

# For Debbie, leaving her husband of 21 years marked the end of her loneliness

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It's been the mantra of Disney movies since the 1930s, but Happily Ever After has a different look these days. Sure, our one-in-three divorce rate has become old hat but perhaps what's more surprising is the data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showing that the average age of divorcees has been steadily increasing over the past 25 years. In 1990, the average age for a woman to pull the pin on a marital union was 35 but by 2018 it had [risen to 43.2](#).

While there's plenty of pain that goes hand in hand with divorcing after a long marriage (research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies shows that divorced Australians [aged between 55 and 74](#) have less household disposable income and fewer assets than their married peers, for example), it's also a sign that older Australian women are wanting more from their lives, says divorce coach Carolyn Madden of Divorce Coaching Australia.



"I felt lonelier in our marriage than I could ever imagine feeling as a single woman." STOCKSY

"The women I see feel they are living a life not on their terms but going through the motions of a day-to-day existence," she says. "Divorce isn't without its own set of stressors but a good divorce coach can help the overwhelmed settle enough

to start to think about possibilities. Age doesn't define us any more." In 2020, it isn't about dreaming about Happily Ever After, it's about owning it.

## 'The loneliest I've been was in my marriage'

*Walking out of a 21-year marriage was painful but necessary for personal growth, says 54-year-old relationship coach Debbie Rivers.*

"I was 18 when I met my husband and 20 when we married. I knew we were quite different people from the start. He was seven years older, happy to potter around at home and didn't see the point of holidays, but I was desperate to experience the world. We had three kids in 10 years, followed by the slow dawning that I felt lonelier in our marriage than I could ever imagine feeling as a single woman.

It took me four years to leave. The decision was made more difficult because my husband was a good man who'd never mistreated me – and there's a lot of guilt that comes with that. Time after time I expressed my feelings, but he didn't understand me. We tried going to counselling but that only made things worse between us. When I finally plucked up the nerve to leave, he was as stunned as he was hurt. People say walking away is easier than staying, but I disagree. Hurting someone you love is a horrible feeling and it never really leaves you.

Initially, life outside the marriage was tough. When we purchased our first home as a couple, house prices were \$40,000 and we'd paid off our mortgage. We both went back to having serious debt hanging over our heads. It wasn't just tightened finances that made me anxious; I come from a born-again Christian family, so there was a lot of shame in what I'd done. I grew apart from friends and I didn't feel comfortable leaning on my family.

For a long time I focused on discovering what makes me happy. I'd never lived on my own before and the choices I made – what I was going to buy at the supermarket, for example – were always someone else's, so I had to learn what I liked and disliked. At the first opportunity, I got my first passport and immediately began exploring the world (I've since been to 35 countries). Once I got the handle of life in the workforce, I started a speed-dating business before becoming a relationship coach.

I often think, had I had effective communications skills at the time, my marriage might have turned out differently. Who knows? It's too late for us, so I'm investing in helping others. Of course, now that I have those skills myself, I'm finally feeling ready for a serious relationship. Why did it take so long? I had to learn to fall in love with me first."

## 'Our mutual grief put a wedge between us'

*Robyn O'Connell, a 65-year-old funeral celebrant and charity founder, says she spent years "treading water" before she left her 25-year marriage. She is now happily remarried.*

"Our daughter Rebecca was born in 1978, six months after my husband and I were married. She was a beautiful baby and the apple of her father's eye, but at nearly 10 months old she died of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

I don't believe a child's death alone causes the breakdown of a marriage but it can be the first big wedge, or the straw that breaks the camel's back. For us, it was the wedge; after she died, my husband never spoke her name again. I didn't know it at the time but it was the beginning of the end.

We had another baby – a son – and he was eight or so when I realised things were getting worse. I kept having the thought, ‘You just have to keep this marriage together until our son leaves home.’ The wedge between my husband and I kept growing but we put on a family front so our son wouldn’t come from a broken home.

I spent years treading water and when our son finally went off to study, that little bit of glue holding our marriage together went with him. In 2002, I told my husband to keep the family home and I moved into a unit to start a new life.

From a financial point of view I was fortunate because not only had I recently started working as a funeral celebrant, but my mother was able to lend me money. The greatest pain was losing his side of the family. Nieces and nephews I’d witnessed grow up no longer invited me to their parties and in-laws stopped inviting me to get-togethers. I don’t know that anything can prepare you for the relationships you lose when you walk away from a marriage.

I had a lot of grief counselling after Becky died and I’m convinced that helped me deal with the grief surrounding the end of my marriage. I continue to work as a funeral celebrant and on the Rebecca Jane Foundation, which financially assists families who cannot afford to pay for a funeral for their angel babies. It’s a field of work that has given me great satisfaction.

I never thought I’d marry again but I met someone special 11 years ago and we did exactly that within 10 months of our first date. Life has been beautiful ever since. It’s interesting that now I know what a happy marriage should be, I realise just how unhappy I was with my first husband. There’s only one way of describing this: you don’t know what you don’t know.”

## **'I've had to move back in with my ex-husband'**

*Jennifer\* used the services of a divorce coach to help her navigate a way out of her 37-year marriage. Since the pandemic, she says she's had to rely on her new-found skills more than ever.*

“I consider myself lucky. Nothing dramatic happened to cause the end of my marriage; we grew apart over time. When we married, I was 28, and like a lot of brides of the time I probably idealised marriage to be the ‘happily ever after’ we were all sold. I’m not saying I regret any of it – we have four children – but I’m almost embarrassed to admit that it’s only recently that I started to get to know who I am.

I left the marriage last year but it took time to get back on my feet. The split itself was easy; our kids were already adults so there were no custody issues, and we agreed on a 50/50 division of assets. But emotionally, I was left searching. I was overwhelmed with questions of, ‘What now?’ Then one night the idea of hiring a divorce coach came to me. They are similar to life coaches in how they operate, and six months after I left my partner I purchased a weekly package and haven’t looked back.

Our weekly sessions have been a revelation. I live in a regional area, so they are always over the phone, and throughout each one my coach has challenged my way of thinking, helping me to flip things so they are far more positive than I thought. My ex would probably find it ‘hippie nonsense’ so I haven’t told him, but my coach has enabled me to move away from the pain and disappointment of a marriage breakdown and make inroads into a new life.

It's one thing to have a plan, but no one could have predicted the pandemic. Like many others, I've recently lost my job and, because I had nowhere else to go, I've had to move back in with my ex-husband. It's far from ideal and I don't know how long this will last, but there's no better environment to utilise the skills my divorce coach taught me.

I am quite reactive but now I'm more aware and conscious of my thinking patterns and habits. Some days are harder than others but I'm confident everything will be OK in the end. It's about making the best of a bad situation – and only my divorce coach could have taught me that.”

**\* Name has been changed.**

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