**EPISODE 220: ​​Dating as a Single Physician: Honest Advice to Help You Find Love**

**With guest Sydney Ashland**

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SA: “Relationships have a certain amount of risk attached to them, but it's calculated risk, because there's also risk with not being in a relationship. Risk to your health, risk to your self-esteem, risk to your well-being.”

HF: Welcome to The Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctor's Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a nonclinical job, or something else. I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So, pull up a chair, my friend, and let's carpe that diem.

Hey there, and welcome to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. I'm your host, Heather Fork, and you're listening to episode number 220. We're not talking so much about careers today, but we are diving into relationships. And if you listened to episode 218, we talked about the marital and partner relationships. And today it's all about talking about relationships for the single physician. So let's get started.

If you're a single physician, you might be finding it challenging to meet someone who truly understands your life and career. Maybe you've been hesitant to put yourself out there, or you're struggling with dating after a divorce. Perhaps you're simply wondering if a fulfilling relationship is even possible with your demanding schedule.

Dating as a physician comes with its own set of challenges, but that doesn't mean finding a fulfilling relationship is out of reach. In today's episode, we'll explore the realities of dating as a doctor and what you can do to create connections that truly align with your life and career.

I am so excited to welcome back Sydney Ashland to the podcast. Sydney is a highly respected relationship and transformation coach with over 25 years of experience working with physicians, hospital executives, and entrepreneurs. She understands the unique complexities of dating as a doctor and the specific barriers that can make finding love feel like an uphill battle.

In this episode, we'll be diving into the realities of dating as a physician, whether you're beginning to look for a partner, getting back into the dating scene after years away, or wondering how to navigate dating apps, relationships, and the personal growth alongside your career.

And I have to say, when Sydney was here for episode 218, the response was incredible. That episode really resonated with listeners as we explored the challenges physicians face in their significant relationships. Things like work-life balance, communication struggles, and navigating career transitions as a couple. If that topic speaks to you and you missed it, you might want to check out this podcast, which we will link to in the show notes. But today, it's all about the single physicians. So without further ado, let's dive in. I am thrilled to welcome back Sydney Ashland to the podcast. Hi, Sydney. Welcome.

SA: Hi, thank you for having me. I'm thrilled to be here.

HF: Yes, and it was really a lot of fun to do that episode. And it's such an important topic, but I don't hear it talked about that much.

SA: I think that's very, very, very true. We talk with physicians about their career development, about burnout, all those issues around their clinical skills and career, but not around their relationships.

HF: And you know this well, because you have been doing this for a while. And for people who didn't listen to your earlier podcast, tell us how you got into working with physicians and specifically in this area.

SA: Well, I think specifically in this area, I had worked in healthcare more in the administrative side of healthcare for many years. And then when I decided to go into private practice and use a lot of what I had learned with business coaching, I was contacted by a physician who ended up really plugging me into the unique issues that physicians were having. I already knew about that having worked in administration, the administrative part of medicine, and also the insurance part side of medicine.

Once I started working with the unique issues that physicians had in terms of their career, training and the scars that that had left, it naturally morphed into also dealing with who they were individually, their relationships, their family relationships. And that's where I really began to feel a deep connection and an ability to help them transform that part of their life. Because when you're happy at home, when you feel connected at home, you're much more resourced to make those types of really difficult decisions when it comes to where you want to go with your career over time.

HF: And as I mentioned in the intro, you are a coach. And some of the things we're talking about might be things that sound therapeutic or that a therapist might recommend, but we're specifically coming at this from a coaching perspective.

SA: Absolutely. Because when you talk about therapy, therapy is a much deeper dive into the pathology of your childhood and your personality and who you are. When it comes to coaching, it's much more strategic. It's looking at the day-to-day situations that you end up with with your partner and really giving you tools and ways to strategize and deal with habituated patterns.

HF: Yeah, a lot of people often ask what's the difference? And that's a great explanation. And the last podcast, we used a Dear Abby format for people writing in to ask questions to Dear Sydney. And these are ones that I made up, but they represent common things a physician might be asking you about. Are you ready to start with the first one?

SA: I am. I thought that was a brilliant strategy. And the scenarios you had come up with, each and every one of them really, really did mirror a lot of what I've heard. So you did a great job.

HF: Oh, thank you. I remember reading Dear Abby as a kid. The first Dear Sydney, let's roll this out. “Dear Sydney, I'm a physician in my 50s, divorced for several years. My marriage wasn't great and I've been hesitant to start dating again. Part of me is curious, but I keep putting it off. I don't trust people easily and the whole swipe left, swipe right culture doesn't appeal to me. Honestly, my confidence is low. I keep thinking, why would someone want to date someone in their 50s? Being single isn't so bad, but still, I wonder if I'm giving up too soon. Sincerely, Cautiously Content, maybe.”

SA: Well, Cautiously Content. Thank you for reaching out. The one thing that stuck out in what you wrote was that confidence is an issue. And when there are questionnaires or surveys done of physicians, that's actually the number one issue physicians talk about is confidence. It's not surprising to me that you would have confidence when it comes to relationship and marriage, especially if you had a marriage that didn't turn out well.

I think that's the number one place to start. Really have a sense of who you are and how to build confidence in who you are, not only professionally, but personally. When you ask, “Why would anybody want to date in their 50s?” I can give you a whole list. Number one, you don't have to worry about pregnancy. If you're both in your 50s, you can have fun and be playful. The other thing I would say is you know yourself so much better by that age. There's more maturity.

You've had some experiences when somebody is in their 20s, 30s, even early 40s, you're building experience. You're really focusing on sharing a life together versus building a life. And that's a very different experience. You've had the shared experience perhaps in the past of having a mortgage or building your career and sharing the growth of your careers together. In this stage, it's less about building and much more around your choices, what you both want, your volition.

Focusing on fun rather than responsibility, really being able to take your time. There's no sense of urgency. I think there are lots of reasons to enjoy anytime after 45 and share that with others.

HF: I'm really glad, Sydney, that you honed in on the confidence because this is something I definitely hear. And whether it's for a career, like “I'm 50, who's going to hire me?” But it also applies for dating. And as we get older, and I think this is an issue for men and women, but especially for women, as they get older, like who's going to want me at this age? And it really touches a lot of tender, vulnerable places and people. Do you have any recommendations for someone like this in terms of just boosting their confidence a bit? And how do I start feeling differently about myself to actually be able to initiate putting myself out there on the Internet and having to put up photos and having to go out on dates?

SA: I think it's really important to reach out to your friends and people that you're close to and ask them questions. “If you were to describe me, how would you describe me? If you were to list what you see as my strengths, what would you say those strengths are? If you were to talk about my weaknesses or some of my idiosyncratic tendencies, what would those be?” And I think that starts to help you experience yourself from more of the third person. And you can start to get more confident if you're going to put yourself out there on an app or really describe who you are, because it's not just sort of a narcissistic view. It's actually more of a friendship-connected social view.

HF: I love that you said that. It's really interesting because I have a friend, we're not young. I'm not that young. She's not that young. She recently just started dating again. And she texted me and she said, this person that I'm having a date with wanted me to ask my best friends how they would describe me. Yes. That's a great question. That's a really excellent one. So those are some really good tips there.

All right. I'm going to go on to the next one. “Dear Sydney, I'm a young single physician who'd love to meet someone, but I can't seem to find the time. Work drains me and dating feels like just another task on my to-do list. When I do go out, even if the person seems nice, I find reasons it won't work out. Meanwhile, most of my friends are married and starting families, and we don't have that much in common anymore. I feel like a third wheel half the time. How do I make space for dating when I barely have space for myself? Sincerely, Too Tired to Date.”

SA: Too Tired to Date. I'm glad that you are sharing this perspective. What I would say is, I'm concerned about you really knowing yourself very well if all you're doing is working. And from your description, I would have some concern that you might be headed towards workaholism, because when you're saying you can't seem to find the time for anything else other than work, and even dating seems like it would be taking time from work, you're already starting to get out of balance, and this could become a longstanding habituated pattern.

I would encourage you to start looking at your work life and really creating some boundaries around it. How much time are you scheduled to work versus how much time you are working? Is that because of your employer's expectations or is that internalized expectations where you are perfectionistic or over-efforting rather than keeping some balance? That's the number one thing I would say.

For you, I would suggest go away, go on a cruise, go on a trip. You need to get out of your environment for a while to start experiencing yourself in a different environment where you can just be stress-free and start to have a sense of returning to yourself again.

I think perfectionism stands out if you're someone who starts to find fault with people that you're around, that sort of picky-pony. You said when you do find somebody, you tend to find reasons why it won't work out. That seems like it either could be perfectionism, it could be fear. And if it's fear and anxiety, then you're just looking for a way out because you're afraid or you feel like it's too risky. Certainly, relationships have a certain amount of risk attached to them, but it's calculated risk because there's also risk with not being in relationship, risk to your health, risk to your self-esteem, risk to your well-being. I think those would be my number one suggestions for you and to just give you a little inspiration and belief in yourself that you can go out there and be better for it.

HF: I love that. I love how nuanced you are in your answers, Sydney, and realizing that there's layers here. It could be they're too busy. It could be there's fear. It could be some self-esteem issues. There's work-life balance, perfectionism. It's a ball of wax. And to help someone, I think, like you said, start to see things differently, getting away, that's a brilliant suggestion because it's so true. We get a different perspective. We get out of our environment. I love that there.

Now, this made me think of a quote I heard and I can't remember who said it, but it was, “We're born into relationship, we're wounded in relationships, and we heal in relationships.” And I love that because it's so true, but it's also in some ways like a motivation that if we're afraid of meeting someone or being vulnerable, that to heal those wounds that happen in relationships, we often need to get into one and need to be careful, obviously, but that's often where the healing occurs.

SA: 100%. 100%. Couldn't agree with you more.

HF: All right. So, let's go to the next one here. Dear Sydney, I'm a female physician in my late 30s. After years focused on training and career, I've suddenly realized I'm single without a partner or children. I've been seriously considering having a child on my own, but what I really want is to find a partner and build a family together. The problem is I feel like I'm running out of time. I don't want to rush into something I'll regret, but the pressure feels real and I can't help worrying about the future. How do I move forward without losing hope or making a mistake? Sincerely, feeling the ticking.

SA: Well, this is one that I actually have dealt with, with both genders. There are actually a lot of men who feel this way too. Just because you're female doesn't mean you're the only one that has a biological clock that is ticking. I think it's really important to, first of all, sort of take a step back and ask yourself what your perfect timeline would be now, because unfortunately what I've found when either men or women start dating with a sense of internalized urgency that they haven't really gotten specific around the details, they bring that into the early dating and the other person immediately feels like “Wow, there feels like there's a lot of pressure here. You're leaning in to try and get to know me so quickly, so fast. What's the intensity?”

And that's not always verbalized. It's just felt. And then I'll hear from these men and women I start to date someone and they accuse me of being too intense or being too marriage focused. And I don't know quite what to do with that, but I'm not really interested in just hooking up anymore. I want a commitment.

I really empathize with this age and stage, but I've learned that what can really help is for you to sort of take the anxiety and put it on a piece of paper. What is my timeline? If I'm going to do this in partnership where am I at and where do I want to end up? And what's the trajectory on that timeline? Once you get it on a piece of paper, it's so much easier to then be able to say, “Wow, maybe I really just want to be a parent first, because my timeline is really accelerated. And I'm probably not going to find someone, develop a relationship and be pregnant in 12 months. That may be expecting too much. Whereas if I put it out on a timeline, then I can also say, wow, I still have seven years. I still have plenty of time. And for seven years, I can just date. I can relax a little bit. I don't have to go into these sort of dating experiences as if I'm on a speed dating, a trajectory going forward infinitely where it really is about slowly getting to know someone, shared interests, developing and building a relationship.”

I think get it on a piece of paper, try not to panic. It's not too late. There are dating apps out there for people actually who want to have children who are a little bit on that cusp. I'm not going to say specifically what those dating apps are, because I can't really guarantee or advise anyone which one they should get on, but they are out there because I did a Google search a few months back to find out about that for a client.

Also, when you're thinking about having your own child, realizing that when you're dating in mid to late 30s, you may end up finding people who already have a child, who already have been married and divorced or even in partnership. And start to ask yourself how you feel about blended families, and maybe not only having your own child, but sharing a child with significant others.

And again, I would really suggest that you talk to your friends and tell them what you're looking for. Be really explicit because friends are happy to start looking, putting the word out, setting you up on dates or inviting you to dinner with people that they have over so that you can start to get as much exposure as possible.

HF: Now, just for clarification, Sydney, are those dating apps you were mentioning, but not by name, for people who want to have children and they're running out of time and it's specifically for that kind of individual?

SA: It is. It is specifically for that individual because a lot of the apps out there are much more focused on personality traits or physical traits, more of the superficial demographics versus really having a life goal, which is parenting.

HF: That is really interesting. And that would be good because then it's like transparent that this is something that I really need to prioritize. I love that. I love your advice. So let's go on to the fourth and final one that we have. “Dear Sydney, there's someone at work I'm interested in, but I'm hesitant. I've been down this road and it usually doesn't end well. I'm often drawn to charming, confident people who turn out to be manipulative. But when I meet someone steady and trustworthy, there's no spark. I can't seem to find a happy medium. I either pick the wrong person or settle into something out of convenience. Meanwhile, others seem to have solid relationships and I wonder, what's wrong with me? Sincerely, Stuck in the Same Old Pattern.”

SA: Well, stuck in the same old pattern. I just need to be really honest here. There are several things that you spoke about that lead me to believe you may have a trauma history. And that is okay. A lot of us have trauma histories and probably, in fact, probably more people have trauma histories than not. But when you start talking about being drawn to people who are charming and then they turn out to be manipulative or abusive, when you start talking about someone who's really wonderful and trustworthy, but there's no spark, that tells me there's some confusion around how to attach to someone who's safe. And that often comes from trauma.

For someone like you, the number one caution I would have is beware of trauma bonds. And it's really easy as a physician where you're working in the healthcare industry, where there is lots of drama and intensity and physical and emotional pain. When you're working with others in that field for you to feel exceptionally close to each other, because you're in the trenches together.

And in that environment, you can create trauma bonds that start to be misinterpreted as love, affection, romance, and trauma bonds are very different than romantic feelings. That would be one caution. Really getting with a therapist or coach who can help you understand the difference between arousal and anxiety.

That's a real thing where some people misinterpret feelings of anxiety as, “Oh, I think I'm attracted to you.” And it's like, “No, there's something else going on.” And distinguishing excitement over fear, because when you start to talk about potentially connecting and partnering with someone who isn't good for you and who might even be abusive, those are some real red flags.

On the upside of this, part of the way to begin to help yourself is start daydreaming a little bit, fantasizing, allowing yourself not to just stay stuck in the cynical “There's no way out of this, I'm stuck. I'm just somebody who attracts the wrong kind of person.” Allow yourself to fantasize daydream, read that romance novel, watch a romantic movie or comedy, so that you start to get those juices flowing a little bit. And really start to think about what your plan is and who you're wanting to bring into your life, invite into your life. And then you're much less likely to get into that path of least resistance, where whoever's close and friendly becomes someone that you start thinking as a potential long-term relationship person. Some red flags in this one that maybe you need to do some internal work, get to know yourself better before you're ready for a relationship.

HF: And this makes me think of something I hear not infrequently from physicians is that they had a narcissistic parent and then they find themselves in a work environment with a narcissistic boss. And there's great things about narcissists like the charming and they can make you feel like a million bucks, but then the other side tends to come out and then they can see this too in their merits. They might have been married to a narcissist.

I can't tell you how often I hear someone say this is they have this experience, but it might be not until someone says, have you heard of the word narcissist? And then when someone tells them that and they go and Google and search, they say, “Oh my God, all these things fit this person. I had no idea.” And then they start to really understand that it wasn't them. They weren't the problem, but they were in an entanglement.

SA: Exactly. At an entanglement or an enmeshment. I try to be very careful when people come to me because we're in a time in our history where we're comfortable talking about trauma. We're comfortable about talking about personality disorders like narcissism. And I think that's good. It's great for us to educate ourselves. At the same time, we have to be careful about armchair pathologizing or psychoanalysis when I'm certainly not a credential to make those diagnoses, but I recognize and what I say to people, oftentimes it can be an affect or it can be narcissistic tendencies versus a full blown narcissist that you're connected with.

Because especially in healthcare, the type of personality that is required to be in the upper echelons of management sometimes attracts people who have to be very focused, detached from their emotions, able to make those really hard decisions. And it can be easy to, perhaps, mischaracterize someone as narcissistic who is just more amplifying some of their personality traits in a way to do the job.

And that can run over into a relationship as well. Because if you're with someone who lives in that energy all day in their work, they can bring it home at night. And still be very self-focused, still be very goal focused, detached from their feelings. And that's a real issue. And it's an issue for physicians who are taught to distance themselves from their patients, to have a certain bedside manner, then how do you reconnect with yourself enough to be in your empathy, to be in your heart? It's a real issue.

HF: Yeah, I love that. I'm glad you clarified that. And we don't want to label people and make assumptions. And that there are reasons why some of these personalities are amplified in medicine too. We select for it. Now, I have a few more questions I want to ask you. But before that, I'm going to take a quick break to share a resource.

My dear listeners, what I actually want to share with you is a request. Because I am here to serve you. I love your ideas. I love your questions. I really would welcome you to email us at team@doctorscrossing.com and just let us know what podcast topics would be of interest to what burning questions are on your heart or mind. And I will answer them on the podcast. So please flood the inbox. I'd love to hear from you. And that's at team@doctorscrossing.com.

All right, now we are back with our wonderful guest coach, Sydney Ashland. Sydney, I want to ask you something. Sometimes when I'm working with a physician, they might say to me “I'm single because I do the Wheel of Life. And on the Wheel of Life, there's this one wedgie where you rate your satisfaction with your significant other.”

And they might not have one and they might rate it zero, they might rate it 10 or however that is for them. And some people say, “Well, I've just decided that I want to be single. This works for me and I really don't want to date.” How does one determine whether this is truly where I want to be or if it's maybe fear or experiences in the past that are making this person feel it's too risky, but they're settling. How do you decide is this a true decision of the heart or is it something that's really causing them to avoid really trying to find that partner?

SA: I love that you asked this question because just as there are people who decide not to have children and to remain childless, and that's not wrong, it doesn't mean that you're not a whole person. It's not wrong to choose not to partner with someone. I think the most important thing you can do is ask yourself whether you're wanting to partner or find someone from a place of longing and desire in your heart and soul for connection, or whether you're feeling like you're at that age and stage where that's what you're supposed to do. Or you're getting lots of criticism from the external world that “Why aren't you married? You should be with someone.”

When someone makes that comment, does that leave you with a, a feeling of desire and longing or do you feel frustrated, misunderstood? There are a lot of people in this day and age that have been diagnosed with executive functioning issues, ADHD, or even are on the spectrum. And you can still have a really wonderful career, but sometimes people who are on the spectrum don't really feel like they want or need a partner. That doesn't mean they don't have close friends. It doesn't mean that relationships aren't important to them.

And so, I think to have the courage to ask those really difficult questions and try not to be afraid by the answers you land on. If your real answer is I'm most comfortable alone. I love solitude, I love the serenity, I want to go and be with some friends and then go home and be alone, then honor that. Don't feel pressured to do something that's outside your comfort zone or the desires of your heart.

HF: That is a beautiful answer. And I love how you said, if you decide not to have children, if you decide not to get married, if you decide that you love your friend group, but you really don't want to be in a committed relationship, that is okay.

SA: 100%. And you can do really deep relationship work with friends. You can create a family of choice around you that isn't your biological family, but are really deep friends and soulmates that aren't necessarily partners. And you can wrestle with some of the same issues around conflict, diversity, in terms of preferences and bring that into the relationship and work it through. You don't have to be married or partnered to do that.

HF: Yeah, that's such a good point. Because when I said we heal in a relationship, that doesn't mean it has to be a partnered sort of intimate type relationship. It can be these deep friendships. I'm sure the listeners are wanting to know “How can I get in touch with Dear Sydney?” Where would you like people to reach out to you?

SA: Well, thank you so much. The best place to reach out to me is on my website, sydneyashland.com. You're welcome to email me. I respond to all emails, so feel free.

HF: Well, wonderful. You're a gem and I love having you on the podcast. Thank you so much and I hope we have you back again in the future.

SA: Thank you.

HF: All right, my dear listeners, thank you so much for being here. I would love it if before the sun sets tonight, you would share this podcast with someone you think it would be helpful for. And if you would like to go on iTunes or Spotify or wherever you like to listen and give us some love. If you like this podcast, just give us some stars. You don't even have to write a review, but if you want to, that's great too.

And as always, I'm thinking of you, if I can be of help, don't hesitate to reach out for career coaching at team@doctorscrossing.com. And as always, don't forget to carpe that diem and I'll see you in the next episode. Bye for now.

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