



**Lifestyles, Dating
& Romance**
A Study of Midlife Singles

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

for
AARP The Magazine

Published September 2003



Lifestyles, Dating and Romance
A Study of Midlife Singles

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For

AARP The Magazine

Report written by
Xenia P. Montenegro, Ph.D.
National Member Research, Knowledge Management

Survey conducted by
Knowledge Networks, Inc.

©Copyright AARP
Reprinting with permission only
601 E St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20049
www.aarp.org

September 2003

AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization dedicated to making life better for people 50 and over. We provide information and resources; engage in legislative, regulatory and legal advocacy; assist members in serving their communities; and offer a wide range of unique benefits, special products, and services for our members. These include *AARP The Magazine*, published bimonthly; *AARP Bulletin*, our monthly newspaper; *Segunda Juventud*, our quarterly newspaper in Spanish; *NRTA Live and Learn*, our quarterly newsletter for 50+ educators; and our Web site, www.aarp.org. We have staffed offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank staff at Knowledge Networks, especially Kathy Dykeman, for their work in conducting this survey.

Many AARP staff contributed to this project. From *AARP The Magazine*, the sponsor of the survey, we want to thank Hugh Delehanty, Steven Slon, Ron Geraci and Karen Reyes for their sponsorship and creative insights. Muriel Cooper of AARP Media Relations also provided creative input.

Knowledge Management staff from various departments also contributed to the project. The core team members from National Member Research are:

Xenia Montenegro, Project Manager
Tracy Needham, Research Analyst
Sonya Gross, Research Analyst
Monica Jacquet, Research Assistant
Adel Dukes Stewart, Administrative Technician
Soheyly Taie, Research Analyst
Linda Fisher, Director, National Member Research

For additional information, contact Xenia P. Montenegro, Ph.D. at (202) 434-3538 or Linda Fisher, Ph.D. at 202-434-6304.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Single men and women in midlife and beyond have always been thought of mostly as widows and widowers or spinsters and confirmed bachelors. This image has been changing as boomers liberalize sexual attitudes, so that by their own choice, more people may never marry. Divorce is also more common, and divorcees now make up the plurality of singles between the ages of 40-69, followed by the never married. Widows and the separated are a small minority.

In addition, singles today may divorce multiple times even as they get older or get in and out of exclusive relationships more readily. Yet, even as the population ages, we have been remiss in recognizing this growing cohort of older singles, in looking at their lifestyles and needs, and at their behavior as consumers in comparison to singles in their twenties and thirties. This report describes the *Singles Lifestyles Study* conducted for *AARP The Magazine* in June 2003, a survey of 3,501 single men and women ages 40-69.

FINDINGS

The majority of singles in this age group are women, at the rate of three women for every two men, and the disparity grows with age. The plurality is comprised of divorcees, followed by the never married.

The Single Lifestyle

Singles engage in a variety of activities, but not much different from others in what they do.

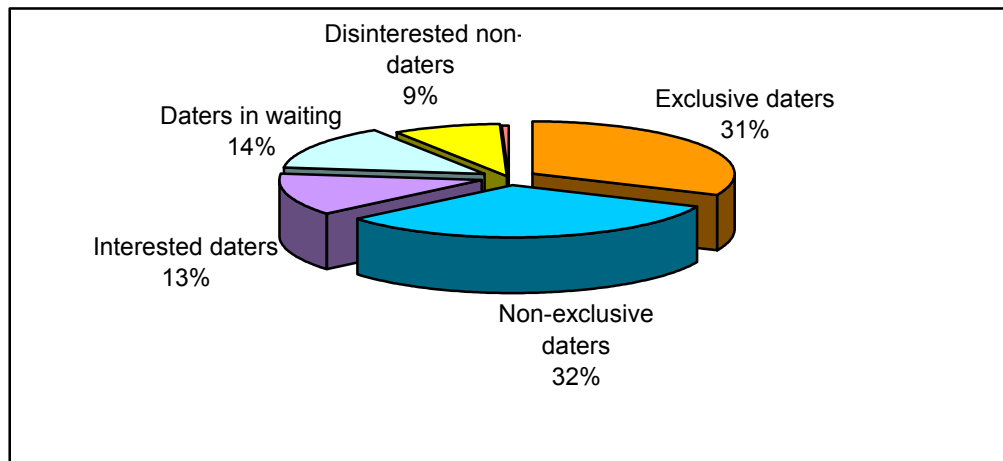
Most singles live active lives; that is, they engage in a wide variety of activities. They are in different living arrangements, but a one person household is the norm. Women are more likely to spend time with family often, especially as they get older. Men are less likely to do so, even as they age. Religious activities, family, and reading are more the domain of single women, especially as they age. Making love and romantic evenings are more common among men. The results also show many stressed individuals, regardless of whether they are active or inactive.

Singles and Dating

The majority date either exclusively or non-exclusively. Yet large proportions, especially of older women, take a pass on dating and sex.

About a third of singles (31%) ages 40-69 are in exclusive dating relationships and almost the same percentage (32%) are dating non-exclusively. Those remaining are not dating, but some (13%) are interested in finding a date, others are daters-in-waiting or would be interested if the right person happens to come along (14%), while about one in ten do not want to be part of the dating game at all (9%).

Types of Daters and Non-Daters



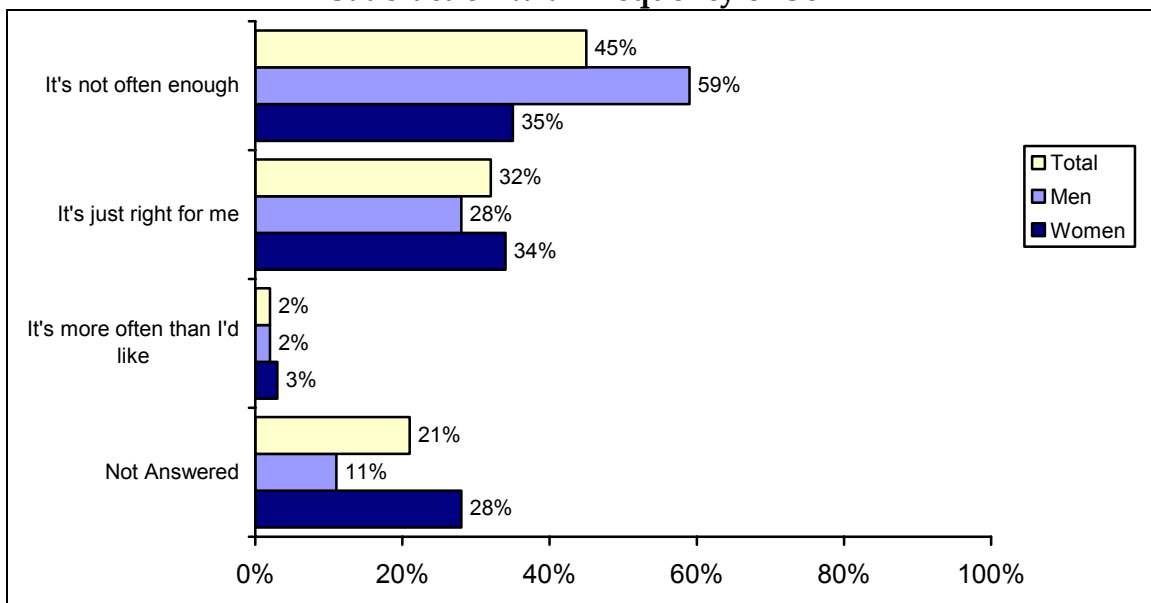
Seven percent of men and three percent of women report same sex dating partners.

Sexuality among Singles Ages 40-69

Sex is addictive. Those who have more tend to want more.

Singles engage in a variety of sexual activities, from hugging or kissing for more than half of singles (54%), sexual intercourse for 37 percent, and self-stimulation for 39 percent at least once a month. The numbers that engage in these activities rise among daters and those in exclusive relationships. Almost six in ten men (59%) feel that their frequency of sex is not often enough, while only 35 percent of women feel the same. Among men who date exclusively (who are also more likely to have more sex) 48 percent say they do not have enough, compared to 33 percent of women who date exclusively.

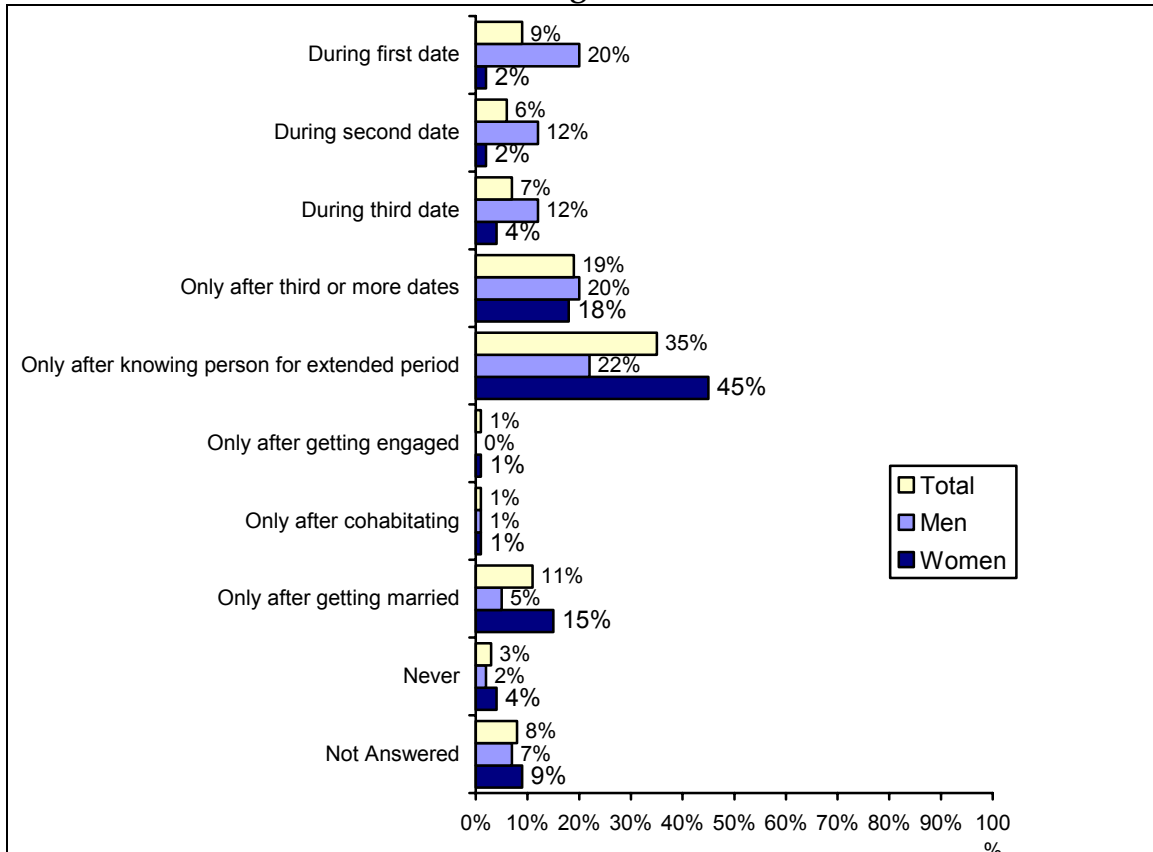
Satisfaction with Frequency of Sex



Q29: How do you feel about how often you have sexual intercourse? (Base=3501, total respondents)

There is a vast chasm between men and women in their dating attitudes and sexual desire. For example only two percent of women say that sex is acceptable during the first date, while ten times as many men, 20 percent, think it is acceptable. This gender gap becomes wider between men and women in their sixties and seems to point to the entrenchment of sexual mores learned and practiced in an era when these current 60-year-olds were children. The differences transcend race, education, and other personal characteristics. Furthermore, the attitudes that divide single men and women at this age may have partly caused them to remain single or revert to single status.

Timing of Sex



Q26. When does sex with your date become acceptable? (Base = 3,160, daters and interested daters)

Singles' Well-being

Life is not all about dating and sex. Most singles feel they are on top of the ladder of life, but a few are on the bottom rungs.

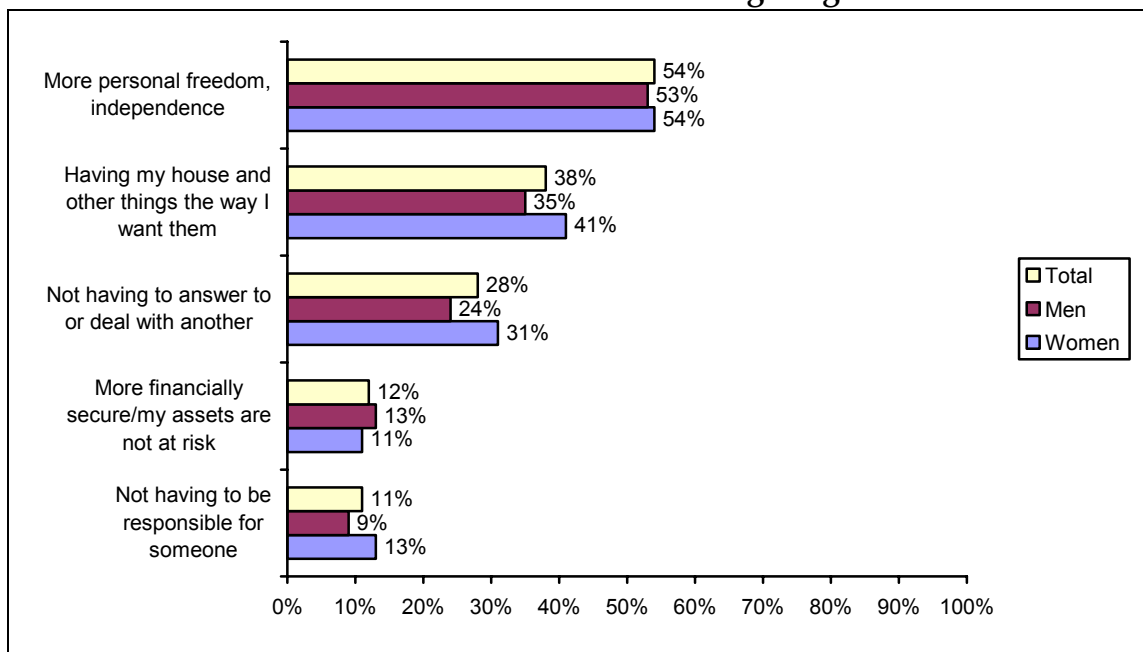
Singles are generally upbeat about their lives. This is true whether they are in their fifth, sixth, or seventh decade. Moreover, those in their 40s and 50s are even more upbeat about the future.

Pros and Cons of Single Status

Singles in their 40s, 50s, and 60s say that freedom rocks but loneliness is a downer.

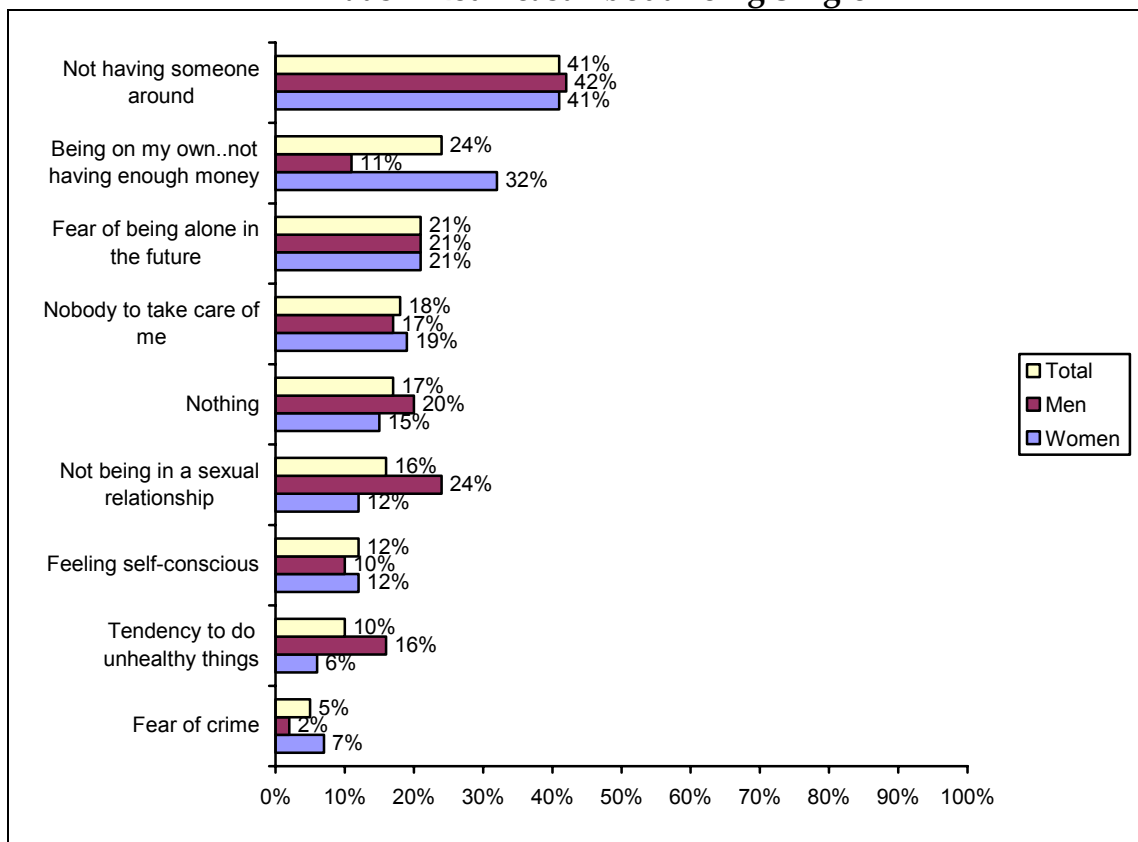
Singles want the best of both worlds. Their personal freedom and independence is what they like the most about being single. Ironically, it comes with a price, which is not having someone to do things with.

What's Liked Most About Being Single



Q4. What two things do you like most about being single at your age? (Base=3501, total respondents; multiple responses allowed)

What's Liked Least About Being Single



Q5. What two things do you like least about being single at your age? (Base=3501, total respondents; multiple responses allowed)

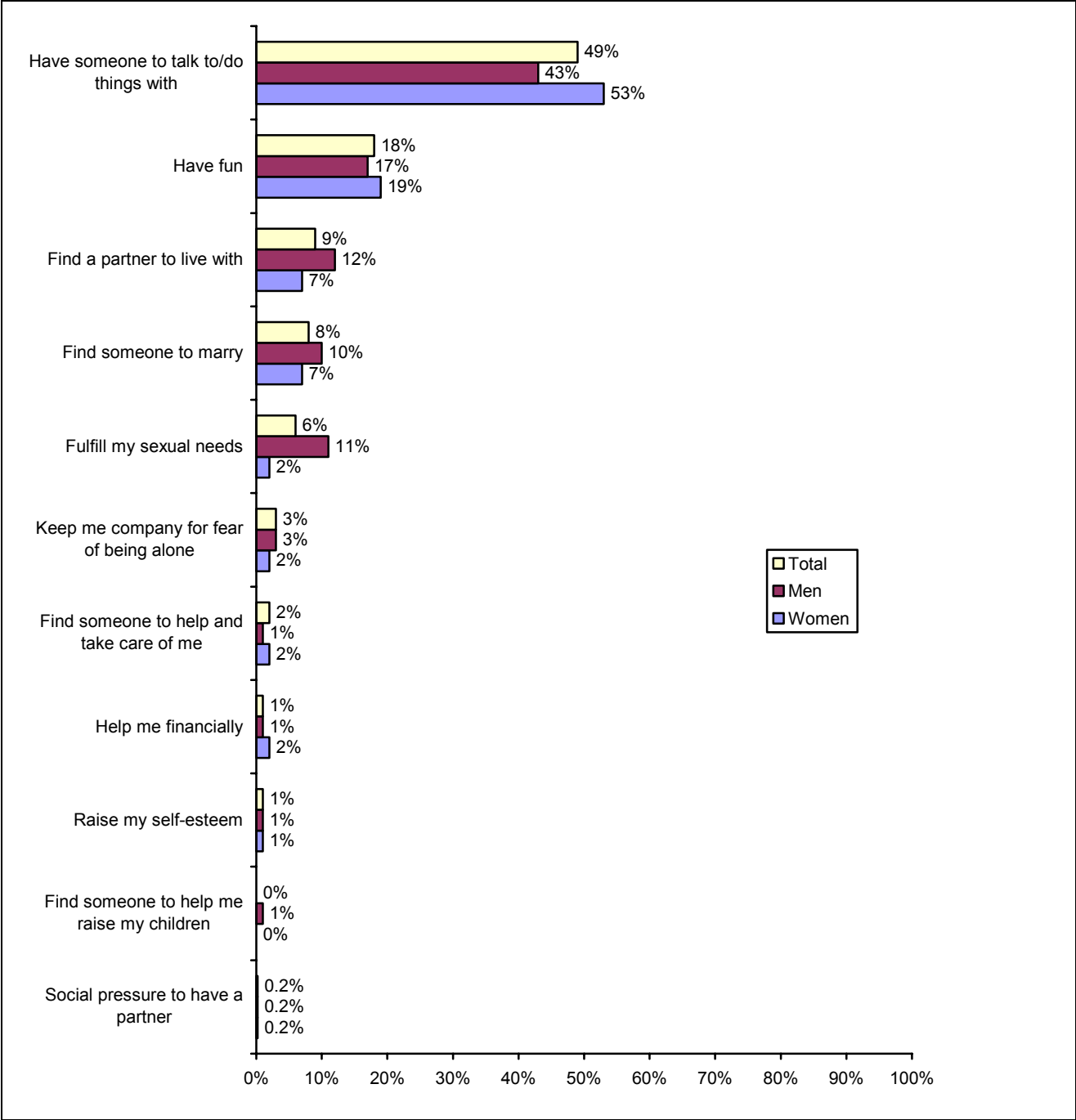
Why Date, Why Not

Women want dates to have someone to do things with. Men want the sexual dimension built in. Social pressure is out.

The major reason for dating is to have someone to talk to or do things with (49%). The second major reason is “to simply have fun” (18%). Although a small minority, five times as many men (11%) as women (2%) say that their major reason for dating is to fulfill their sexual needs.

The mantra for those who are not interested in dating at all is that they like their single life the way it is. Secondly, many have had bad experiences with past relationships and some say it is too much trouble or effort to be in a relationship.

Single Most Important Reason for Dating



Q10-1. What is the single most important reason why you date or are interested in dating?
 (Base=3,160, daters and interested daters)

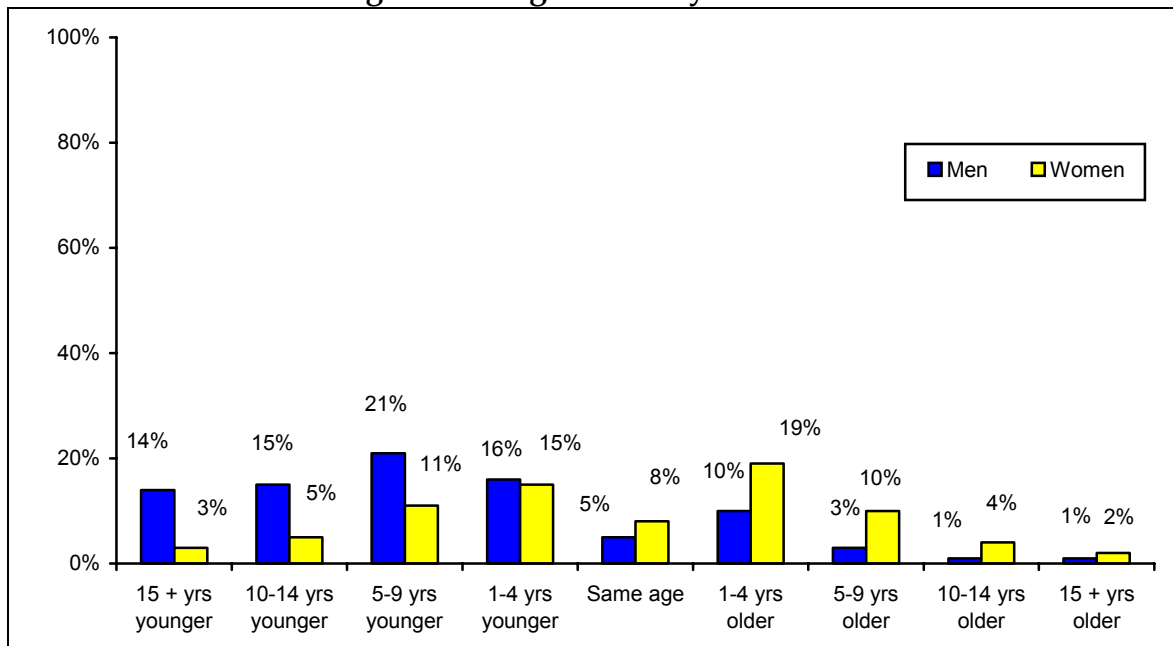
Desirable, Undesirable Dates

Personality and sense of humor count most, but many men also emphasize physical attractiveness and sexual satisfaction.

Women look more for a pleasing personality and sense of humor, common interests, and personal or moral and religious values in a date. Financial stability is also important for many women. It is not that men do not want these. Many of them just have added wants such as physically attractive dates and sexual activity. Men are also more open to dating and trying more things to meet these wants.

Most midlife and older men want to date younger women. Many midlife and older women, by choice or need, want to date younger men, ironically making men and women's age preference in dates incompatible. However, life must not be all about the opposite sex and sex, because the majority of both men and women still have a bright outlook on life and the future.

Age of Dating Partner by Gender



Q13. What is the age of your current or most recent dating partner? (Base=3,160, daters and interested daters; of these, 13 percent of men and 22 percent of women did not answer the question)

The majority, especially men, would date someone with a different religion, someone who is less educated, and someone with less money.

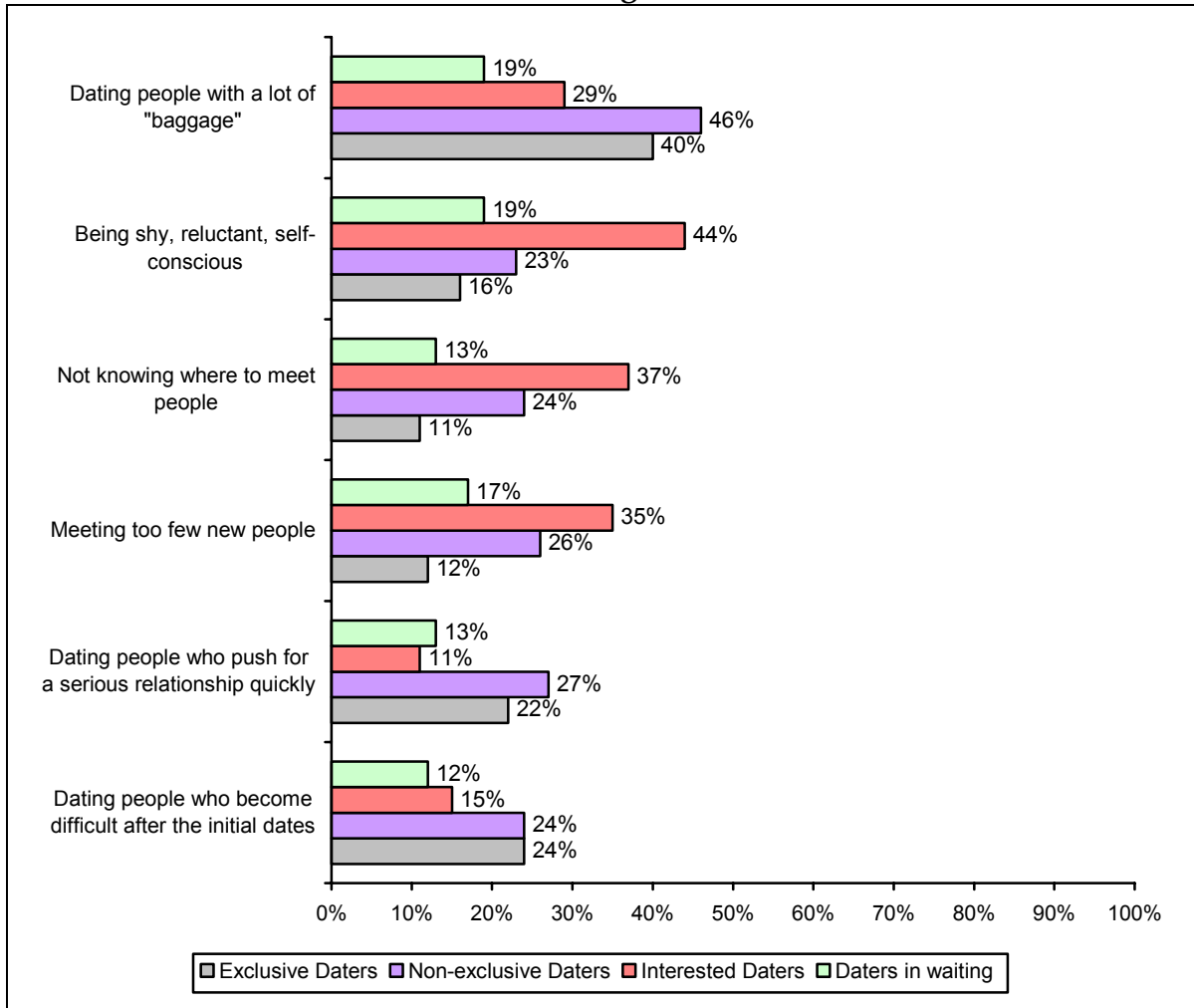
Finding a Date

Friends, relatives, and work are still the best bet, but singles organizations, matchmaking services, and online services are starting to compete with going to church.

Twenty-nine percent of singles in this age group have difficulty finding dates. They cite a variety of reasons, such as the scarcity of potential dates, baggage of potential dates, and differences in sexual expectations.

There are frustrations as well: being shy, being reluctant and self-conscious, not knowing where to meet people, and meeting too few people.

Frustrations in Dating and Romance



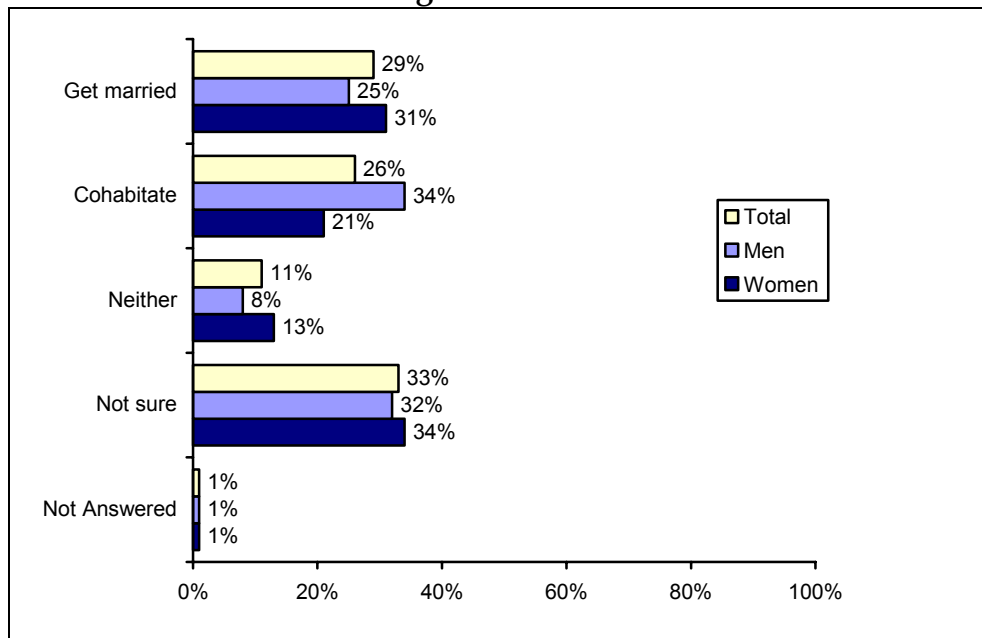
Q21. What are the greatest frustrations you face in dating and romance? (Base=3,160, daters and interested daters)

Beyond Dating

Cohabitation or marriage? It is the big question as many are not sure.

About a third of men (32%) and women (34%) say they are not sure whether they should marry when or if they find themselves in a committed, exclusive relationship. Another third of men (34%) say they would cohabitate, compared to about a fifth (21%) of women. Almost a third of women (31%) say they would get married versus one in four (25%) men.

Marriage or Cohabitation



Q24. When or if you were to find yourself in a committed, exclusive romantic relationship, do you think you should get married or cohabitate? (Base=3,160, daters and interested daters)

More than twice as many men (46%) as women (21%) say they have “cheated” on their mates in the past. However, some of these same men and women do not call this cheating: posed to them as “maintaining a sexual relationship with more than one person during the same time period.” Only 47 percent of men, compared to 52 percent of women, feel that it’s cheating “if you date two people at the same time even if you’ve never agreed that the relationship would be exclusive.”

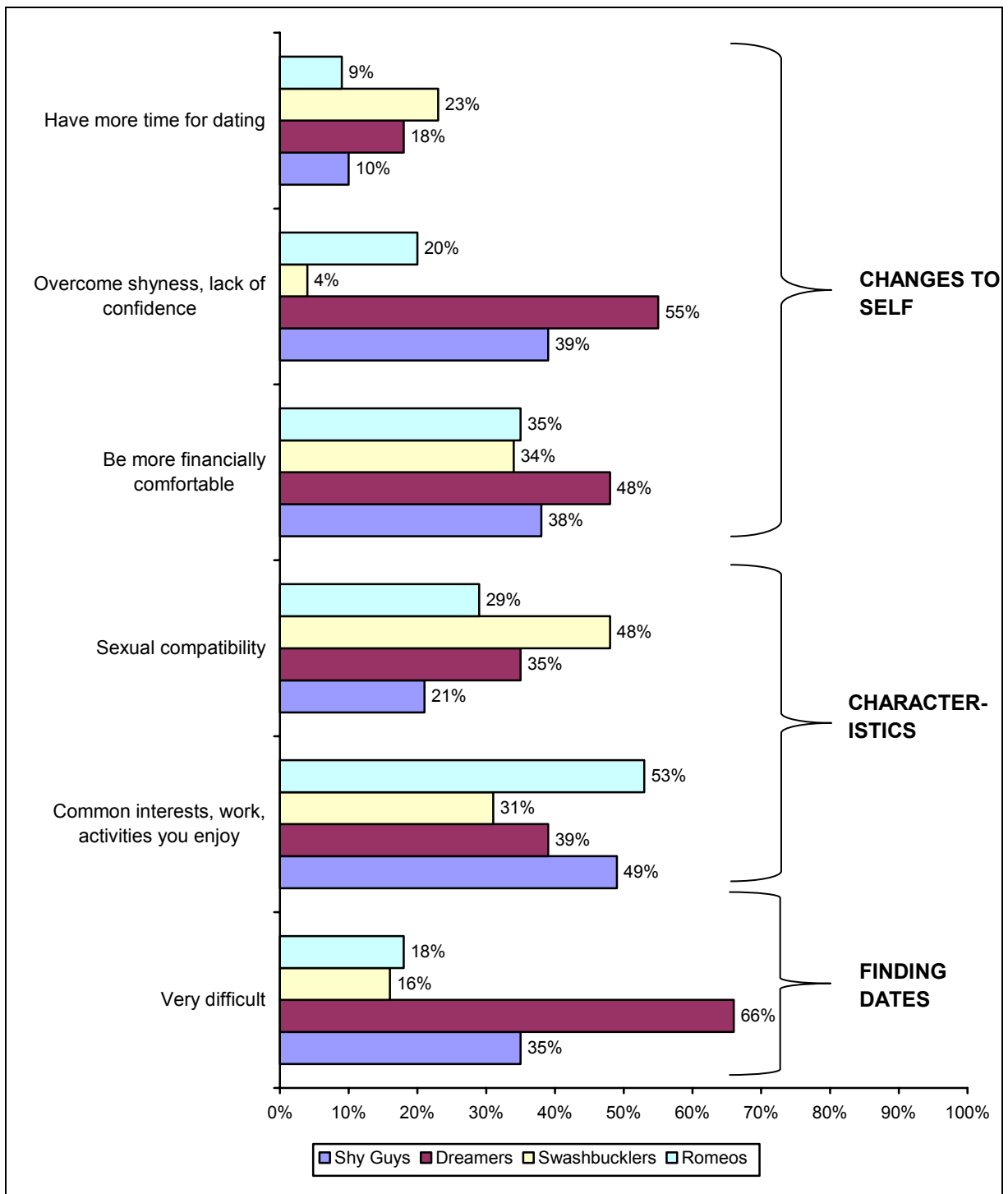
Demographic and Attitudinal Groups

Gender and age matter, but there is more to these singles than meets the eye.

Age and income are also strongly related to dating behavior even more so than other characteristics such as education, health status, employment, or single status: widowed, divorced, or never married. Single men seem to converge into the following groups

- “shy guys” who are likely to be either widowed or never married, who are interested in dating but may not be trying to date or have given up because of shyness or problems finding a date
- “dreamers” who are likely to be looking hard for dates but not having much luck, partly because of their desire to date physically attractive women and meeting few new people
- “swashbucklers” who are likely to be active, healthy, and confident, and like the single life; they have dated more and have more sex than the shy guys and dreamers, like to play the field and have multiple relationships
- “Romeos” who are likely to be happy, optimistic, and self-confident but also perhaps in a committed relationship; they engage in a lot of sexual activity and are apt to have no dating problems.

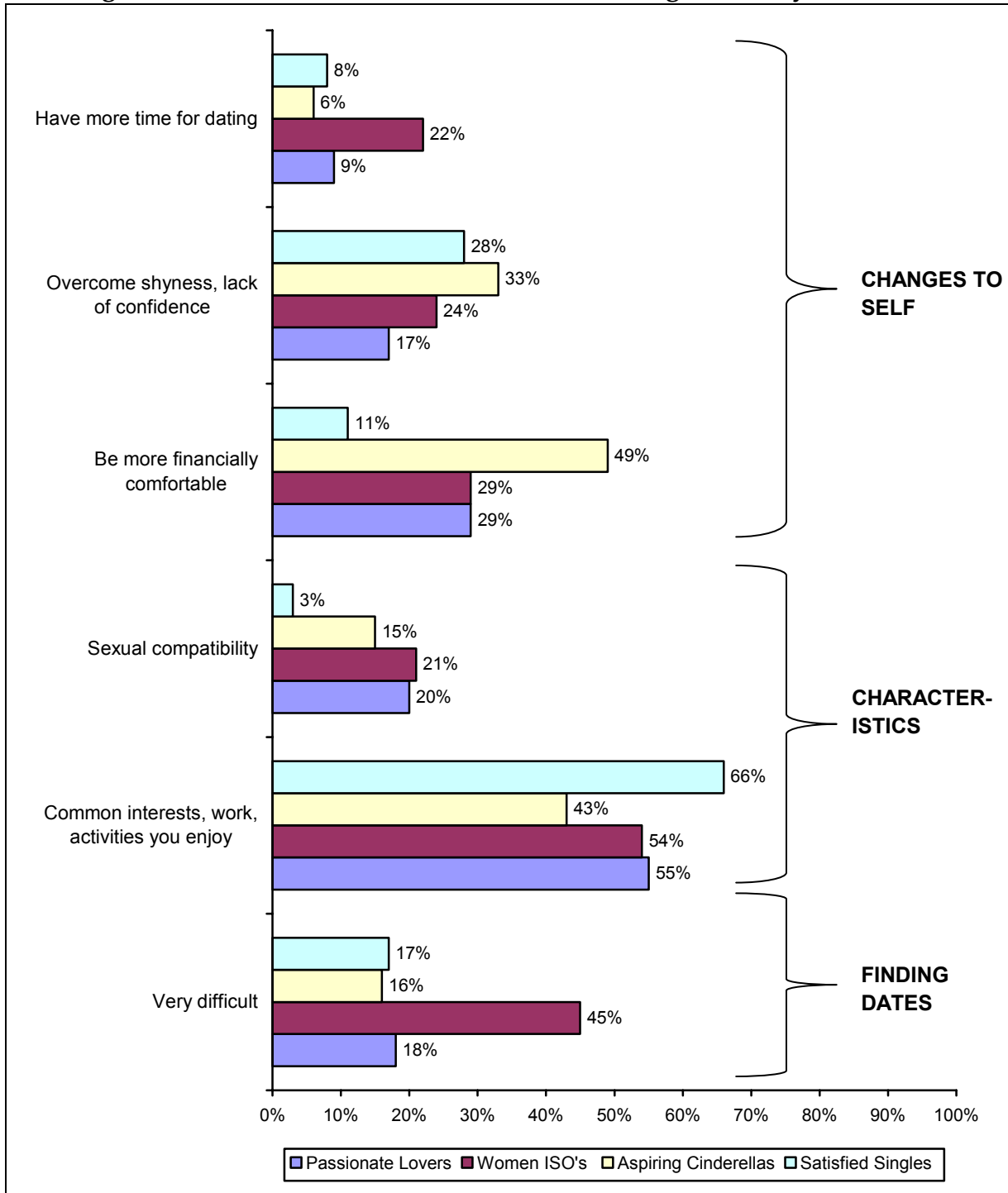
Changes to Self, Desired Date Characteristics, Dating Difficulty (Men)



Single women may be seen in these four groups

- “passionate lovers” who are healthy and likely to be well-off financially; they are also likely to be romantically involved with someone, engage in a lot of sexual activity, and likely to have few dating problems if any
- “women ISOs” (In Search Of)s looking for dates and sexual partnership; and who are trying hard at these. These women are likely to be divorced, active, healthy, and more affluent than the average single woman; however, their biggest frustration is not knowing where to meet people and meeting too few people to date
- “aspiring Cinderellas” likely to be in fair or poor health with lower than average incomes and with a dim outlook on life and the future; they want to find dates or someone who will take care of them, although some may not be interested in dating anymore
- “satisfied singles” likely to be widows and retired living in their own homes; they miss having someone around to do things with but are not necessarily looking for dates because they are also content with where they are, although some would date if “the right person” came along.

Changes to Self, Desired Date Characteristics, Dating Difficulty (Women)



Singles enjoy their freedom, yet need someone to do things with, pointing to opportunities to provide them with activities where they can share common interests with others. Some pursue opportunities on their own; many are too shy, lack the confidence, or may not have the financial wherewithal to seek out company.



601 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20049
800-424-3410
www.aarp.org