



May December Relationships:

When she is older than he, can the marriage work?



Dear Andy and Judy:

Frank has asked me to marry him. He started asking me out about a year ago, and we did lots of stuff with family and friends before dating. At first I only thought of him as a fun friend but not partner material, because ... and here's the weird part ... he's way younger than I am.

He's only 33 and I'm 49! The age difference doesn't bother him at all, he acknowledges it and then shrugs it off. There's lots of sexual chemistry between us; we love spending time together, most other aspects of our relationship are great except for the age difference, which I worry about but he doesn't.

My worries are mainly that he'll tire of me quickly as we both age, and that others will judge us and think we're crazy. His response is that he feels confident he wants to spend the rest of his life with me and he knows himself well enough to know he won't change his mind. And if we love each other who cares what others think. Some background about me: I was married 25 years and have 4 grown children. Frank has never married. He is a devoted uncle and friend to young people but doesn't want children of his own, so it doesn't bother him that I'm too old to bear him children. If you're wondering why he has never married, he was in one long-term relationship before where his partner wanted children and he found he had a low sperm count, so that made her decide not to marry him.

And about growing old together, I'm in excellent health, slim, and work out regularly, so I guess you could say I'm a very young 49. He is in good shape but not as conscientious as I am about nutrition and exercise. You might say that evens out our ages in a way. And maybe as we get older, the age difference will seem smaller and smaller. My questions:

Is there research on the likelihood of success in a marriage with this large an age difference? Am I overlooking any significant potential problems that I should consider before marrying him?

April (F) 49
Salt Lake City, UT
1 year together

Peter Pan or Responsible Man?

Some men like Peter Pan, never grow up. In life they look for a woman who will be both mother and wife so they never have to be a responsible adult. Other men know their own mind, appreciate the maturity of an older woman and make great husbands.

I wish I could find enough clues in your letter to make a good case one way or the other. So I'll address some of your comments and concerns, and then mention what you might want to think about in deciding which kind of man you are with.



The Issue of Age

Of course you wonder what other people will think when they see the two of you together. The media has portrayed your relationship across the spectrum from the unimaginable *Harold and Maud* to the touching love story of *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. Most people won't know what to make of your relationship. So when people stare, just remember they are usually not judging you, but are merely curious. The people who know the two of you will draw their own conclusions by seeing the relationship you have built together over the years. If you're still very caring towards one another twenty years from now, people will simply admire or envy you!

You mentioned that as you aged, "The age difference might seem smaller and smaller." In terms of how young we look, women age faster than men, and men often get better looking with age. So there may well be more of a difference in appearance between the two of you in 10 years than there is now. Time isn't going to be on your side in that way.

Look down the road 5, 10 and 20 years and consider what life will be like and what you'll be sharing - as you retire, as income sources change and as you slow down faster than he does.

Spend the Time

You said you were afraid that he'd tire of you. If you've known each other several years, then maybe he does know his own mind. If you've only been friends and more than friends less than 18 months, then you should probably wait awhile and notice how things progress. Make sure you've been dating at least a year before you start with the marriage plans. That time will may tell you what you need to know.

The other side of this is his statement that he won't change his mind. Well, has he walked his talk? Did he at one time want children, then change his mind when he found out it would take "science" to help he and his future wife to conceive? Has he been steady in his career or job choices? Does he have long-time friends who are also very responsible and commitment minded themselves?

The Wonders of an Older Woman

Some men who are comfortable with older women, appreciate how understanding and tolerant they are. Older women often really understand and like men, creating a very pleasant experience for a man. Then too, some men like to be taken care of rather than do some of the difficult work of growing up and caring for others (i.e. children or women their own age). An older woman usually knows how life works, how to keep a house, and is more forgiving of a young man's behavior or lack of ambition or diligence.

Children and a Child at Heart

Many men get along very well with children because they are children at heart themselves. Some older women enjoy such men because they are fun, spontaneous and quite adorable. It often means that the man is not going to be the one thinking about the future and the woman is going to be the planner and the practical one in the marriage. If the man is responsible, this is reasonable. If he is not, it can mimic raising one more child. If this is the case, when he's 48 and you're 74 that may not be as acceptable to you as it is now. So think about whether he fits the above profile, and whether that would be okay with you.

Why Didn't Things Work Before?

The only perplexing question I found in your story has to do with the long-term relationship that didn't progress.

It seems strange that he does not want children, yet spent the time and money to discover what his sperm count is. If they were living together and trying to conceive before marriage, this would make sense. Otherwise, I'd wonder about his story.

More than any other time in history, a low sperm count can be overcome with science. It's not as fun as the normal way children are conceived, but for those who are serious about a family, it can be done. I wonder why a long-term relationship died over this? I wonder why the relationship went on so long instead of moving towards marriage sooner, or why after all that time and investment on her part, she left. I hope you can make sense of this issue.

Decide whether you've got a Peter Pan or a Responsible Man. Then, take your time and be sure you take a walk around the calendar together as a couple before making any final plans. If you're still sure of him by then, you may find yourself a great relationship and a great husband.