

Silent rise of silver divorce

The Times (London); Nov 3, 2007; Celia Dodd; p. 10

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Divorce rates are falling -except for people over 60. What is the fallout when Granny and Grandpa split up, asks Celia Dodd

Nowadays, few people raise an eyebrow at the news that another young friend or relative is heading for the divorce courts. But what happens when couples divorce later in life? What makes couples who have rubbed along together for decades mess with the status quo so late in the day? The unpalatable stereotype of the grey-haired man trading in his wife for a younger model undoubtedly still exists, but there is a new desire around for fulfilment in later life, and women in particular have the get-up-and-go as well as the economic freedom to do something about it. Could we be entering the age of the silver divorce?

The latest set of statistics show a continued rise in divorce among the over 60s age group; a trend that started in 1998. This is in marked contrast to the 22 year low in annual divorce numbers for the rest of the population. Divorce among the Saga generation may be on the rise because people in their fifties and sixties are looking forward to a longer and healthier retirement than their parents, and feel less inclined to settle for second best.

The emotional fallout when older couples separate has a knock-on effect down the generations: it divides loyalties and even splits families. For the person who has been abandoned, it's a bitter blow at the cruellest time of life, when all the props that help younger couples to get through have taken a back seat.

"Divorce is almost worse than bereavement"

A leading divorce lawyer Marilyn Stowe, of Stowe Family Law, says: "With older clients divorce is almost worse than a bereavement because your spouse of 30 odd years is still around, enjoying retirement, but not with you. Adult children almost invariably side with the person who has been deserted, and the grandchildren will follow their parents and, as a result, the relationship between grandchild and grandparent can be ruptured.

"I think there is an increased possibility of hostility when the children are grown-up because it's easy for them to make black-and- white moral judgments. And I think the idea that their inheritance might go to a stranger is at the back of some adult children's minds."

Emma Soames, the editor of Saga Magazine, says: "This generation of over-50s buys into a lot of the lifestyle of a younger generation. There is an element of 'We'll have what they're having'. So as people approach retirement they no longer think of it as the end of their lives but as a time

of opportunity and reinvention. And in an age of psychotherapy, people get gripped by a desire to live as they really want to live rather than by someone else's values. Being a single woman is no longer a big deal and a lot of people would prefer to be fairly happy on their own than miserable in a couple."

Retirement itself can put an added strain on a marriage, as can the empty nest.

Soames adds: "Retirement really does move all the furniture around in a relationship. Many women say they can't stand the thought of their husband being at home all day." Added to this, couples over 55 are the least likely to go for relationship counselling, so they are more likely to give up than patch up. The marital therapist Andrew G. Marshall, the author of *I Love You But I'm Not In Love with You*, says: "There is a stigma among the over 55s about getting help. And older couples can be harder to help because they have much longer-ingrained problems and there is a huge amount of history to get past."

A practical and an emotional nightmare

At the same time, grandparents are becoming more closely involved with their grandchildren and increasingly play a key role in caring for them, which means that divorce is a practical nightmare as well as an emotional one for the generation stuck in the middle. If there is a new partner on the scene, adult children have to tread a particularly tricky tightrope to avoid offending one or the other parent. Things can be guaranteed to come to a head at family gatherings, sometimes years after the divorce.

When Jackie Warren's three younger grandchildren were christened last year, her son found himself caught between his parents, who had divorced six years earlier after 36 years of marriage. Warren, 62, recalls: "I couldn't face going because my son had invited my ex-husband's new partner. My son thought it was reasonable since they had been together for a couple of years, and he also invited my new partner. It tore me apart. But looking back I can see that my son was trying to do the right thing for his father. He was in an impossible position."

Denise Knowles, of *Relate*, says: "One of the myths about divorce is that, if the children are older, they cope better. But it's a double whammy for the middle generation of adult children who have to manage their own loss, grief and anger as well as dealing with their children's emotions and anxieties about their grandparents splitting up. "Even if the divorce is seen as a positive step after years of unhappiness, the adult children still have to explain the situation to their own children, who may be thinking: If it can happen to Grandma and Grandpa, when is it going to happen to Mum and Dad? So they need huge amounts of reassurance."

Thanks to FiftyAlready.com for their research

Anne Pike divorced this year after 37 years of marriage. Her family share their reactions ...

ANNE PIKE, 66, MOTHER

"The divorce came as a huge shock; I had always imagined Malcolm and I growing old together. There was a phase when I wanted to know everything that was going on in his life, but my older daughter refused to talk to me about him. I was disappointed, but she was right. Sometimes it's a real temptation to say something nasty, especially about his new partner, but I try to be civilised for my grandchildren's sakes. It would be stupid for them to lose touch with him."

SUSAN PIKE, 37, DAUGHTER

"I've been surprised by how upset I've been by the divorce, because at 37 you think you're all grown up. It's been horrible. I find it very upsetting that my dad rejected someone I think so much of. But I've also had a childish reaction to the fact that my parents are no longer figures I can take for granted. I've had periods of being very angry with my dad. And the idea of meeting his new partner fills me with horror."

RACHEL GEE, 42, DAUGHTER

"Because my mother and stepfather had such a stable relationship, the divorce was a shock. My stepfather has been around for as long as I can remember. My mother married him when I was 4. He's also very close to my kids. The first thing they said was: 'Will we still see Granddad?' I said: 'Of course, but not with Grandma.'

"I don't feel any animosity towards him. I'd be happy to meet his new partner and, if they married, I'd go to the wedding, although I know it would upset my mother."

CHLOE GEE, 12, GRANDDAUGHTER

"It kind of worried me that we might not see so much of Granddad because we used to spend a lot of time with both of them. When he came over recently on his own, I felt a bit awkward. But that was only because it was a strange new situation; I wasn't angry or anything.

"I feel closer to Grandma now. Recently I saw her crying in the kitchen, but I didn't feel I could do anything to comfort her, so I just left her. That did make me feel sad."