



Silver Splitters: The baby boomers bucking the divorce trend

Divorces are on the increase as the over-65s – the new trailblazers – head to court for their Decree Absolutes

The beginning of the end

“I thought we’d be together forever,” says former solicitor Alison, 68, “but after my husband and I retired and started spending more time together, we realised the spark had gone. He was happy to stay in watching TV every night – and that wasn’t for me.” At that point, Alison, from West London, had been married for 40 years.

“Celebrating our ruby wedding anniversary really brought it home to me. Life’s short and I wasn’t prepared to spend the rest of mine with someone I no longer had anything in common with. We tried to keep things going but my heart wasn’t in it. We divorced just over a year ago. There was no one else involved, but I have a new partner now. My ex is still in a serious relationship with the TV!”

According to a 2017 ONS study, while overall divorce rates are decreasing in England and Wales (falling 28% between 2005 and 2015), older people are bucking the trend, with the number of men divorcing at 65+ going up by 23% and, for women of the same age, 38%. ‘Grey’ divorce – a phrase coined in the US – refers to the demographic that’s divorcing faster than any other. Although some of these divorces may be due to a mid-life mistake, most silver splitters have been in long marriages, many of which have lasted 40 years or longer. So, apart from drifting apart, what else would make a couple separate after so many decades?

Why is there an increase in divorce rates?

Rediscovering a partner post-retirement, as Alison did, is one of several reasons for divorce in later life. [Samantha Woodham, a barrister at one of the largest family law firms in the UK, says:](#) “I have a lot of clients who are over 65. People this age often have more opportunity and time to re-evaluate their lives. The reaction to divorce at this age can be very polarised, quite often with one half wanting the divorce and a new life and the other half feeling utter devastation at being abandoned. It can be quite overwhelming for both – the thought of starting all over again, finding

someone new or possibly being alone." Once over the initial shock, though, many people find divorce in later life to be a great release, marking a new beginning and offering up new opportunities.

A surge of independence

An increase in late-life divorces could also be down to wives being more financially independent these days. Whereas women were once tied forever to their other halves due to having no means of managing alone, that's no longer the case. Deciding to separate is easier once children have grown up and settled down with families of their own and, although the sudden break-up of elderly parents can be a shock to their offspring and grandchildren, it's easier than divorcing when the kids are still living at home.

"When there are kids involved – even adult ones – it can be difficult," says Woodham. "It's important for the couple to work out a narrative about what's happened, to have all the answers in place. Then the children of the divorcing couple will feel less anxious about the situation."

Health and wellbeing

Better health is sometimes considered to be another reason for divorce in later life. 70 is definitely the new 50 these days, with more over-65s than ever claiming they don't feel old, and most being fitter and healthier than their parents were at the same age. Woodham agrees, adding: "The whole 'wellness culture' brings with it an expectation that life should bring you joy and that you should do something because you love it, not out of a sense of duty."

Longer life = more opportunities

Could the increase in older people forming new relationships be due to living longer? Fifty years ago, an average man could expect to live to 69 and a woman to 74. Today, a man aged 55 has an average life expectancy of 84, but a one in four chance he'll live to 92. For a woman of the same age, the average life expectancy is 87, with a one in four chance of living to 94 and a one in 10 chance of living to 98.

Decades ago, people wouldn't dream of starting over on their own, but now, most 65-year-olds can easily see themselves enjoying a new lease of life. "No one expects a person to live in the same house or do the same job for 60 years," explains Woodham, "and, now, in the same way, it's not expected that a couple should stay in a relationship for that long, especially if it's run its course."

There's no shame in divorce

It's also true that divorce isn't taboo as it once was. When today's retirees first wed – many of them as far back as the 70s – marriage was a forever thing and divorce was frowned upon. These days, it's just a fact of life, with people separating for all kinds of reasons and without judgement. Woodham says: "We as a society have tended to stigmatise divorce, but with overall divorce rates now at 42%, it's just a fact of life."

Despite there being a noticeable increase statistics-wise, it's still hard to find people like Alison, who has done it and is happy to speak out. "There's still this residual element of shame," she admits. "It sounds silly and I don't want to feel that way but I have to acknowledge that the feeling is there and it's not going to go away."

Others may feel a sense of failure in divorcing after so many years. Chartered psychologist and author Dr Audrey Tang says it's not uncommon to feel this way. "Acknowledge you are hurting," she advises. "Do not feel as if you have to put on a brave face. Likewise, don't pretend to be sad because it's what others expect."

There hasn't been much research on the subject because these grey divorces are a relatively new trend. Although it can be trying at any age, diamond divorcees tend to have a very positive outlook. As Alison concludes: "This new phase is the final chapter in my life and I'm sure as hell going to make it a good one."

8 tips for diamond divorcees

- 1. Get therapeutic help.** It's vital to talk to someone impartial during the course of a break up – at any age. "Do it together, not separately," advises divorce lawyer Samantha Woodham. "And, because most people want some acknowledgement, you should say thank you for the good things you've done for each other."
- 2. Take your time.** No matter how short you believe life to be, it's fine to move slowly through this difficult period. Psychologist and author Dr Audrey Tang says: "You will have spent a long time growing with someone, and now is a chance to rediscover the things you loved that you may have neglected."
- 3. Present the news of your divorce to adult children as a shared decision.** "Explain that the relationship isn't working anymore and that there's not going to be any drama," suggests Woodham. "Have answers prepared to any questions they might ask. That way, although they may be upset, they'll have a better understanding of what's happening."
- 4. Don't let others influence your decisions.** Dr Tang says: "Don't let other people – especially adult children – foist their opinions onto you." Everyone has their own agenda and it's important that you stick to yours."
- 5. Talk money!** There will be shared assets and finances that need to be discussed. Recent research by Legal & General revealed that 37% of over-50s divorcing see their incomes fall by an average of £10,650. But Woodham advises couples not to be fearful of talking money. "It's vital to take financial advice and to do some proper budgeting," she says. "Even in difficult situations, there's almost always a way through."
- 6. Reflect on your actions.** "Derailment of a relationship takes two – as does staying in it for longer than you needed," observes Dr Tang. "There's no need to apportion blame: instead, grow from the experience. Anything you learn now may stop you repeating that behaviour in future relationships."
- 7. Avoid posting about your divorce on social media.** You don't want to be someone else's living soap opera. As Dr Tang says: "Your personal growth and mental wellbeing is worth more than that!"
- 8. Don't be too available.** Take this time for yourself. Dr Tang says: "If you are not ready to see people – even your adult children and grandkids – and they want to talk, just say no! Meet with them when you are ready and on your terms. Don't feel bullied into it."