

Keeping May-December Romance in Season by Colette Segalla

In age-difference relationships, although we typically see older men in relationships with younger women, we are now more frequently seeing older women in relationships with younger men. The current term "cougar" implies an older woman on the prowl for a younger man, specifically for sex. However, Linda Franklin has been campaigning to define the *real* cougar woman which she views as a smart, sexy, independent, and confident woman who may be in a relationship with a younger man not because he's younger but because there is mutual attraction and compatibility in energy level, interests, and values. Please see her website for more information: <http://www.therealcougarwoman.com/>

Older women dating younger men. Older women in relationships with younger men are a phenomenon that is still relatively uncommon. Fewer than five percent of marriages will occur between an older woman and a younger man whereas up to about fifteen percent of marriages will be between an older man and a younger woman. The overall trend is that relationships or marriages between older women and younger men are increasing. There are celebrity relationships like Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher or Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins that are bringing this type of relationship more into the public eye.

How big of an age gap makes a relationship officially an "age-difference" relationship? A significant age gap is eleven years or more.

What are some of the issues that people in significant age difference relationships may face? Despite the age difference between two partners, issues that may arise are going to be a little bit different when it's an older man versus an older woman. However, generally some of the issues are as follows:

1. **The judgment or perception by others that there's something wrong with the relationship or that it's not all right for there to be that significant of an age difference.** This is particularly an issue when it's an older woman married to a younger man. This type of relationship is subject to the most scrutiny and judgment by family members, friends, and even by strangers.
2. **Children from a previous marriage or a relationship without children but a desire to have them can also create an issue.** Children from a previous marriage can complicate matters and there can be a whole host of issues that need to be addressed. A complicating factor can be having children the same age as your spouse. Often, the children of the older spouse are not quite as old but very close in age to their step parent or in some cases, as with larger age gaps between two spouses, they are the same age or even older than their step parent. This confuses the relationship between the child and the step parent. What role is the step parent to play in the life of their spouse's adult children? The relationship between the step parent and the adult children need to be addressed as its own relationship rather than as an adjunct to the relationship between married partners. By cultivating a relationship in its own right, the role of step parent becomes less of an issue since it is not based on parenting.
3. **The possibility of having slightly different perceptions of the world.** With a significant age difference, spouses may find that they view the world differently because they were brought up in different time periods. This may come into play with regard to the division of household chores and sharing of expenses.

4. **Different life stages.** Partners may be transitioning through different life stages, which can present another set of issues. What these issues are depends on the couple and how long they have been together.

Ways to deal with age difference issues. A big part of dealing with issues in a relationship that may arise from a significant age gap is acknowledging that there will be issues that may come up in the relationship. It's important to talk about them with your partner to open up a dialogue and ensure both spouses are aware of what these factors are in the relationship. This acknowledgement allows you to adjust your approach and attitudes by finding ways to accommodate differences as with any marriage or relationship. Although an age difference might lead to the development of some complicating factors, these factors are not insurmountable obstacles, and they do not reflect that there's something wrong with the relationship.

Is the age gap an easier or harder problem for people to work through? Most couples do not present to therapy for problems related to age gap differences. They come in because there are other relationship issues that are coming to the surface. This is not to say that the age gap difference hasn't been a problem in the relationship but usually they aren't the key issue that these couples seek help for.

Benefits of having an age gap in a marriage. One of the benefits of having a marriage where there's an age gap is that you can gain the wisdom of the older person in the marriage which can add richness to the relationship. The couple can also benefit from the youthfulness of the younger person in the relationship. Another benefit is the ability to obtain a mix of social contacts which can be enriching to the marriage as well. Financial stability of the older partner can also be an additional benefit, although the couple does need to be careful not to get into a power dynamic with regards to money.

Things to keep in mind. As a younger person married to a much older partner, it is important to remember that concerns about the age difference will come and go. There will be times when it won't be an issue at all and there will be other times when it seems like a really big issue. During these times it is important to remember that there are going to be fluctuations and that you have got to keep your focus on what brought you together as partners in the first place such as commonalities of interests, attraction, and the enjoyment of each other's company. As things settle back down again, the couple may be in a better position to appreciate the enriching experience of having gone through a transition together or to have integrated step children into the picture.

For an older person married to a younger partner, the most important thing to keep in mind is that having patience and humor will go a long way in dealing with ups and downs when it comes to being with somebody much younger. Although you may feel like you have lived through many of the experiences that you're seeing your younger spouse go through and you may think you have all the answers, it's important for your partner to find his or her way, of course with your input. Remember that they're in their own process, and it needs to be respected, just as yours was when you were at that stage.

Relationships with significant age differences are manageable. There are statistics indicating that these marriages endure and are as likely to remain intact as are marriages between people closer in age.