

Is the Road to Happiness...Divorce?

Sure, it takes guts to end a decades-long marriage, but more and more women in midlife are deciding to get divorced and fly solo.

By *Kenneth Miller*

The New Face of Divorce

Kelley Alexander will never forget the night she met Chris Waynick. It was August 1993 and she was working the graveyard shift at a factory in French Lick, Indiana. Chris, who worked in the warehouse, invited her to breakfast at a local diner. "He was handsome and charming," Kelley recalls. "We had similar interests and wanted the same things -- a happy, passionate marriage and a houseful of kids." Chris proposed after just five weeks of dating; a week after that they were married. He was 21; she was 24. The following July Kelley gave birth to twin girls.

A year later, already pregnant again, Kelley discovered that Chris was having an affair. "He said stress drove him to it," Kelley recalls. "Financial and otherwise. We'd started a family before we really knew each other."

Chris seemed genuinely remorseful, and with her pastor's help, Kelley managed to forgive him. They had two more daughters and the marriage settled into a smooth rhythm. Chris, who'd become a classroom aide, was the main breadwinner, while Kelley worked part-time and ran the household. And then, a decade after his first affair, Chris strayed again.

This time Kelley found it harder to forgive him. She asked Chris to go into couples counseling, but he refused; he'd never been much of a talker. The two agreed to continue living together for the children's sake, and to avoid arguing in front of them. But in 2009, when their youngest reached middle school, Kelley finally decided she wanted a divorce.

"I was close to 40," she says. "My life was half over. It was time for me to do something for myself."

According to conventional wisdom, the longer a couple is married, the less likely they are to split up. It seems counterintuitive that, after weathering early storms, a marriage would fail as a couple enters middle age. The poster couple for this phenomenon, Al and Tipper Gore, shocked millions of Americans two years ago when they announced their separation after 40 years of a seemingly perfect marriage. But the Gores' situation is an increasingly common one. While half of all divorces occur at around a marriage's eight-year mark, a recent survey turned up an intriguing statistic: One of four couples divorcing these days have been married for at least two decades. Even more intriguing: Two-thirds of the time, it's the wife who pulls the plug.

Thirty years ago the notion of going solo in middle age would have horrified most women. "They used to say, 'You're fat at 40, finished at 50,'" says historian Stephanie Coontz, author of *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage*. "Today we have a longer active lifespan, more economic independence, and more opportunities for finding new partners after divorce. Women are less willing to put up with an unsatisfactory marriage."

"A lot of later-stage divorces happen in what I call semi-happy marriages," says social historian Pamela Haag, author of *Marriage Confidential: Love in the Post-Romantic Age*. "These relationships aren't terrible, but they're not fulfilling. Once the central function of raising children is taken care of, women often feel the marriage has become obsolete."

Indeed, "because of the children" is the most commonly cited reason for staying in one of those marriages, according to a study conducted by AARP. It's not merely that mothers want to shield their kids from the trauma of a broken home -- it's that childrearing consumes so much time and energy. Suzy Stauffer, 48, a mother of three in suburban Philadelphia, first began considering divorce when her youngest child was a baby. The former full-time mom had recently begun a career in TV production, which she loved. But her husband, Tom Slook, an IT manager, wasn't happy with her long



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hours and the way their roles and responsibilities shifted. "He was like, 'I didn't sign up for this,'" she recalls. Suzy insisted they go into counseling but after five years of sincere effort, they both knew it wasn't working.

"Each of us was trying to be what the other person wanted, and we were both miserable," she says. Their divorce was amicable, and became official shortly before their 20th anniversary. "I was the first to take action," Suzy says, "but it became a mutual decision. Neither of us wanted to drag each other through 20 more years."

A Last Chance for a Happier Life

During her 30 years as a clinical psychologist, Linda N. Edelstein, author of *The Art of Midlife: Courage and Creative Living for Women*, has counseled many long-married women like Kelley and Suzy. "Women tend to lead other-directed lives," she says. "They care for husbands and families -- and even in their careers they typically pay more attention to others than to themselves."

As women enter their 40s, however, that perspective often changes. After watching their parents age and their children become independent, many women take inventory and start to focus more on their own needs. "Midlife presents them with a choice," says Edelstein. "'What do I want to do with the years I have left? I'm still relatively young and healthy. What else is out there?'"

For her book *Calling It Quits: Late-Life Divorce and Starting Over*, author Deirdre Bair conducted 400 interviews with men and women who divorced after being married from 20 to more than 60 years. She, too, found (to her surprise) that not only were middle-age couples divorcing in record numbers, but that women were the initiators more often than men. "In every economic class, from the very poor to the well-off, I kept hearing the women say, 'I have to do this -- I need to get out now while I still can,'" Bair says. "Of course, many were frightened or concerned that they might be making a mistake, but in the end, they saw divorce as an opportunity, a chance to try -- and be -- something different."



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Of course, divorce is not always the answer, says Edelstein, even for women in unhappy marriages. Many can, and do, find a new connection with their spouse through counseling. For others, though, couples therapy becomes a way to exit a marriage, not to revive it. "Sometimes, as I'm sitting there with a couple, I feel a door close," says Edelstein. "The husband will say, 'Why didn't you tell me you were so miserable?' The wife says, 'I've been telling you for 20 years! You've never listened and now it's too late.'"

That's what happened to Denise and Mario Pompetti (not their real names). Denise, now 42 and a public-relations executive in Alexandria, Virginia, met the handsome, Italian-born Mario at the company where she worked after college. At first he seemed to be an ideal match, but soon his moodiness and perfectionism began to feel oppressive. "I got blasted for loading the dishwasher the wrong way," Denise recalls. After their son and daughter were born, the couple fought over Denise's desire to continue working (she won). They rarely went out as a couple, unable to agree even on a restaurant.

Denise grew depressed and went into therapy; Mario refused. Then, when the kids were 12 and 9, a high school boyfriend looked Denise up on Classmates.com. "We went out to lunch," she says, "and he was like, 'You look fabulous! You have a great job! You seem like a terrific mom!' It was exhilarating to be praised after all those years of criticism."

The two wound up having an affair, and Mario found out. "It was wrong," Denise says, "and I felt horrible, but it brought everything to a head." Mario agreed to couples counseling. "By then, though, no amount of therapy could make it better," Denise says. "We couldn't see eye to eye on anything. I said, 'I'm done.'"

Looking into the future and seeing only the status quo can also prompt an unhappy wife to finally take action. Annette Frith, 44, married her high school sweetheart, Dirk Thompson, only to discover how different they were. Annette, an administrative assistant, yearned to see the world beyond her small Alberta, Canada, town; Dirk, who managed an auto parts store, refused to travel. She liked to spend weekends camping; he preferred to stay home. She wanted a second child; he was happy with one.

They bickered constantly, leading Dirk to put in longer hours at the store. Annette began to dread the day when their adolescent daughter left home. "It'll be just the two of us," she thought. "What will we say to each other after that? What will we do?"

She thought seriously about leaving the marriage but then Dirk told her he'd changed his mind and was willing to have another child. "I thought that might make a difference," Annette says. "Needless to say, it didn't."

When their son was 4 she gave her husband an ultimatum: We're going away together for a weekend, or we're through. He kept putting her off. So, after 20 years together, she gave up. "I don't have to settle for this," she told him, then asked him to move out.

Divorce is hard -- especially for women who've spent decades building a home, a family, and a financial life with one man. Studies show that wives tend to wind up substantially poorer after a breakup, thanks to persistent gender gaps in earning power. "Unless there's physical abuse, I always ask, 'Are you sure you need to leave this marriage?'" says attorney Michele Lowenstein, who heads the family law section of the San Diego County Bar Association. "Every woman needs to take a hard look at her finances and decide if divorce makes sense. If you're 45, with no career, a few thousand dollars in a 401(k) and a limited amount of spousal support available, you may need to consider whether divorce is worth it." Indeed, the economic downturn has contributed to a drop in divorce (if not an increase in marital happiness): A 2011 study from the University of Virginia found that, although many marriages are strained by the bad economy, 38 percent of couples considering divorce before the recession decided to put it off, most likely because of the high cost of maintaining two households.

And no matter what age kids are, they're likely to have a tough time. "You can't assume that just because you're happy, they're going to be happy," says therapist Sharon O'Neill, author of *A Short Guide to a Happy Marriage*. "Even for adult children, a divorce can push a lot of buttons."

Yet children, regardless of age, generally recover, and many discover upsides to the end of a contentious marriage. "My son tells me, 'I'm glad I don't have to listen to you and Dad fight anymore,'" says Annette, who is now happily remarried. Adds Dirk, "I've built stronger relationships with the kids than I ever had before."

The bottom line? The majority of women who divorce in midlife wind up happier. In the AARP study, 76 percent felt they'd made the right decision. (Only 64 percent of the men were glad their marriages ended.) Nearly 80 percent of the women started dating again, usually within two years. Only one-third had remarried, but 43 percent had no desire to do so. As Deirdre puts it, "Many women who get divorced after a long marriage revel in the fact that they no longer have to pick up anyone's dirty socks, and if they want to have a chunk of cheese, an apple, and a glass of wine for dinner, they can."

Kelley Alexander did remarry; her new husband, Jeff, is a high school classmate she reconnected with on Facebook. She remains close to her ex -- "He's the father of our children, and I'll always love him" -- and Jeff and Chris have become buddies. "I put my foot down and said, 'This *will* happen,'" she says. "'You don't have to be best friends, but you do need to get along.'"

"The people in our small town are like, 'What? Chris is coming over to watch a football game with Jeff?' And I'm like, 'Hey, it works for us.'" Kelley laughs. "It takes too much energy to hold grudges. You have to get to a place where you can move on."

Denise Pompetti's ex-husband still lives in their old house, while she rents in the same subdivision; the two share equal custody of the children, and everyone gets together for birthdays and holidays. "The early days were hard, with lots of crying," she says. "But nobody has cried about anything for a good year and a half."

Since ending her marriage in 2009, Denise has dated a couple of men. Unlike her husband, the one she's currently involved with shares many of her interests. "With relationships now, I'm like, 'Love me for who I am,'" she says. "If not, I walk away."

Originally published in Ladies' Home Journal, August 2012.