



Why are more of us DIVORCING AFTER 60?

We speak to one woman who decided to end her marriage after 37 years, and a relationship expert who explains why this trend is on the rise

By Kate Corr

Age 60, Sue Plumtree found herself living alone for the first time in her life. "I was a little nervous," she admits. "I worried about silly things like what to do if the plumbing went wrong or the computer crashed. Other than that, having my own flat was fantastic. I loved it straight away!"

The decision to leave her marriage of 37 years had been a long time coming. "I was only 20 when I met my husband," says Sue, from Richmond, Surrey. "He was ten years older than me and I was attracted by his dimples! Although we loved each other very much, I soon discovered we were totally different people; I was sociable and gregarious, he was quiet and a bit of a loner."

Sue spent years trying to make the best of it. "We never rowed but as early as 1982 I was writing

in my journal 'reasons I should leave him.' Then I'd get scared and pretend everything was okay."

It wasn't until 2002, just before her 60th birthday, that she finally told him it was over.

Sue's story is an increasingly familiar one, as more and more women wake up after decades of marriage and think, 'Is this it?' A few years ago the answer would have been a straightforward, 'Yes' because for our parents' generation marriage was, quite simply, for life. But not anymore. While the overall UK divorce rate is falling, there is one noticeable exception; couples over 60. In 2010, the most recent year for which figures are available, 14,600 people in England and Wales aged over 60 divorced. So-called 'silver separations' are becoming more common as men and women decide there is life after a very long marriage,

Sue did grieve for her marriage but now says she's never been happier



and they are young enough to start again. "It's a very positive sign that women – and men – no longer feel they have to stay in a relationship that has run its course," says psychotherapist and marriage counsellor Helen Mia Harris. "I see couples who've been together since school, but what we want at 15 is often not what we want at 50. We're living longer, too, and deep down most of us still feel young inside; the desire to start again can be very strong."

Yet no matter how valid your reasons, the initial split can be surprisingly

REASONS WHY COUPLES PART...

"Loss of respect for each other is probably the main reason why couples part," says Helen Mia Harris. "Once respect goes, so does passion and communication. People no longer listen to each other, and just 'live alone together.'" So when is it time to quit? "Deep down, most people realise when a relationship has done its full cycle, if problems are solvable or not," says Helen.

"But don't be reckless. Make sure you have thoroughly explored every alternative before asking for a divorce, including relationship counselling, and don't underestimate your partner's anguish either. After decades together

he or she may be totally traumatised at the prospect of you leaving, so tread carefully and gently when you explain that you feel your relationship may have come to an end.

"It's also important not to forget the effect on children of whatever age. Divorce in its own sense is a wound towards children and is one of the reasons why pursuing an amicable parting where you can both remain friends is so key. If divorce happens this is always the best solution but that's impossible if one of you is left grief-stricken."

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For more information from Sue and Helen go to www.sueplumtree.com and www.helenmiaharris.com

difficult. "Even though I initiated it, I was amazed at how painful our separation was and how much I grieved," recalls Sue. "And there were practical difficulties; I couldn't just pack my bags and go, so I moved into the spare room for a year until we sold the house."

Among women who do leave, a common complaint is husbands who didn't try hard enough or no longer appreciated them. "I see many women who are simply worn out from playing the 'mother' role not only to their children but to their husbands, too," says Helen.

Sue agrees: "I spent years blaming my husband for my unhappiness, without seeing my own contribution. Now I do see my part in it. I did everything for him, I thought that's what 'loving' was, but it wasn't good for him. The first thing he said to me when I said I wanted a divorce was 'what's going to happen to me?' He's living abroad now, has become an environmental campaigner and he's happy. He's doing what he was meant to do."

Sue was lucky enough to have a degree of financial independence as she was still working full

time. "I couldn't have left if it had meant going into poverty, and I would never suggest any other woman should either. But if you can survive financially I'd say, it's your time, you've given enough to others, now give to yourself."

But splitting up isn't always the only solution. "As a marriage counsellor I've seen many couples who believe they've reached the end of the road but, by learning to listen to each other and appreciate each other again, have managed to rescue their relationship," says Helen Mia Harris.

"If you think being single again will be easy, you might be being naive because the fact is you may end up feeling very lonely."

Or you could end up like Sue who, at 68, has never been happier and is now a life coach.

"It took me about seven years to grieve for a 37 year marriage, and I have had moments of loneliness, but now my life is so exciting. I go out more, have fabulous friends, and have absolutely no regrets about my marriage. But it was time for a better life and walking away was the best thing I've ever done."

Meet our expert

Helen Mia Harris is a specialist in couple relationship counselling, individual therapy, life coaching and recovery programmes



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