



November / December 2003

Modern Love

Straight answers to candid questions about love, romance, and relationships.

By Hugh O'Neill

Q: The woman I've started seeing revealed to me that she's also dating another man. I'm newly divorced and haven't dated for many years, so I'm not sure how to deal with this. Is this normal? Can I expect us to go forward? —Scott D., Kenosha, Wisconsin

What she's doing is pretty common. Getting phone messages from Moe, Larry, and Curly can make a woman feel beautiful—especially if she's just out of a long relationship with the same tedious, God-rest-his-soul, guy. And, obviously, it can make her social life far more fun.

"Some multiple daters go out with several people to keep things from getting too serious too fast," explains sex therapist Barnaby Barratt, Ph.D., director of the Midwest Institute of Sexology in Southfield, Michigan. Spreading her bets can also prevent a woman from becoming too attached to a man who may not stick around (a defensive tactic she's learned through experience). At the far end of the casual dating spectrum, notes Barratt, there are people who believe in having ongoing multiple relationships without ever settling down with just one person. This unusual practice even has a name: polyamory.

"She's done you the honor of being upfront about her situation," says Barratt. Don't take that lightly; it can be rare to find such frank honesty in dating. If you're enjoying getting to know her, don't bail just because she's filling her dance card. Barratt's advice: Steer your next conversation toward the topic of relationships, and ask about her views. Is she looking for a long-term monogamous relationship, as I'm assuming you are? If so, you have two options.

The first choice is the "bring-on-the-competition" strategy, in which you keep dating her and are so darn thoughtful, charming, and enthused that she forgets about Joe Loser.

Don't like your odds in a one-on-one against the guy? Opt for the "you're-great-but-I-can't-handle-this" strategy. Tell her respectfully that you just can't deal with sharing her. Sound apologetic for being so old-fashioned. Important: This cannot be an ultimatum. If she hears even a trace of "It's him or me," you'll lose. A good line: "I think the world of you, but we want different things right now. I'd love to hear from you in the future." Show her a self-reliant man who knows what he wants, and she may not let you go.

Finally, I'll emphasize an obvious concern. If both of her relationships are sexual, this situation raises health issues—even if you're using protection. Me, I'd opt out, because of this danger and because, frankly, I'm not bright enough to handle the emotional complexity of a sexual triangle. Monogamy is tricky enough. But, hey, that's me.

Q. My wife passed away last year. I received a sympathy card from a woman I had dated in high school, and we began seeing each other eight months later. My son told me that if I keep seeing her, he's never coming back from college. He said that I wasn't respecting his mother. I asked him to see my side: I need a companion. Still, he won't bend. What can I do?—John H., Pittsford, Michigan

The impatient part of my brain is tempted to take a hard line with your son, along the lines of "Get over it. This is my life, and love is rare." But the wiser, gentler part of me tends to agree with Carol Rinkleib Ellison, Ph.D., a relationship therapist in Oakland, California, and author of *Women's Sexualities*. Your son is responding this way because he's trying to prevent another blow.

"Your son has lost his mother, and he probably fears he may also be losing his father to this other woman," Ellison explains. Further, he has to deal with the disturbing idea of his older father being sexual and is being asked to embrace a woman he doesn't know. "The trauma of losing a parent can also make young people regress," she adds—which partly explains why your college-age son is overreacting to these factors as if he were 11 years old.

I'm presuming you've tried several times to talk this through with him, without anger and with deep respect for his feelings. If he hasn't budged, push for this compromise: Tell him that during his visits home you won't bring the new woman in your life anywhere near him, and he won't have to see or talk to her. This way, the relationship won't be in his face, and he'll know he won't be forced into situations that make him uneasy or grief-stricken. It's a sign of respect for him. One that represents sacrifice for you and your new companion—and he'll be aware of this. As he sees that you are indeed honoring the memory of his mom, he'll come around.

If this fails, go forth and find happiness knowing that you've done all you could for your son.

Q. I've been out of the dating game for quite a while. I met a terrific man three months ago, and he recently asked me to go on a weekend trip with him. I want to be intimate with him, but it's been so long I'm not sure how my body has changed. I don't want this to be awkward.—Ellen P., Waltham, Massachusetts

If you've been sexually inactive for a long time, or you've gone through menopause since your last relationship, you may find intercourse a little uncomfortable, says Jean Koehler, Ph.D., president of the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists. A drop in your estrogen levels and decrease in lubrication often thin vaginal tissues—and can make sex slightly painful. Also, your sex drive and responsiveness may not be quite as powerful as they once were. A natural decrease in testosterone and estrogen can cause some women—though certainly not all—to have less sexual desire and to take a little longer to get aroused.

Your gynecologist can help with both of these issues. Topical lubricants can eliminate the unwanted sensitivity. One new topical oil called Zestra (which is not estrogen-based) has been shown to raise levels of arousal in women. For sexual healing, however, nothing beats making love. Once you start to have sex regularly, your body will adapt and begin functioning much as it did when you were sexually active, says Koehler.

Realize that your guy may have similar worries and you can help put him at ease. "It makes sense to be less intercourse-focused than perhaps you were in the past," advises Koehler. "The hands and mouth are very sexual." Include condoms in the fun—the number of reported sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in women above 50 has been on the rise, so don't think safe sex is just a concern for bed-hopping twentysomethings.

Before you get busy at all, however, you'd be smart to discuss what taking the sexual step means to both of you. "Does it imply commitment? Exclusivity? These are important questions," says Koehler. It may not be necessary that you see it precisely the same way, but if you've been out of the sexual whirl for a while, it makes sense to know what you're getting into other than satin sheets.