To Live and Date in Sobriety

Just because you’re sober doesn’t mean you know the first thing about appropriate dating—let alone how to do it right.

“‘Two sickies don’t make a welly,’ my 80-year-old sponsor used to say.”

According to James, a 33-year-old photographer from Los Angeles who’s been sober for eight years, when he first came to AA he listened to what his sponsor told him and religiously avoided dating women in the program. He didn’t date anyone at all for the first six months—he was in a Salvation Army men’s rehab anyway, so it wasn’t like he had much of a choice. But when he finally entered the realm of sober dating, it was with a good chunk of sobriety under his belt, a strong program and a great relationship with his sponsor. Did that mean he immediately dated “appropriately” and “healthily”? “Hell no,” he laughs. “I spent five years dating messed up speed freaks and growing pot for a living. I guess I still liked hanging around screwed up people, even if I wasn’t using. I identified with their drug-addled minds. I still found something sexy about it.”

The Big Book doesn’t specifically state that dating is forbidden in the first year of sobriety, but you’ll hear this suggestion bandied around the rooms plenty of times. Dr. Christine Milrod, a sex and life coach in LA, suggests that this is because “many people in recovery have previously used for so long that they have no idea of who they truly are. They need to get to know themselves on a very deep level and enjoy self-acceptance before rushing into a sexual relationship.” She advocates psychotherapy for examining past behaviors and coming into the self-acceptance necessary for entering into healthy relationships. While Mary, a 26-year-old former heroin addict in Oakland, agrees with this assessment, she also admits that staying single in sobriety—particularly during the first year—is challenging. “I only have a few months, and probably shouldn’t be dating anyone,” she confesses. “But getting sober is pretty lonely. It’s really hard to stay single when you feel like you’re giving up so much other stuff at the same time.” Dr. Rosalyn Dischiavo, a sexologist and licensed addiction counselor, has a cheerier outlook: “There is another, more optimistic truth about love in early sobriety: it shows that you are healing. As the
body begins to recover, it wakes up. Erotic healing is a good sign. Falling in love is a sign that you are being restored to health."

Take it very, very slow. Date like it’s 1955, whether it’s with someone new, or with your current partner or spouse. Go to the movies, take a walk in the park, go skiing together, but slow down and give the intimacy a chance to develop.

The problem with “sober dating” is that even if you’re not using and have a considerable degree of recovery behind you, a lot of people in recovery still unconsciously identify with and seek out other addicts and alcoholics as partners. Why? Sober people are often drawn to those who are using for a variety of complex reasons—among them, because it’s kind of like relapsing without going out, because it gives an edge of danger to a “normal” sober life which lacks the drama and tragedy of using years, or because it might make an addict feel powerful to not be the “identified patient” in the relationship.

Still, Dr. Milrod, Dr. Dischiavo and Dr. Belisa Vranich—a clinical psychologist specializing in sex and relationships—all agree that there is no reason why addicts and alcoholics shouldn’t be dating other addicts and alcoholics. According to Milrod, the most important foundation is simply that “sobriety needs to be a priority. If a relationship starts to threaten the recovery process, it needs to end.”

Dr. Belisa likes to tell her clients to adhere strictly to a set of dating rules: “I’d love to tell you that the first rule is that there are no rules but it’s actually quite the opposite,” she says. Her rules include avoiding “testing” yourself by going to bars and other places of temptation, no dating those with significantly less time (such as newcomers in the first year)—and, most importantly, don’t fall in love for the first year. Why? “You’re more at risk for obsessive distracting love when you’re supposed to be focusing on your sobriety,” she says. “There’ll be plenty of time in the future for love that’s not mired by codependence.”

The problem with alcoholics and addicts, of course, is that rules can often be disregarded and, rather than making the healthy choice, they’ll often opt to stay in a destructive cycle until it gets too painful—until they’re “sick and tired of being sick and tired.” Is that what happened to James? “Pretty much. I’m not into the ‘Higher Power’ stuff in a religious sense. If I had a Higher Power, it was helping other people and getting out of my head and out of this “me” mentality—the selfishness that you have when you’re a using alcoholic. I think it’s no coincidence I met my wife while I was volunteering, had no time for myself, and dating was the last thing on my mind.”

Patti, a 27-year-old from New York with four years of sobriety in NA, says that after getting sober, she found it hard not to be drawn to the same kind of train wreck relationships of her using years. After several relapses spurred on by those relationships, she entered therapy, chose a new, strict sponsor whose advice she actually listened to. She also avoided dating anyone for the first eight months of her sobriety, learned to identify and avoid red flags, and realized that a partner who was not using and have a considerable degree of recovery behind you, a lot of people in recovery still unconsciously identify with and seek out other addicts and alcoholics as partners. Why? Sober people are often drawn to those who are using for a variety of complex reasons—among them, because it’s kind of like relapsing without going out, because it gives an edge of danger to a “normal” sober life which lacks the drama and tragedy of using years, or because it might make an addict feel powerful to not be the “identified patient” in the relationship.

Dr. Schiavo’s most important dating tip for those in recovery is to: “Take it very, very slow. Date like it’s 1955, whether it’s with someone new, or with your current partner or spouse. Go to the movies, take a walk in the park, go skiing together, but slow down and give the intimacy a chance to develop. Expect to be terrified to have sex, and let that be one more thing you can laugh with your partner about.”

Sarah, a 50-year-old British chef living in Westwood who has spent a great deal of time in cognitive behavioral therapy as well as 10 years in AA, says that she found the “old fashioned tips” worked best for her. “I got sober at 40, had never been married, and had only ever fallen into bed with guys...
when shitfaced drunk,” she says. “That was how I started a relationship. I had no idea how to function in the real world, so I just swallowed up every little piece of advice I could, confided in my sponsor, and started doing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.” Sarah’s tips, many of which were also suggested by the experts interviewed in this article, include: avoid dating fellow 12-Steppers and alcoholics and addicts who are using, make the first date a coffee or lunch—in the day, with an easy get-out clause should it turn out you never want to see this person again. If you’re looking for a relationship, Sarah says, don’t have sex until the person you’re dating has made a clear commitment to you, and you’ve established you’re on the same page.

Both Dr. Milrod and Dr. Belisa warn against guessing what your partner is feeling (a “skill” addicts tend to think they have), and advocate open and clear communication. In other words, if your partner is saying, “I don’t want a relationship,” listen and if that’s not the answer you want, look for someone else rather than considering the words a challenge that must be taken up. Also, talk over your feelings with your sponsor, and utilize step 10 inventories for complex emotions.

Ultimately, it’s important to keep in mind the fact that getting sober doesn’t happen all at once. Like a lot of things, learning how to date and discovering what’s appropriate and what’s not takes following other people’s rules until you’re well enough to figure out your own.

Ruth Fowler is a journalist and screenwriter from the UK living in West Hollywood who has written about Burning Man and alcoholic thinking, among many other topics, for The Fix.

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