

When a Wide Age Gap Doesn't Matter

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The common perception that men act younger than their age can be a good thing in marriages with a wide age gap between the couple

When housewife Elly Sjamsul, 43, first got to know her husband, who is nearly 20 years older than she is, she felt he acted younger than his age.

"He made jokes, wore fashionable pants and smiled a lot," she recalls. A relative introduced the Indonesian-Chinese to her husband, property agent Koh Yong Soon, when she was 20 years old and he was about 39.

"He enjoys life. It's a youthful part of him. He likes karaoke, singing and dancing," says Ms Elly, who feels her 62-year-old husband to be "around 50 years old".

The common perception that men might act younger than their age can be a good thing in marriages with a wide age gap between the couple. Mandopop king Jay Chou thought so too.

Last month, Chou married model Hannah Quinlivan, aged 21, in a lavish wedding in Yorkshire in Britain on the eve of his 36th birthday.

The Taiwanese singer, who is about 14 years older than Quinlivan, had said: "My mental age is about the same as hers and we just get along like children."

But Mr Koh does not feel particularly young. In fact, in his 22-year marriage, he has often felt societal pressure over his May-December union.

"After unsuccessful dating experiences before I met my wife, I was already old at 39 then and I wanted to get married," says Mr Koh, who wed Ms Elly after a courtship of about a few months and they now have a 21-year-old daughter and a 19-year-old son, both students.

"After marriage, priorities change, with considerations of income and children. Looking young is much less of a concern, one is not looking for girls anymore.

"But now I'm 62, she's 43. About 10 years ago, there was a sensitivity I felt about looking young so that I could match her, so we look like a couple when we go out. People look at you. We know they're thinking whether she's my daughter or my wife but we ignore it," says Mr Koh, who adds that he sometimes jokes that his wife is his daughter.

Experts say there may be a tendency by some couples to "close" a substantial age gap between them.

Says sociologist Tan Ern Ser, a council member of Families for Life, a non-profit organisation that promotes resilient families: "Perceptions are shaped by cultural context. In Singapore, men are expected to marry someone younger, which means that women are expected to marry someone older. If the gap is too wide, it is likely to raise eyebrows. I reckon there can be a tendency to close the gap - for instance, a younger wife who tries to act older than her age.

"It is also possible that two persons in a marriage may be close in chronological age, but are further apart in mental age."

Ms Theresa Bung, principal therapist at the non-profit Family Life Society, says May-December couples may sometimes see each other as closer to their own age.

"A wife who sees her much older husband as younger than he is may expect him to have the same energy levels as her. An older man may see his much younger wife as older than she is, and expect her to take on more responsibility," says Ms Bung.

Ultimately, she adds, it is not the age gap that matters but the quality of the relationship.

To help bridge a wide age gap in marriage, she urges couples to cultivate common interests and set common goals such as buying a home. She also advises trying to accommodate each other's needs and recognising that the other may be at a different life stage.

Being at the same stage in life despite a big age difference was what brought Ms Antoinette Zung, 38, a financial director at a retail company, and independent corporate advisor Johnson Choo, 49, together - 20 years after they met.

They got to know each other when they were working on the same project as voice talents, dubbing a Mandarin drama show in English at the then Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (now MediaCorp), when Ms Zung was just 11 and Mr Choo, 22.

Years later, when Ms Zung was 19, she ran into Mr Choo, then working as an MTV producer, and they caught up over lunch.

Keeping in contact via the occasional e-mail message and "once-a-year catch-ups" over the years, they became friends, but started dating only in 2007, when Mr Choo invited Ms Zung on a Bangkok trip he had won for two people at a lucky draw. The pair married in 2009.

"We first met when I was 11 and he was 22. We were at different places in life and different mental ages. Once we were in the same phase in life and working, the age difference fades away. For a good 20 years, he was an acquaintance," says Ms Zung.

While she and her husband share an interest in deep-sea diving and the couple went on their honeymoon in South Africa, where they went on a safari and cage-diving with sharks, she sees Mr Choo's adventurous side as part of his personality and unrelated to his acting younger than his age.

She was initially concerned about the energy levels needed with their having children in his 40s but those concerns also ebbed. The couple have a four-year-old son, Alexandre, and Ms Zung is expecting their second child.

Mr Choo says: "Age doesn't matter. Our outlook is similar. We enjoy the same things such as travelling, watching movies, eating and sleeping in during weekends."

Moreover, age gaps become less stark when couples grow older.

"If she's 25 and he's 45, maybe some people will stare at them. At 45 and 65, it doesn't matter anymore," says Ms Bung.

Housewife Lily Ho's husband is 12 years older than her - he did not act younger than his age and she liked it that way from the start. They are now 73 and 85 years old.

Mrs Ho's late mother objected to her dating Mr Harry Ho when he visited their home with a family friend and later posted a letter to her asking for a date. She was 18 and he, 30.

"My mother said he was too old, but I was very insistent, I felt more secure with an older man because he didn't gallivant, drink or smoke like other people my age then," says Mrs Ho.

Mr Ho adds: "When we were 18 and 30, we saw the difference in our appearances. When we were older, the age gap was not visible. We are in good health. Maybe if someone is sick or wheelchair-bound, it would be different. I'm still mobile but much slower. I don't feel like an old man."