples: "We grew apart over a long time and ended it two years ago. It was hard and I am glad to be through it." Or: "He had an affair and I left. It took a while, but I am in a good place now."

Chapter 10: Children, ex-partners, time, and money

What this chapter will help you do

Protect the people and responsibilities already in your life while a new relationship earns greater access.

If you have children, a former spouse, or complicated finances, they are part of dating at this age. Pretending otherwise is how good relationships end. This chapter is about bringing them into the picture on purpose.

10.1 Your children

The research on stepfamilies is consistent: children do better when new partners are introduced at a slow pace, when the parent stays the parent, and when the new adult builds a friendship with the child before trying to be anything else. Introducing too early is one of the most common ways a promising midlife relationship falls apart, and when it does, it often falls apart on the kids. The test is whether the relationship has shown enough consistency for the introduction to serve your child. How much the two adults feel for each other is not the test.

A reasonable timeline

No introduction until the relationship is stable and you both expect it to continue. Many therapists suggest at least six months as a floor. A first meeting as "a friend," at a park or a casual activity, short, low-pressure. No overnight stays for a long while after that. You keep all the discipline. If you can, tell your ex before the children meet the new person, so the kids do not have to carry a secret.

My children's ages, and what each one knows or suspects about my dating:

What would make an introduction serve my child, not only the adults?

What stability would I want to see first?

What information is right for each child's age? What I will say to each of them:

How will I avoid making my child a messenger, secret keeper, or judge?

If the person I am seeing pushes to meet the kids sooner than I am comfortable with, I will say:

If my child has a hard reaction to a new person, I will:

10.2 Former partners and co-parenting

Your former spouse will come up. Your new partner will have opinions about the custody schedule and the alimony. You will compare, out loud or in your head. Some of this is normal. The question is how much of the ex the new relationship should hold.

What contact with my ex is necessary and healthy?

Where do I need clearer boundaries with my ex?

What information about my dating life is private, and what must be communicated for the children's sake?

How much do I talk about my ex with someone new? Is it history, or is it processing that belongs somewhere else?

If my ex finds out I am dating, what happens? Is there anything I need to plan for, including my own safety?

10.3 Family, culture, and community expectations

For some people, divorce is not only the end of a marriage. It can feel like a failure of family, of faith, of who you were supposed to be, or of what your community expected. Dating again can

bring shame, secrecy, pressure to remarry, or fear of what your children and extended family will say. If you are living overseas, or inside a small expatriate or military community, there is another layer: the pool is small, everyone knows everyone, familiar support is far away, and a new relationship can become the center of your life within weeks because there is not much else nearby to hold the weight. None of this means you cannot date. It means these things belong in the plan rather than in the background.

What does my family, faith, or community expect of me after divorce, and which of those expectations do I share?

Who, if anyone, am I keeping my dating life from, and what would it cost me if they knew?

If I am living far from home or inside a small community, what would keep a new relationship from becoming my whole support system?

10.4 Money and practical life

Divorce leaves most people with strong feelings about money and a complicated situation. A new partner may have debt, support obligations, or a very different relationship with spending. These conversations belong before you share a lease, a bank account, or a major purchase. Have them early and in small pieces.

Commitments worth making now, before anyone has a reason to test them:

- ☐ I will not lend money, co-sign, share passwords, merge accounts, invest together, or change beneficiaries during early dating.

- ☐ I will verify major claims before making financial decisions.
- ☐ Before combining lives, I want direct conversations about debt, support obligations, retirement, housing, caregiving, and expectations.
- ☐ I will seek qualified legal or financial advice for decisions with lasting consequences.
- ☐ I know my own financial situation well enough to explain it.
- ☐ I have a sense of what money fears from my divorce I am bringing into this.

My biggest money fear in a new relationship, and where it comes from:

Chapter 11: Flags, mixed signals, endings, and recovery

What this chapter will help you do

Judge patterns over time, treat severe safety concerns as what they are, end with respect when possible, and do not make every ending a verdict on your worth.

At some point there is a person. You have seen them several times, you like them, and something in you is starting to reach. This is the part where your pattern from Chapter 4 wakes up. It will. You are not trying to stop it. You are trying to see it a little sooner each time.

11.1 Flags

Green, yellow, and red. Green means keep going. Yellow means pay attention and ask a question. Red means the concern outweighs the chemistry. Some items in the red column are safety concerns that call for ending contact and getting support. Others call for strong caution and more time before you decide. The column mixes incompatibility, immaturity, coercive control, and possible abuse on purpose, because in real life they arrive mixed, and part of the work is telling them apart.

Green	Yellow	Red
Asks about you and remembers the answer	Talks about their ex a lot, with heat	Contempt for every former partner; all of them are "crazy"
Words and actions line up over time	Hot and cold; intense then distant	Stories, identity, status, or availability keep not adding up
Respects your pace without sulking	Sulks or pushes when you say not yet	Punishes boundaries, threatens, or keeps testing
Has friends and a life of their own	Has no friends and wants all your time	Wants passwords, location access, isolation, or constant proof
Handles disagreement without drama	Gets defensive fast	Yells, threatens, or punishes with silence
Can name past mistakes and what changed	Apologizes, then repeats the same thing	Apologizes and repeats the same harm, again
Curious about your kids	Pushes to meet your kids	Undermines your parenting or

Green	Yellow	Red
without pushing to meet them	early	competes with your children
Can talk about money without weirdness	Vague about work or money	Asks for money, or has a crisis that needs yours
You feel calmer around them over time	You feel anxious and cannot say why	You are hiding the relationship from people who love you

Red flags are not a score

One serious safety concern may matter more than several positive qualities. Do not balance a red flag against the green column. If anything in the red column involves fear, control, or money, treat it on its own.

Where is the person I am seeing, if I am honest? What do I see in each column, and is there anything in the red column that needs its own answer?

If you have been in a controlling or abusive relationship before

Intensity can feel like passion because it is what you know. Someone who wants to see you every day, who texts all day, who says you are the only one who understands them, may feel like love. Look at the red column again. If anything in it is true, talk to someone you trust before you go further.

11.2 Pattern tracker

When something does not sit right, track it rather than arguing with yourself about it.

What did this person say?

What did this person do?

Was it a one-time event or a pattern?

How did they respond when I asked about it?

What happened after the apology or explanation?

What would I advise someone I love?

Important

You do not need enough red flags to win a case. You can leave because something feels wrong, because you are incompatible, because desire is absent, or because you do not want to continue.

11.3 Watching your own pattern wake up

Every time you feel the pull to do your old move, whether that is over-texting, going quiet, finding a flaw, or drafting a breakup at midnight, write it down. Then write what you did.

What happened	What I felt in my body	What my old pattern wanted to do	What I did instead

You are working toward a pause between the pull and the move, not toward perfection. One different thing, once, counts.

11.4 Ending scripts

After a few dates

"Thank you for the time we spent together. I do not feel this is the right fit, so I am going to end our dating connection. I wish you well."

When more conversation is appropriate

"I have appreciated getting to know you. I have realized our needs and direction do not line up, and I do not want to continue the relationship."

When safety or repeated boundary violations are present

"Do not contact me again." Further explanation is optional. Save evidence, block contact, and seek support when needed.

11.5 After rejection or disappointment

What happened, as a camera would have recorded it?

What global conclusion am I making about myself or my future?

What did this connection awaken or represent?

What can I grieve without romanticizing?

What support and routine do I need for the next 72 hours?

What did I learn that will help me date more clearly next time?

Chapter 12: My personal dating plan

What this chapter will help you do

Turn insight into a plan you can return to when attraction, disappointment, or uncertainty becomes loud.

12.1 Back to Chapter 1

Go back to the self-check in 1.4 and rate yourself again, in a different color. What moved?

12.2 The plan

My current intention for dating is...

My signs that I am grounded enough to continue are...

My signs that I need to slow down are...

My non-negotiable safety boundaries are...

The parts of my life I will continue tending are...

People I can contact for perspective are...

My plan for app use is...

My preferred pace for texting, dates, sex, exclusivity, and introductions is...

The conversations I will not avoid are...

When I feel activated, I will...

If I experience rejection, I will remind myself...

12.3 Early warning signs

Your pattern will come back. Not because you failed, but because patterns do that under stress. Write down what it looks like when it starts, and what you will do.

When I notice myself...	I will...

12.4 My dating compass statement

Write three to five sentences that describe how you want to show up in dating. Include openness, discernment, boundaries, pacing, and how you will stay connected to your own life.

12.5 A letter to the person who started this workbook

Write to yourself as you were on the day you opened this. Tell them what you know now. Keep it somewhere you will find it on a hard night.

12.6 Review date

I will review this plan again on:

Three months from now: Where am I with dating? Where am I with myself? What do I need?

Closing reflection

You will still be disappointed sometimes. What changes is that you notice sooner, ask more clearly, pace with more care, leave when you need to, and stay on your own side through all of it. And you are not starting from nothing. You know a great deal more than you did the first time, including some things you wish you did not.

When to bring in a professional

This workbook can do a lot on its own. It cannot do everything. Reach out to a licensed therapist if any of these are true.

- You have thoughts of not wanting to be alive, or of hurting yourself. Call or text 988 in the United States, or go to the nearest emergency room. Outside the United States, contact your local emergency or crisis service.
- You cannot get through Chapter 2. The story is too raw, the grief is too big, or there was betrayal or abuse you have not worked through.
- You are drinking or using more than you want to, above all around dating.
- Your former partner is threatening, monitoring, or frightening you. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is 1-800-799-7233.
- You have sent money to someone you met online and cannot stop, or you are ashamed to tell anyone.
- You keep ending up in the same kind of relationship and cannot see why.
- Your children are struggling in ways that worry you: school, sleep, anger, withdrawal.
- You have done the work, you are doing everything right, and you are so tired you cannot feel anything anymore.

Look for a licensed marriage and family therapist, psychologist, or counselor with experience in divorce recovery, attachment, or sex therapy. If you are working from this workbook already, bring it. It will save you both time.

Sources and further reading

The ideas in this workbook come from research on divorce recovery, attachment, stepfamilies, and midlife dating. These are the main sources, with a few books that are worth your time.

Research behind the workbook

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- Federal Trade Commission. (2024). *Consumer Sentinel Network Data Book 2023*. The source for reported losses to romance scams; categories and totals vary across federal reports. Report fraud at reportfraud.ftc.gov.
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- Raley, R. K., and Sweeney, M. M. (2020). Divorce, repartnering, and stepfamilies: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82(1). Repartnering after 50 often means cohabiting or living apart together rather than remarriage.
- Sbarra, D. A., and Borelli, J. L. (2019). Attachment reorganization following divorce: Normative processes and individual differences. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 25. Why your nervous system keeps pointing at your ex, and how that changes.
- American Medical Association. (2025). With STIs on the rise among older adults, here is what doctors can do. The source for the sexual health figures in Chapter 9.

Books worth reading

- Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief*. Harvard University Press. For the losses that have no funeral.
- Gottman, J. M., and Silver, N. (2015). *The seven principles for making marriage work* (rev. ed.). Harmony. The research on repair, bids, and contempt applies to new relationships too.
- Johnson, S. M. (2008). *Hold me tight: Seven conversations for a lifetime of love*. Little, Brown. Attachment in plain language, from the founder of emotionally focused therapy.
- Levine, A., and Heller, R. (2010). *Attached: The new science of adult attachment and how it can help you find and keep love*. TarcherPerigee. A readable guide to the patterns in Chapter 4.
- Nagoski, E. (2015). *Come as you are: The surprising new science that will transform your sex life*. Simon and Schuster. On desire, arousal, and the body, for anyone dating with a body that has changed.

Support lines

- 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: call or text 988 (United States). Outside the United States, contact your local emergency or crisis service.
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233, or text START to 88788.
- Federal Trade Commission fraud reporting: reportfraud.ftc.gov.