

Welcome to the

## Truth, Daring & Dating at Midlife

April 2005

Welcome. This letter represents the fruit of ten years of academic and clinical research into the world of midlife singles. It's designed to help you figure out what's going on in relationships and how to create meaningful and satisfying relationships. Please enjoy it, please forward it, please always give credit. To submit questions, to see other issues and articles, to subscribe, go to <http://www.datingatmidlife.com>

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### *Theme of the Month: It's Spring. It's in the air. How to think about it?*

How do midlife single men and women figure out whether and when to sexualize their relationship? Is there a right and wrong way to do this?

If you've been following my newsletter for a couple of years, you'll know that I don't do "right" and "wrong." Mature people generally come to their own conclusions about what works and what doesn't. I know. It's strange to look in the mirror and say, with a question mark, "This is the face of wisdom?" Such humility is the beginning of wisdom.

Rather than presume to tell you what's right or wrong, I hope to tell you how it works. Then you can make your own choices and then you can learn from your successes and your mistakes.

**SEND FEEDBACK.** Please, I want to know how you respond to the stuff I am saying here. Have I missed something? Did I get it right? I have some academic research to support my claims but there's a lot of debate about these matters. **SEND STORIES.** I'm writing a book. I need good stories. Drop me a note and I'll call and collect your story.

We'll start out with a poem by William Stafford. The first and last verses speak so clearly to our topic this month. The middle verses require a more careful reading. The first verse talks about how much self-knowledge (a midlife issue if there ever was one) is required if we are going to make our own decisions about how to conduct our lives. The last verse talks about how we have to communicate this self-knowledge to others.

### *A Ritual To Read To Each Other*

If you don't know the kind of person I am  
and I don't know the kind of person you are  
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world  
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,  
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break  
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood  
storming out to play through the broken dike.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,  
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,  
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty  
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,  
a remote important region in all who talk;  
though we could fool each other, we should consider –  
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake  
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;  
the signals we give – yes or no, or maybe –  
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

--William Stafford.

### **The Signals we give about sex.**

By Philip Belove, Ed.D.

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It's normal to be confused about sex in midlife dating. Actually, it's normal to be confused about sex decisions period. First, let's talk about the confusion; then let's talk about how it's different at midlife. Finally, let's cover some of the basic signals that people exchange when they are negotiating sex with each other.

### **Confusion is not the same as ignorance.**

Ignorance is the result of too little information. Confusion is the result of two things: too much information and also conflicting information. It's always confusing when you ask

a question and the answer is Yes and No and this is an answer that comes up a lot when the question is, “Do I want to have sex with this person?”

One way people handle this question is through willful ignorance, or aggressive naiveté. Instead of being honest about all sides of the issue, they simply deny information, and attempt to eliminate confusion by changing it into ignorance. I’m old enough to remember a time when condoms couldn’t be sold in certain parts of the country. The moralistic argument was that giving birth control information did not encourage responsible decision-making it only encouraged sex. In response to some of my recent newsletters which, like this one, discussed midlife single sexuality with candor, some people canceled their subscriptions on the grounds that I was “encouraging that life style.” Confusion is a different kind of problem than ignorance and needs different kinds of solutions.

The big, the Whether-Or-Not-To-And-When decision, is processed at multiple levels and so you can get a clear “yes” at one level (Great hot body and inviting smile!) and a “no” at another level (What else is being promised here?).

**As you mature, certain things become less confusing because your thinking becomes more complex.**

I’m in a bar in Chicago and my friend is trying to talk his way out of feeling guilty about having had sex with a woman who, and he knew this from the outset, wanted a much bigger relationship with him than he ever wanted with her. He said, “I’m 49 figuring out how to be a teenager.” The mating dance, at midlife isn’t that different than it is for a teenager. Except it is.

In his quartet of poems about midlife, T. S. Eliot said, “The end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” Sometime by midlife, we stop lying to ourselves and we start actively trying to be extremely truthful with ourselves. If we are fortunate, and blessed, this deeper honesty happens in many areas of life, including sex. Even though all our lives we’ve known the moves in the dance, we start recognizing them. The glance that lingers, the touch on an elbow, the softened voice are as effective as always. We are still influenced, but there is some part of our mind able to step outside the spell. A voice in the head says, “Yes, that’s a signal. What are you going to do about it?” One of the marks of maturity is the ability to think with candor and still allow magic to happen. Even as they are charmed older people retain self-possession.

Now let’s look at some ways people learn to make sense of their confusion.

**Mating decisions are made at three levels**

Humans operate at three levels. We are evolved mammals – animals -- with a three to five million-year history; we are social creatures living in communities and families with a several generation history, and we are each individuals with a few precious decades of life pursuing a very personal version of happiness. Every sexual encounter has

implications for all three perspectives, and people give off non-verbal signals and make statements which reveal how they feel on all three levels.

As we get older we can sense, deal with, and harmonize the conflicts between our animal impulses, our sense of social obligations, and our personal aspirations. This ability depends on our being able to tell the difference between signals at each separate level.

### **The three levels: animal, social, personal.**

The social level is the level of what's considered to be good, right, proper, or acceptable in your corner of the world. This is the "what-would-others-care?" part of sexual decision-making. It's important stuff. It's what gets gossiped about. It's what ruins careers.

Ask anyone whose had an affair that broke up a marriage and then tried to turn that affair into a new marriage. It almost never works, and one of the biggest challenges is the resistance to that new relationship by the social surround.

Those are extreme social concerns. Here are the less extreme social concerns: "What will my children think?" "What will my ex think?" (It is not unusual for an ex to be surprised by her own tears at the news of an ex partner's new marriage.) "What will my friends think?" "How secret will this need to be?" "What will it be like dealing with this person the week after next if we have sex?"

Every midlife relationships sooner or later requires some serious diplomacy and these challenges have nothing at all to do with whether or not the partners have great sexual chemistry.

### **Separate the social stuff from the animal stuff.**

There is a scene in the Eric Rohmer's film, *Autumn Tale*, where a midlife woman, who is married, has a couple "dates" with man from a neighboring town as part of her project to find a boyfriend for her charming unmarried girlfriend. At a certain point in the story she tells the new man that she is married, not the least bit available. He says, "But I've come to love you." She says, "That's okay. I want every man who meets me to fall in love with me."

She's quite calm about it. She wants him to accept that he can never have her, but also to want her. A woman will flirt to confirm she's still got it. A gracious man will let know she's still got it, even though nothing is going to happen. This is the animal connection making peace with the social connection.

The animal connection is a free-standing, independent, and totally separate from social concerns. You can make the animal connection with the widest variety of people. The social connection narrows down the range of choices. The personal narrows it down even further. Sex done whenever the animal feelings seem intense enough and it seems like a

good enough idea at the time is generally called casual sex. I couldn't think of an equivalent adjective for sex which carries a community blessing. "Formal sex," seemed like the right word in that it follows the proper forms, but also, to me, seemed to imply something having to do with bow ties.

Sometimes, with younger adults, the animal connection is a lightening bolt and so intense they can't even think about social considerations. I get a certain kind of question so often at first I thought it was a prank. The set up is always the same. The letter is from a young woman. There's a man at work who stares at her. She knows he lusts for her. They can't talk and when they do, only harsh words are exchanged. They aren't even friends, there's nothing social or personal between them, and yet they each captured by animal magnetism of the other.

The signals about the possibility of animal, spontaneous, casual sex are exchanged instantly and involuntarily at first encounter and are almost exclusively non-verbal. Let's talk about "instantly," for a minute: Possibly your most instant perception of someone you meet is whether they are male or female. Close on the heels of that is some take on their attractiveness, their health, their vitality, their sex appeal. It registers in the back of your mind as a little "Yes!" or a "No" or something in between.

Now if a response registers in your consciousness, it also displays itself on your face, in your eyes, in your posture, in your tone of voice and in the rhythm of your speech. That's a lot of information you are putting out for anyone to read. And, because you are a sexual mammal, you not only send those signals, you also read them instantly, and subliminally.

What you do with that information is another matter, but you can't not respond. And your initial response is completely independent of social considerations.

### **Men And Women Respond Differently.**

The President of Harvard was recently censured by his faculty for suggesting there was an essential difference between men and women when it came to the hard sciences. I really don't what to think of that. But I am sure there is an essential difference when it comes to the implications of sex. Men don't get pregnant. When the matter is sex, sex has a different consequence for women, a greater consequence. It means they must be far more practical. Consequently, they give different signals.

### **The four signals that women send.**

In our social structure, women are the gatekeepers to sex. We have laws that say women have final say in whether it not anything happens. Men do not have leadership in sex until women give it to them.

There is a peculiar mythology that women are not interested in sex. There are website and ebooks for men offering stealth techniques "guaranteed" to make women interested in sex. One of my favorites of these techniques involved a careful description of how to

“accidentally” brush her breasts during a conversation. There are a lot of men who haven’t outgrown their belief in “scoring,” as if a sexual encounter involved some kind of subterfuge. At the same time, the headlines on the women’s magazines at the checkout line at the supermarket show just how very interested women are in sex: “Three positions that will blow his mind?” “How to make him beg for more.” “Survey reveals what really turns men on.” “Act like a professional and do try this at home.”

It is not that women are disinterested, rather it is that they are far more discriminate. At the animal level, women send four kinds of signals and a man who simply notices and pays attention to those signals can do very well and also not get into trouble. They are as follows:

First there is the basic, general signal and we’re not going to count that one because it not directed to anyone in particular. It’s in the clothes and the walk. The four signals are variations on this one: *I’m here, I’m confident and I’m not afraid to be sexy.*

Beyond that, there are the four signals:

- 1) ***Probably Yes.*** This is an intensification of the basic signal and it means that woman finds the man an acceptable candidate. It is the drop-the-hanky signal, an invitation to the dance.
- 2) ***Probably No.*** The basic signal is closed down and this means the man would be wasting a lot of time hoping for anything to happen. This is the I-just-want-us-to-be-friends-and-if-you-ask-for- more-we-won’t-even-be-friends signal.
- 3) ***Wait a minute*** – meaning the woman wants the man to stop temporarily until she gives the go ahead signal, and this is an extremely important signal because it is the measure of safety. This is a way women test men. There is a lot more to be said about safety even beyond what will be said when I present the men’s signals.
- 4) And the last signal, ***Take Me I’m Yours*** – which is a temporary signal meaning that foreplay may commence. This last signal is usually given once a man is firmly trained to respond to signal #3, Wait. It is really the first time in the sequence that leadership is handed over to the man.

These are biological signals and usually given inadvertently, spontaneously, persistently and non-verbally. Sometimes guys are dense and a woman has to be more obvious, deliberate, and persistent, but the process isn’t all that mysterious. I watched a three-year-old with very little language skills get his mother to leave a conversation, go to the kitchen and make a sandwich, all non-verbally. I have a cat who taught me when to open the door for her, non-verbally. I’ve talked to women who had to grab a man by the ears and kiss him before he understood she was interested.

There is a children’s game little girls enjoy called, “Mother, May I?” and the object of the game is for the leader to appear to give people permission to do something, and then punish the followers if they don’t listen carefully enough to the permission-giving statement. “Go back. You didn’t say, “May I.” Women joke about needing to “train” their

men. It's not a joke. On the other hand, men enjoy following orders if the routine is clear and fair.

Some men panic when they get a "Yes, you can ask me to dance." When it comes to the space in between Just Friends and Foreplay they don't know what to do. Such men get confused and occasionally angry. They think wait-a-minute means "no." Sometimes women give up on these shy guys and miss a chance to develop a really good long-term relationship.

Some men resent not having control in something so important to them. Some get obnoxious about it, or get angry at women they find too exciting or too provocative.

### **The Sex Signals Men Send**

As I said, women are far more discriminate. The biggest difference between men and women is that a man is more likely and willing than a woman to have a brief, causal encounter. "Honey, it was nothing." Whereas a man will lower his social and personal relationship standards for sex, woman will make exceptions only in the opposite direction. She will have a brief fling with a man if he is, for her standards, exceptionally good looking, or famous, charming, athletic, smart, talented, powerful or some combination of two or three qualities.

For men, monogamy is an acquired taste. There is a lot of good to be said about acquired tastes. When you look at the list of things you have to make it a point to learn to like – good wine, good cheese, dark chocolate, very good coffee, classical music, jazz, and The Whole Truth – you'll notice they are all complex, demanding and worth the work, and a mark of maturity.

Because men can be more or less discriminating, they give off a different kind of signal. Like women, they also give off the basic "I'm here, please notice me" signal. But men, instead of a "whether or not" signal, they give off a "how much" signal. There is a big difference between "whether or not" which is like a digital signal (on/off, yes/no) and "how much" which is like an analogical signal (more/less, louder/softer, strong/weak.)

When it comes to the animal negotiation (and that's all we're talking about right now), men (spontaneously, involuntarily, truthfully) give off two intrinsically related "how much" signals. These are the signals that women study when they try to figure out whether or not to have sex with a man.

First the general signal in men and all signals are variations from this baseline:

*I'm here, I'm sexy and I'm safe.* This is roosting and men do it around women. It takes many forms. For some it's a display of wealth – watches, cars, clothes – for others it's a display of talent – athletics, mechanical expertise, music, dancing – for others it's a display of kindness and consideration and finding ways to be helpful. One man, on his first date, took a woman to a shopping mall and gave her a \$1000

bill to spend and an hour to do it. He meant well even though the woman found it vaguely insulting. In the early days of cell phones, researchers found that men were far more likely than women to display their expensive cell phones. Most men have subtle ways of showing off.

Now, the specific signals, the ones women notice:

**1) *Here is how much I am willing to invest in getting into bed with you.*** Some walk across the room to get a partner and some wait for the partner to cross to them. Some walk halfway. It's a negotiation. Soon enough a pattern develops and the partners work out just how much a man is willing to invest (and how much the woman is insisting on) in taking this relationship to the next level. One man I know put it quite bluntly, "It's a matter of hours of investment per orgasm."

Men are power- and status-conscious in ways women can only imagine. It is not women who become easily star-struck; it is men. The playwright, Arthur Miller, said that a star was someone who, when they liked you, they made you feel like they were doing you a favor and there is something about them that leads you to accept their friendship on those terms.

One man, a former midlife bachelor, described it to me this way, "When I meet an interesting woman I have this list in my head of what I require and while I'm talking to her I measure her against my list. But then I met this woman who was so fabulous that I realized the one being measuring against the list in my head wasn't her. It was me! I was wondering if I could make the grade."

Some men resent giving a woman this power, but some men feel grateful and if a woman appreciates what she's been given and uses it wisely these guys make very happy partners. There was a fictional character, Rumpole, who referred to his wife, pleasantly, as "she who must be obeyed." John Gottman, probably the most thorough researcher into what makes marriages succeed or fail, said that one of the tests of a successful marriage was how much a man was willing to be influenced by his wife. In my December 2004 letter I talked about this quality of special appreciation.

Other men panic when they are around a woman to whom they feel inferior. So many women have written me about this that at first, I thought the letters, each so identical to the others, were part of a prank. A woman would write to say that a certain man is interested in her. She is sure because his eyes get sort of wild; he stares at her parts and is unsure of himself. But at the same time he avoids her. She sees him staring at her from a distance. When she asks him about his staring he gets angry and even scolds her. He seems out of control. What should she do? Here is a case of a man who is too impressed by a woman to be in control of himself. Such men are a lot of work for a woman and the woman has to take on the burden of making the relationship safe. It's not a good sign in the early days of flirtation.

And we should also mention the other extreme of how much I'm willing to invest: *Nothing. Does that work for you?* Some men will be completely non-responsive to a woman's charms or invitations. Some women who experience this response talk about feeling invisible. This is an extreme version of the first signal men give.

This question takes us to the second "how much" signal that men give. The first "how much" signal is about how much he wants her sexually. The second is related and also an animal signal:

**2) *Here is how much it matters to me that you feel safe.***

Men who are trying to seduce women give two signals. I'm sexy (thrilled by your sexiness and also surprising, daring, funny, smart, entertaining, and exciting to be with) and I'm safe (Won't hurt you, pay attention to your signals, care about your well being, honor you, and respect you.) Both signals are of the more/less, how-much type. A man will give more or less of these qualities depending on how highly he values the woman and how much he thinks his own attention is worth.

When women give their "Maybe" signal, they are testing the man and there are two tests. The first test is "How much do you want this and what are you willing to invest." The second test is "How much can I trust you." Both tests need to be answered before the woman gives the fourth signal, which is, "Take over, have your way with me."

**Safety, the bedrock of eroticism and relationship success**

Safety is another set of considerations and really, too much to go into at this point. Whereas sexual chemistry is a bit of a given, it is radically shaped and changed by safety considerations. The safer people feel, the more they trust, the wilder the erotic side of a relationship; not only that, safety can be built in intentionally from the start – and this is one of those places where midlife knowingness can really make a difference. Women consistently report that their sensuality peaks when they hit their thirties and forties and stays there and this is related to their ability to create safety. All this material and more will be bundled into one of the book chapters.

**Summary:**

- 1. Sexual Chemistry has a mind of it's own and when you are older you know how to listen to it but not be ordered around by it.**
- 2. Men and women approach the matter differently.**
- 3. Women give four signals: no, yes, wait, and take over.**
- 4. Men give two more-or-less signals: How much they are willing to invest, and how considerate and safe they are willing to be.**
- 5. Chemistry is important, but it's only a part of what makes an enduring relationship endure.**
- 6. It's a living psychic connection and you can nurture it or choke it off.**
- 7. The safer people feel the hotter the connection.**

**Teleclasses: None in April, but look for a series starting May to cover this and other material.**

Meanwhile, write me about this material and send me your thoughts and questions. Help me flesh this stuff out. At this point I have so much research that I'm having a hard time figuring out what to include and what to leave out.