

The Anatomy of a Gray Divorce

Choosing to be single again after the age of 50

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People are often stunned and saddened when an older couple that has been married for many decades announces their decision to divorce. But the dissolution of marriage among those who are over 50 is continuing to rise as baby boomers move toward retirement. The divorce rate for couples over 50 has doubled since 1990, and for those over age 65, it is even higher. This is according to a study by the National Center for Family & Marriage at Bowling Green State University.

ACCEPTING CHANGE

Older couples divorce for many of the same reasons that younger couples dissolve their marriages, but there are significant differences. Rather than dissolving their marriages due to infidelity and/or abuse, more often older couples that have been married for many years simply find that they have drifted apart over the course of the marriage. They become aware that their needs have changed over time and their goals are no longer in alignment with those of their partner. The fact that people are living longer, coupled with our current culture's approbation of personal development and the ready acceptance that even the best of marriages do not last forever, also contributes to the growing number of late-in-life divorces.

DIVORCE AS A SOCIAL NORM

Margaret "Peggy" Walker, a domestic relations lawyer, a collaborative attorney and a mediator at The Harris Law Firm, has handled dozens of divorce cases involving mature couples over the course of her career. "The graying of divorce is more common now than people realize," she says. "Historically, the institution of marriage was based on a number of practical and economic considerations, but when 'The Pill' was developed in the 1960s, this highly convenient and effective form of contraception allowed the baby boomer generation to enter into marriage with more far-reaching goals and expectations that included self-fulfillment and personal happiness."

In previous generations, couples stayed together even if they were very unhappy, but when the boomers decided they were no longer content within marriage, they made arrangements to find their bliss elsewhere.

THE DESIRE FOR FREEDOM

When examining the reasons why mature couples divorce, it is also important to consider how the marriage began. Many marriages are created by passionate young couples who fall in love and want to raise a family. But after several decades of sacrificing many of their own needs to responsibly raise their children to be the happy, healthy, college educated and self-supporting individuals they grew up to be, some couples are suddenly faced with the

fact that raising children was their only shared interest.

Once the kids move out and 24/7 parenting is no longer required, many older couples begin to imagine a different life. During this time they often discover a new sense of personal freedom that allows them to redirect their energies toward their own fulfillment. For couples who have spent many years focused on the needs of their children and each other, sometimes this renewed awareness leads to the realization that their increasingly divergent lives might be better lived apart rather than together.

AN AMICABLE SEPARATION

When couples over age 50 decide to divorce, the best case scenario is when both parties agree that terminating their marriage and leading separate lives is a positive change.

"Couples who dissolve their marriages later in life are often more philosophical about their shared responsibilities for the unraveling of the marriage," said Carrie Eckstein a family law attorney, mediator and a Certified Family Investigator with The Harris Law Firm who has handled many divorce cases for those over the age of 50. "They are also more open to an amicable parting via the forward-thinking concept of 'Conscious Uncoupling,' which comprises the concept of divorcing without conflict or animosity."

MUCH DEPENDS ON FINANCIAL SECURITY

The motivating force behind the filing of many mature divorces is a couple that has incompatible financial goals following retirement.

"Financial security is often the primary concern for couples who are considering divorce, and terminating a marriage can be far easier for couples who have enough assets to allow both individuals to maintain a comfortable lifestyle after they have divided their fortune," said Kathy Nelson, special counsel to The Harris Law Firm. "Many people who divorce later in life often have to face the harsh reality that they may have to reduce their standard of living. But having enough money to create two comfortable and independent lives means not having to choose between an unsatisfactory marriage and financial hardship."

PREPARING FOR A DIFFERENT LIFE

When one spouse wishes to divorce and the other partner prefers to remain married, this can create a more difficult situation.

Many people who are admittedly dissatisfied and unfulfilled in their marriage and are well aware that their circumstances are less than ideal, can still convince themselves that the union is worth preserving.

In this often fear-based mindset, they choose to remain unhappily together because they are unwilling to face the emotional, financial, social and legal changes that comprise the impact of divorce.

But when divorce is inevitable, the first step is to create a comprehensive plan for how you will live your life after your marriage has ended.

Having the courage to let go of an untenable marriage and embrace the possibilities of a different life can allow mature individuals to outline the opportunities of a new kind of happiness.

CHOOSING HAPPINESS

While divorce should not be celebrated or encouraged, it is important to know that many people over 50 have made the decision to end their decades-long marriages in order to pursue the hope of a more satisfying life.

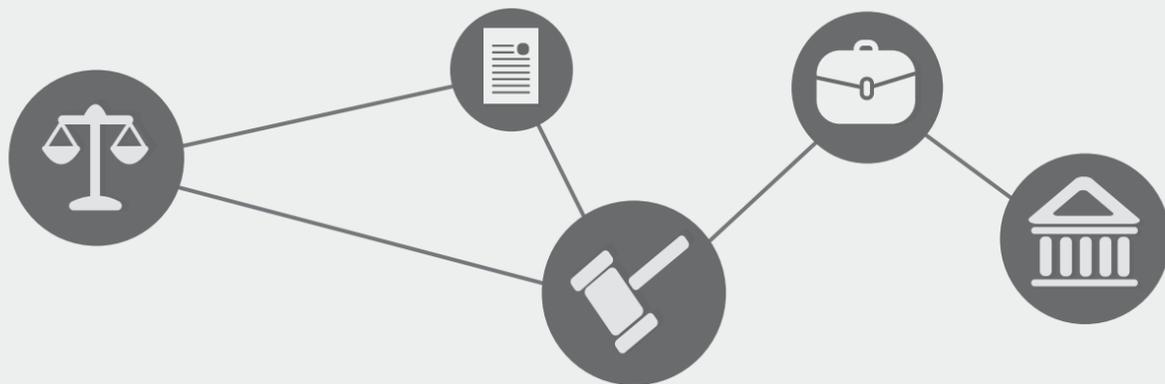
They have made a conscious choice to allow themselves the freedom to do what they want when they want to do it without hesitation or compromise.

Staying healthy, keeping active, maintaining meaningful relationships with friends, family and community, and having a sense of purpose are the keys to finding lasting personal happiness, and it is important to recognize that happiness is attainable at any time and at any age. •

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