



What should we make of same-age marriages?

AZRA HUMAYRA

Certain things in life have simply never made sense to me, and relationships are right up there, sandwiched between calculus and people who pay money to run in marathons. I never especially cared about romance, but I told myself, in a pleasantly delusional way, "If it pops up, I'll welcome it with open arms."

Of course, I had standards. The man must wear glasses. He must be taller than me. And, crucially, he must be older. You may ask why I insisted on the last one. The truth is, my mother drilled it into me from childhood: my husband must be older so that his maturity level aligns with mine. I tried to follow her wisdom, but the future had other plans.

I stumbled into my first serious relationship at the age of 20. My partner ticked almost every box on my carefully curated list, except one, the very one my mother feared for reasons known only to her and her peers. Eventually, my mother discovered that I was seeing someone, and her first question was whether he was my batchmate. When I admitted that he was, she sighed, visibly wounded. It was bad enough I was dating at all, but what made it particularly upsetting for her was that my partner was of the same age. This was a calamity, up there with earthquakes and skipping dinner.

Now that I'm approaching what I like to call a "serious" age, I've been thinking about marriage. My partner, inconveniently, has remained exactly as old as I am this entire time, which feels like poor planning on his part. Lately, I find myself wondering why my mother was so squarely opposed to same-age marriages, and why my friends swore by them.

I consulted four fully fledged adults, all well into their 40s and all with at least a four-year age gap between themselves and their partners. Then I interviewed six young adults who believe in "age symmetry" in marriage.

When I asked the pro-age-symmetry crowd to sell me their philosophy, they practically produced presentation slides. They talked first about friendship, a foundation for *everlasting* love. If you're the same age, they said, you're more likely to actually like one another, not just tolerate each other's breathing habits. Then there's communication; you're more likely to communicate openly with someone you can confide in as a friend. That is, until someone forgets someone's birthday.

Being born in roughly the same era supposedly means you understand one another's references, which is vital if you don't want to spend half your life explaining who *Jogesh* is. Shared references eventually ripen into jokes no one else finds amusing, but it hardly matters because your partner will always laugh.

There were other points too. People of the same age often have shared interests, which means a greater supply of conversation topics beyond filing taxes and the outrageous price of eggs. They might relate to childhood experiences in similar ways, bonding over mutual anger involving dial-up internet. And having lived through the same macro environment, economic recessions, questionable fashion trends, and various political disappointments, they tend to form similar worldviews.

One interviewee, who has been married to her partner for over a decade, said they could also understand one another's mental health better because they were travelling through the same life stages at the same time. Apparently, it's easier to unmask your anxieties to someone who remembers the same political turmoil.

In case you forgot, there are cons. Nothing comes without a health warning, and the anti-symmetry adults came armed with theirs. They worried about both partners advancing through illness and creaky joints at roughly the same rate, which sounds sentimental in a film but less so when you're both comparing prescription lists. There's

also the matter of careers. Two ambitious people in the same stage of professional development may find that their home resembles a shared office with laundry, each wondering who will cook dinner and whether capitalism is the true villain in their relationship.

Then there were the classic complaints. Men, someone insisted, are forced into financial responsibility far too early if they date a woman their own age. Personally, I hear patriarchy and capitalism clearing its throat in the background. Besides, plenty of women are marching into the workforce and splitting bills with admirable enthusiasm, which suggests the real task ahead is unlearning our mothers' favourite matchmaking superstitions.

One of the older women, who vehemently opposes same-age marriages, fretted about maturity; the logic seemed to be that men reach emotional adulthood the way slow-cooked mutton reaches tenderness: given time, medium heat, and the firm belief that leaving them alone for long enough will improve the outcome. This is a myth one of the interviewees, who has dated older men, busted. So maybe age doesn't come wisdom.

In the end, it seems everyone has a theory, and most of them sound perfectly reasonable until you start living with an actual human being who doesn't wash their feet before getting on the bed. There will always be pros, cons, warnings, and intergenerational advice delivered with *bhaat* and a hint of doom. But the real truth is that relationships are wildly personal. You don't have to be the same age to laugh at the same things, nor do you need a four-year gap to magically acquire maturity. You just need someone you can talk to, complain to, and occasionally glare at while deciding who's going to make tea in the evening.

Azra Humayra is a sub-editor at Campus, Rising Stars, and Star Youth.