

The “Gray Divorce”: Why Decades of Marriage End in Divorce

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By Bryce Newell Updated: March 04, 2019

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You often times hear people say that they want someone they can “grow old with.” So when you hear of couples that have been married for 20 plus years, it makes you wonder what could have transpired to end a married of such longevity?

How can a couple be so loving and happy with each other for so long only to have their marriage go down the drain when they’ve hit the marriage milestone of spending their “golden years” together?

Well, the “gray divorce” is actually on the rise more than one would think or hope. It’s the “Baby Boomers” who are increasing the divorce rates among Americans aged 50 and over. According to the Pew Research Center, a study conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau found that for every 1,000 married couples aged 50 and over, 10 of them ended in divorce.

Why Decades of Marriage End in Divorce

“The 20-Year Itch”

After your kids move out of the house, it poses as a milestone in your marriage. You no longer have your children to put your focus, forcing a couple to reevaluate not only their marriage but their individual lives as well.

Losing the Connection

In a marriage, taking care of the children, on top of taking care of home can be so consuming that it can actually drain all the life out of a marriage. You’re constantly tending to their school work and grades, getting them to extracurricular activities, and making sure they’re prepared for college.

Resentment

To add to the loss of connection, the aspect of resentment also plays a role in this situation. Maybe the wife had dreams and aspirations of becoming a teacher, but her husband was the breadwinner and he wanted her to focus on home life. Resentment can make any spouse feel like they’re trapped in an unsatisfied situation, making getting out of it and starting over, look more fresh and appealing.

Times are Changing

There used to be a time where there was a negative stigma surrounding the idea of divorce. Today, divorce trends are rapidly changing with the new social “norms” about staying in unhappy and unsatisfying marriages.

Unlike today, there was an era where the woman was so reliant on her husband for financial security that the idea of leaving him was unimaginable. The Australian Institute of Family Studies states that today there is less social stigma on leaving a marriage and women are much more self-sufficient when it comes to their financial stability.

Could Advancements in Medicine Play a Role?

According to AARP, possibly! The fact is, with today’s advancements in medicine, people are living much longer than they did a century or so ago. People were more willing to stay in unfaithful, unhappy marriages because they figured there was no sense in divorcing when they would only live a few more years. An adult in their mid-60s can add at least 10-15 years to their life now. With that improved quality of life, they have the opportunity to live out their last years in a new and loving relationship.

What’s Triggering These Long-Married Divorces?

The answer to this question comes a dime a dozen. When people hear the word divorce, the first thing that comes to their mind is extramarital affairs. Although infidelities are a common reason why marriages end in divorce, it’s not the primary reason in most cases. The AARP Sex, Romance, and Relationships Survey found that infidelities in marriages only happened for a small percentage of couples.

“We Just Grew Apart”

As cliché as this saying is, it doesn’t mean that it’s not a real reason why couples get divorced or separated. With “gray divorces” it’s some kind of event or trigger that happens slowly over time. For example, if a couple used to be really active but then one spouse grows tired and is no longer interested in doing the things they used to do together as a couple. Whether it be tennis, ballroom dancing, or cooking together, when that flame goes out, it can be hard to relight it.

This growing apart also ties in with boredom in a marriage. It really puts meaning behind those vows of “till death do you part.” Being around the same spouse for so long has made some couples stop trying. They stop interacting, communicating, and doing the little things that made them fall in love with each other in the first place. For a lot of couples, it really is the little things that count, and when you don’t have that, what else do you have?

One example would be that you might do little things to get your spouse to notice you, like get your hair done and buy a new dress to spice up your marriage but your spouse doesn’t even notice or mention your efforts.

Financial Issues

The differences in income and spending habits can bring any marriage to a screeching halt. One spouse might be more frugal and put their financial focus on saving while the other spouse likes to spend more than what's financially available. These issues are very prevalent with shared accounts and debts. You've heard the saying, "what's yours is mine and what's mine is mine?" Well, that saying is exactly what can lead a marriage to turmoil.

Sexual Difficulties or Lack of Sex

Shifts in sex drives become more profound with age. The Mayo Clinic reports that it's very common for men to lose their sex drive with age but they can also maintain a healthy libido well into their 60s and 70s. Medical conditions and medications can play a significant role in the decrease of sexual desire in "seasoned marriages." The same can be said in women.

You or your spouse might be dealing with chronic pain and the pain is so severe that it makes you not want to engage in sexual activities. It may sound like an easy fix but it's more difficult than one might think.

The Age Difference

When a couple first got married, the difference in age was not a big deal at all, but as that couple grew old together, the age difference began to be a problem. You've heard of people having a "midlife crisis?" Well, that is when your brain goes through a type of "reboot" needing something new. Huffington Post states that it's this "reboot" that makes some people seek younger men or women to satisfy this need.

When Enough is Enough

Facing the inevitability of a divorce can be quite devastating for both spouses. The reality is that not all marriages are meant to last forever, regardless of how bad you want that "happily ever after" ending to your marriage's story. If you have tried all methods to attempt to save your marriage, and nothing has helped, then it's time to seek legal support and guidance to help you through the process of filing for divorce.

Although this process can be difficult, it can also be a time for self-reflection and actually serve as a time to reinvent your life for the better. You can become the person you always wanted to be but weren't able to be while you were in married. Divorce isn't necessarily a "good" thing or a "bad" thing. It's one of those situations where it is what it is... the key is that once you come out of the situation, you take efforts to be on your way to better.

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