

Singled OUT

GRACE IS SINGLE – but it's not for lack of trying. Over the years, she has been on blind dates, tried speed dating, online dating, spent endless nights at house parties, in noisy bars and clubs, and has even allowed her parents to act as match-makers. But at 41, Grace has resigned herself to being unattached.

"I still go out, but realistically I don't have much hope of meeting Mr Right. I get pressure from my parents and relatives, but I can cope with it because I have a great group of supportive girlfriends, many of whom are single. We enjoy our lives."

There's little doubt that by the time you hit your 40s, the pool of available and/or suitable partners has shrunk significantly, and is made up of many different groups: divorcees; single people still searching for Mr/Ms Right; single people who have prioritised their career and haven't met anyone; serial daters; and, those looking for one-right stands. It's a jungle out there.

By the time most of us reach middle age, we have strong ideas about what we want and what we don't want – and more often than not, we're not willing to compromise. On top of this, many people over 40 are carrying emotional baggage: failed relationships, rejection complexes, children from previous relationships, ageing parents and so on.

"In your 20s, you don't have the responsibilities you have at 40," says Grace's friend Susan, 43, who has recently married. "There's a bigger party scene, you can go drinking until 3am and roll up for work the next day. You can easily meet people at social events, and you tend to have more confidence because you're not used to get-

introducing boyfriends to parents or getting that ring on her finger."

Jones says there are almost as many sign-ups to his website from people in their 40s as there are from those in their 30s or even 20s.

But Grace says most men in her social circle are either married or engaged by the time they're 30. "There's a real problem for women over 30 in Hong Kong. There are definitely more women looking for men in my social circle."

Although this seems to be a common perception among women such as Grace, the official figures agree with Jones. Statistics show that Hong Kong men are turning to the mainland for wives, as more women choose careers over husbands. Commissioner for Census and Statistics Fung Hing-wang says that of 50,300 marriages registered in Hong Kong last year, 18,000 involved men who brought brides from the mainland. Fung says the number of marriages has declined during the past 10 years and the proportion of women who have never married has increased to 30.7 per cent last year from 28.9 per cent in 1996. The proportion of unmarried men is even higher, at 34.3 per cent.

So what should women such as Grace be doing? Richard Gee, counsellor at Resource the Counselling Centre, has this advice. "A famous therapist once said, 'The problem is not the problem, it's how you respond to the problem'. How are you responding? Are you negating the rest of your life because you can't find a partner?"

"Don't give up. It's true the pool is shrinking. By the time you're 60 it will probably be shrunk to a dozen, but people

aren't looking for a serious relationship. I'm looking for a long-term partner, so I go to parties at friends' homes, networking events at the local business chambers, speaking events and so on – don't sit at home on your own."

Both Jones and Gee agree that Hong Kong is a multicultural society and cross-cultural relationships can be a positive opportunity. "It makes the relationship more challenging, but it's a good trend," says Gee. "If you can resolve the differences, it makes the relationship more rewarding because you're dealing with a different culture and a different map of the world. And it's not just expat/Asian – there are significant differences between Asian cultures too."

Grace knows it's important to make the most of yourself: to smile, make yourself attractive and enjoy life. She says that if you're happy and healthy you're more likely to attract the right partner – if it's meant to be, it will happen, but marriage isn't for everyone.

"When you reach 40, you have more understanding of yourself and your lifestyle. Sometimes it's difficult to change to suit a man. If you're a single woman it's OK, you don't have to feel defeated by loneliness. Being in a relationship isn't the answer to everything. I meet women who are married, but they feel lonely too."

"ONLINE DATING, SPEED DATING ... IF YOU REALLY WANT A RELATIONSHIP THEN GO FOR IT"

Richard Gee Counsellor

ting rejected like you are in your 40s. Let's face it, most men in their 40s are looking for a sexy 20-year-old in a low-cut top."

Toby Jones, founder of local internet dating service wheresmydate.com.hk, says that, although some men are interested only in dating girls half their age, it's a mixed bag and people want different things from relationships.

"If you take a mid-40s guy going out with someone young, then he's probably not so bothered about having a good conversation – he just wants a good body to cuddle up to. But some men love the idea of dating someone who's hit her sexual prime, and that's a woman in her 40s," he says.

"The encounters I've had with older women have been more memorable. Women are also looking for different things. A 40-year-old divorced woman with children might simply be looking for fun and might view men the same age as herself as boring. She's not interested in

in their 80s find partners and marry. If you say you can't find anyone, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the end, every relationship is about two people working together. If you go into it looking to get something without giving, those relationships don't last very long."

Gee says fortysomethings on the dating scene should experiment and try new avenues to meet people. "Online dating, speed dating ... if you really want a relationship, then go for it. You only find out if these things work by giving it a go."

David, 42, has never married. He recently turned to an internet-dating service to find a partner. "I've been looking around Hong Kong for the past couple of years and couldn't find anyone, so I found someone in Manila on the internet."

"It depends what you're looking for. You need to work this out first and then hang out in the right places. For example, men who go to bars and clubs probably

