


Sean Penn and Scarlett Johansson: Is the Age Difference an Issue?



 By Christie Hartman, PhD

After 14 years of marriage, Sean Penn and Robin Wright divorced in July 2010. Now Penn, who's 50, has been caught canoodling with Scarlett Johansson, 26. Yes, your calculations are correct: Sean Penn is dating a woman who is literally half his age.

Of course, the obvious questions are: Why would Sean Penn go for someone so young? And why would Scarlett Johansson date a man so much older than herself? That's when all the pseudo-scientists come out of the woodwork and start spouting evolutionary theory – i.e. that older men like young and pretty women because they represent fertility, and that younger women like older, not-necessarily-good-looking men because they have the maturity and means to care for her and her young. While there is some truth to these theories, it's only a small part of what drives dating (and mating) behavior.

More often, such theory is used as an excuse for older men to chase women who are too young for them, and for younger women to seek sugar daddies.

That said, many people assume a May-December romance is somehow typical, and that it's what every man wants. Single women in Penn's age bracket may wonder, "What chance do I have if men my age can get women in their 20s??"

Here's why you shouldn't fret much when you see a relationship like Sean Penn and Scarlett Johansson:

1. Older men often rebound with younger women. In fact, dating a much younger woman is an ironclad sign a man is still recovering from a past relationship. He's looking for fun, sex and an ego boost after the difficult time he's been through.

2. Celebrities are not like regular people. You will often observe more extreme mating behaviors in celebrities, including multiple marriages, rapid transition from one partner to another, marrying after having dating only a few months and partners with vast age differences. These behaviors are far less common among the rest of us. In fact, only 7.5% of U.S. marriages include a husband who is more than ten years older than his wife.

3. Most older men admire younger women, rather than prefer them. A youthful, pretty face is a pleasure to look at, but most men want a partner with whom they connect. That special connection will rarely occur with someone half your age. Likewise, most women prefer men much closer to their own age.

Christie Hartman, PhD is a psychologist, dating expert, and the author of Dating the Divorced Man and It's Not Him, It's YOU.