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AND HER GRAN

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Back in the dating game

When single mum Katy Regan decided to date again, she called in the experts. But can their advice boost her chances? Photographs by Ben Wright

After 18 months in the dating desert, I was delighted to discover The SpeedDater Date MakeOver – an innovative new service that promises to help singletons ‘make the best first impression and improve

your chances of dating success’. With clothes advice, flirting tips and analysis of where you’re going wrong, it’s a real-life version of the brilliant BBC show *Would I Like to Meet*, minus the embarrassment of having to broadcast your inner woes to millions. Always a sucker

for anything that allows me to indulge in a bit of self-analysis (and talk about myself), I decide to give it go. The big question is, will it work?

THE PREPARATION

First stop in my journey of dating discovery is Michael Myerscough. With his slick ▷

◁ dress sense and enigmatic pauses, he is everything I hoped for in a date coach.

Initially, he quizzes me about my relationship history. This, naturally, is the bit where I get nervous. Far from the thirtysomething Bridget Jones stereotype who just has rotten luck with men, my life is way more complicated.

The main reason I am single is because, last year, I fell very unexpectedly pregnant by my best friend. This resulted in the birth of our little boy eight months ago, but rather than us then becoming a normal family, my friend and I are still just friends – and therefore free to date, albeit with my son now the main man in my life.

I'm embarrassed coming to Michael with all this haggage, but, thankfully, he's unfazed. 'OK,' he says, leaning back into his chair, 'so you're a single mum. That's OK.' I sincerely hope it is. I am constantly trying to banish negative thoughts that nobody will ever want me with a baby and remember people such as Kate Moss and Liz Hurley who have kids from other relationships and also get adoring new boyfriends. Yes, I know they're both models and one of the boyfriends was a heroin addict, but you get my point.

What Michael really wants to get to the bottom of is why I continually go for people that I love on a personality level, but have little sexual chemistry with.



Katy opens up to dating guru Michael, above, before life coach Lisa gets to grips with her self-image, below



We come to the conclusion that I just don't have the confidence to go for the men I really fancy and opt for the comfort zone of being 'just mates' with them instead.

The other thing I sometimes do on dates is get inappropriately drunk and try to outwit potential men. I explain to my dating coach that I long to be one of those demure types who says very little but has men hanging on her every word. What I usually am is the one propping up the bar with the man I don't fancy

while the demure one goes home with the man I do fancy.

I off-load like this for around an hour, with Michael giving me invaluable advice about how to get in touch with my sensual side and how I should try to come across as 'safe' (something that men like, apparently).

He also makes me practise saying 'Hi, I am Katy' in a slow, deep voice, to help me sound less brusque and manic. By the time I'm finished, I feel as though I'm a phone sex worker. My

homework is to write down 20 things about myself that make me irresistible. Does the fact that I once won a writing competition with a poem about Heinz spaghetti hoops count, I wonder?

Now, I need an outfit to match the new me. This is where stylist Jodie and life coach Lisa come in. My very own Trinny and Susannah, they are trained in cruel-to-be-kindness to guarantee I look and feel a knockout on my date.

I am slightly concerned I am going to be made to wear a black catsuit and stand in an all angles mirror while they draw attention to my post-baby overhang. In the end, it's not quite that bad, but nearly. We go to Top Shop, Next and Gap and they make me stand in my underwear while they dress me in a million outfits, scrutinising me in each one.

It's fairly excruciating and I do wonder what it's doing for my confidence. But after three hours and a very low point when they try to get me into an empire line dress with only tiny orange triangles to cover my boobs, we have my date outfit: a flared brown skirt, little gold shrug (gives definition to my bosoms rather than giving me sausage boobs, I am told) and some indecently high gold sandals. It turns out they knew what they were doing all along.

I feel like Charlotte from *Sex and the City* – all demure ladylikeness with a naughty edge. They ask me to close my eyes and visualise a ▷

“THE OTHER THING I DO ON DATES IS GET DRUNK AND TRY TO OUTWIT MEN”



'Do my boobs look big in this?' Katy at the mercy of stylist Jodie, above, and with her successful 'date outfit', below



◁ time I felt sexy. When I finally smile (more because I feel like a prat than anything else), they start shouting, 'That's it, that's it! She's found her happiness anchor.'

Apparently my 'anchor' is the point where I know I look good. It sounds like a load of therapy speak to me. But I've got my date outfit, so I'm happy.

PUTTING IT TO THE TEST

I've done the preparation, now it's time to see if it works. I dip my feet in the dating arena with a man I meet at

a speed-dating night. I'd thought it would be a no-strings way to try out my new-found tips, but it's a total disaster. Not only is he a dwarf (I could have forgiven him that, I hadn't seen him standing up at the speed date, after all), but he has absolutely no social skills. I decide I need to be more realistic in my approach and go on a date with a friend of a friend. At least he won't be a weirdo.

I am worried I will just get drunk and forget every tip Michael gave me, especially as no alcohol is Michael's

golden rule number one (along with not pulling 'comic' faces). I can't imagine a first date without a drink, so compromise by lining my stomach with a good meal before I go out. My mother would be proud.

Drink or no drink, I am exceptionally nervous. This is the first (the speed date didn't really count) time in my life as a single mum I have been on a date and I'm not sure how I will be received. Under Jodie's instructions, I am wearing a version of an outfit they chose for me – a skirt and feminine heels. I feel slightly OTT to tell you the truth, but they have assured me men like it when they know you've made an effort.

To get in the mood, I try Lisa and Jodie's 'visualisation' exercise and try to remember a time I felt really sexy. Just as I am whisked back to the time I returned from holiday with an all-over tan and my boyfriend ravished me within minutes, my date walks in.

The nerves dissolve immediately. Will is every inch the gent and pulls the chair away for me and insists on buying me a drink. I immediately warm to him.

I size him up. (Come on, what girl wouldn't? I know he must be doing the same to me.) He has a nice face, a lovely manner, too. He is perhaps on the slightly sartorially challenged side, but I am careful to remember what my date-coach told me – not to get obsessed about whether this is the man I will marry, and just to have a good time. (I did once dismiss a man

based on the fact he only drank Sea Breezes, but I still stand by my decision.)

I'm most worried about what we're going to talk about. Since becoming a mum, I've done absolutely no polite chit-chat-over-a-cocktail whatsoever, and I was never very good at it in the first place. As I explained to Michael, my usual dating style is to go into interview mode, firing questions at men as if they're a contestant on *Mastermind*, chosen subject: 'The Life and Times of Me (and Potentially Us)'. Michael concluded this is my defence mechanism, I would rather quiz someone else than reveal something about myself.

He also stressed that I need to concentrate on being interesting as well as being interested, so that I created 'intimacy'. Otherwise Will or any other potential date may go away without any sense of who I really am.

Thankfully, Will's a great conversationalist and extracts information from me with ease. Rather than just small-talk about where we live and what we do, we talk about our hopes and passions, about turning 30, about the mad people in the bar next to us. To be frank the chat

just flows – it's great. Perhaps it's because I am making an effort to be warm and 'available', revealing lots about myself

I DID ONCE DISMISS A MAN BASED ON THE FACT HE ONLY DRANK SEA BREEZES

as Michael taught me, or perhaps it's just because we have a connection; I can't tell. All I know is that I'm enjoying myself.

But this is another thing my date coach told me: ▷

◁ listen to your instincts. If he seems like a loser after the first five minutes, he probably is. If, on the other hand, you get good vibes, trust them. This was perhaps the most helpful bit of advice Michael gave me.

The beers flow (sorry, Michael, I just can't do this sober). I remember to be warm and available with my body language, sit with my legs gently parted (I said gently – no crude jokes, please) and arms unfolded. I remember Lisa and Jodie's tip to caress my décolletage, bringing attention to my ample and yet perfectly scaffolded bosom, but I ignore their tip to rub my fingers around the rim of my bottle 'seductively', for fear I will end up looking like a bad audition at a porn film. We happily move from bar to bar, the only snag at the back of my mind being the one rather large subject we haven't covered yet – the fact I have a baby. Michael's advice was perhaps not to mention it on the first date, but this is easier said than done.

The more Will asks me what I do at the weekends and who I live with, the more I feel like I'm lying, hiding what is obviously a huge part of my life.

I think to myself, 'This is me. You can either hack it or you can't and I'd rather know now if it's the latter.'

So when, after the third or fourth drink, he asks me: 'So, who do you live with?' I come clean. 'Actually, there's something I should tell you. I've got a baby,' I say.

There's no gasp, no run for

the door. In fact, he responds impeccably. 'Well, that's wonderful,' he says. 'Why are you embarrassed? You should be proud.' If he *was* put off, he certainly hid it well. I am hugely encouraged.

That off my chest, I get the feeling he perceives me differently. In fact, I know he does, because he tells me. 'Now that I know you're a mother, it's nice, it's more worldly,' he says. OK, so we are rather pissed by this point, but his warmth makes me feel great. But more than that, for the first time in ages, I feel sexy.

I notice that he touches me lightly on the bottom as we go up the stairs or through a door. If Michael's advice is right, this is a cue he likes me and an invitation to do the

same. So, while we talk, I touch his arm lightly to show my enthusiasm. It works like magic, and there's an ensuing kiss.

I finally roll into a taxi long past the time a mother should be out. He texts me to check that I've got home OK.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

I have to admit that although I liked the idea of a date makeover, I never actually thought it would work. But even if nothing happens between me and Will over the next few weeks, I really



The champagne and conversation flow on Katy's date with Will

think the coaching (and the outfit) helped me to get through something I've been dreading ever since I had my baby. Obviously, no amount of advice or styling is going to make the right man walk through my door, but at least when a potential one does, I will certainly feel more confident about making something happen.

If I'm honest, I still don't know if I am ready for a relationship. My life seems so complex, I can't get my head around it, let alone anyone else. But at least if Will doesn't call, I'll know it wasn't my dodgy dating style. ■

For further details on the *SpeedDate Date MakeOver*, visit www.datemakeover.co.uk. To book an appointment with stylist and life coach Lisa and Jodie, call 020-8542 0698 or log on to their website at www.youlookgoodfeelgreat.com.

Tips from the experts

1. Trust your instincts. If you don't like your date within the first five minutes, it's unlikely you will.
2. If in doubt, over-dress.
3. Before you leave the house, stand in front of the mirror and repeat: 'I am sexy' until you believe it.
4. When you meet, shake his hand, look into his eyes and say, 'Hi. Nice to meet you.'
5. Be interesting. Practise answers to questions such as 'What do you do?' to reveal something about yourself.
6. Try not to think about if you'd marry this man and concentrate on having fun.
7. Compliment him – we all like to be flattered.
8. Ensure your body language is warm and inviting. No crossed legs or arms.
9. Touch him lightly on the arm to signal that you fancy him.
10. Don't get drunk.

I FINALLY ROLL INTO A TAXI LONG PAST THE TIME A MOTHER SHOULD BE OUT