

Children grown, financial strains eased, time to do as a couple all those things you put off while the kids were home. An ideal situation. Yet you may be facing those "golden years" alone.

Middle-Aged Marriage Going, Going, Gone?

By MAGGIE P. HAYES

What has happened to that long anticipated time of life when a married couple finally is relieved of the demands and responsibilities of parenthood and can relax and enjoy the bounties of their harvest? Once through the turmoils of early adjustment and the stresses of parenting, can most couples look forward to the companionship and new freedoms that accompany the middle years? The answer is that although modern science has rewarded us with many additional years of life expectancy, the pressures of modern living and disrupted relationships rob many of us of the rewards we anticipated. For example, today one in five marriages end in divorce after 20 years of marriage — a rate that has doubled over the past 15 years.

To investigate this important phenomena, I conducted a study of divorced men and women at mid-life who resided in seven counties in Oklahoma in 1975-76. The names were gathered from court records, and 138 men and women returned my mailed questionnaire. The questionnaire sought information about the causes and effects of the divorce. Later, 70 of the same subjects were interviewed in depth, with the primary focus on the marriage as it had been experienced through the years. Four years later the same 70 subjects were contacted again with another questionnaire to determine whether life satisfaction was being attained five years after the divorce.

CAUSES OF MID-LIFE DIVORCE

Why do some marriages end in divorce while others that are just as troubled and unrewarding remain in-

tact to the bitter end? Dr. George Levinger from the University of Massachusetts has identified three factors that influence the decision to remain married or to seek divorce:

- (1) attractions within the marriage (such as esteem for spouse, desire for companionship, sexual enjoyment, mate's income;
- (2) sources of barrier strength that keep the relationship intact (including obligation to dependent children, obligation to marital bond, or economic bars), and
- (3) sources of alternate attraction (including preferred other sex partner, opposing religious affiliations, or wife's opportunity for independent income and/or desire for personal freedom).

According to his definition, one or both partners must value another alternative over that of the present marriage before there is a decision to separate.

In relating Levinger's theory to marriages that ended in the middle years, this study found that the barriers or forces that tend to keep couples in marriage during the child-rearing years are no longer present at mid-life. Ninety percent of the 138 subjects indicated there had been forces that kept them in the relationship much longer than they wished, with the most frequently designated reason "for the sake of the children." Second in importance was financial necessity, with religious reasons and societal pressures following closely.

At middle age, with the children growing older and money more plentiful, the desire to leave the relationship far outweighed whatever social stigma or religious concern might have been present earlier. Clearly, those making the decision to divorce

today are not faced with the social ostracism of bygone days, nor do they have the feelings of moral responsibility that were once present.

With the barriers removed, couples then are faced with a choice of whether the attractions within the marriage outweigh those outside it. At present, the attractions outside the marriage are proving to be much more tempting to the middle-aged man than to the woman. More than half the men in the 70 couples represented in the interviews were involved with another woman at the time of separation. While most of them did not regard the involvement as the primary cause of the divorce, it did prove to be the precipitating factor, since it was not until another relationship proved to be enticing that the husband examined his marriage and determined that he was not willing to settle for continuing the marriage for the rest of his life.

If the wife was the partner that requested the divorce, her request was made most often because she finally could support herself, and a life alone seemed more attractive than the less-than-satisfying relationship she had tolerated for years. The decision often followed some experience that promoted growth for her: returning to school, finding a new job, or participating in group activities, such as Weight Watchers, Al Anon, or group therapy. One-fourth of the wives had been unfaithful at some time during their marriages, but another relationship typically was not the reason they wanted out of the marriage.

With the barriers removed and alternatives available for both men and women, the deciding factor in marital survival during the middle years is the quality of the relationship as



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evaluated by both the husband and wife. In determining at what point the divorced person was aware that there were serious problems with the marriage, it was found that one-fourth of the couples were aware that the problem was there from the beginning. Slightly more than one out of ten thought the marriage was good until just before the divorce, which left almost two-thirds of the participants terminating a relationship that started out well, was satisfying during the early years, but then very gradually deteriorated. It was the deterioration process that I sought to clarify in the interviews with 70 of the divorced men and women. The following factors emerged as most important in contributing to the failure of the relationship:

The Husband Excessively Dominant and Controlling. Over two-thirds of the subjects interviewed indicated that the husband was the dominant person in the relationship, with only 17 per cent considering themselves equal partners. The degree of control was the surprising aspect of this finding. Many of the husbands ruled their wives as though they were indentured servants. Such husbands were afraid especially of any personal growth or independent effort on the part of their wives, such as seeking employment, going back to school, handling money, or even learning to drive the car.

Failure to Communicate. Three-fourths of those interviewed felt it was difficult to talk to their partners. For many of the couples, real sharing had never occurred, but for the majority, the amount of dialogue had declined through the years. Common problems interfering with communication were inability or unwillingness on the part of one partner to talk, especially to share feelings (more typical of males than females); feeling that the other was too judgmental or too much of a know-it-all,

and fear of conflict. In general, taking time to communicate with each other gradually decreased, and more than a third indicated they really "visited" with each other less than once a month.

Low Self-Esteem. Popular literature describes the male mid-life crisis as primarily an ego problem, and this research substantiated this. However, it was interesting to note that it was the wife's self-concept that tended to become much lower while married, while the husband's remained the same or became more positive. The great majority of subjects of either sex indicated that their marriage partners seldom or never contributed to their self-esteem.

Decreasing Companionship. The number of shared activities decreased through the years for three-fifths of the divorced couples. Other things took precedence: work, children's activities, housework, individual interests. Some could not recall any pleasurable activities they had shared together.

Failure to Express Affection and Appreciation. The majority of both men and women expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of caring and concern shown by their former mates. They perceived a difference in needs, and some had no desire for closeness, warmth, touching, kissing — while their mates were hungry for some sign of affection. Many indicated their spouses never verbally expressed love or appreciation.

Sexual satisfaction also was examined, and while it was not a major factor in the marriage failure, the majority experienced some problems. For those who were most dissatisfied, sexual incompatibility had often been an important factor in the unhappy marriage for years. While some of the sex problems were of a serious nature (impotence or orgasmic dysfunction), most were due to lack of responsiveness as the total relationship de-

teriorated. Sex, too, became boring as the years went by.

Heavy Involvement in Careers. Did the husband's success or lack of success in his work affect the marriage? More than half of those who felt the husband had achieved the success he was seeking indicated a negative effect on the relationship and felt that too high a price was paid for that success. More males than females expressed this opinion, often indicating they had outgrown their wives and had few common interests. The amount of time invested in their work was seen as detrimental to the marriage, but it was difficult for a man to determine whether he invested most of his time in work because the marriage was unrewarding, or the marriage was neglected because he was caught up in becoming a success. For those marriages where the husband was not perceived as successful, his lack of achievement was almost always considered by the wife to be damaging to the relationship, both in affecting the husband's ego and in creating financial problems.

Extramarital Involvements. Three-fourths of the men and one-fourth of the women indicated they had been sexually unfaithful. For most of the men, the first occasion was earlier in marriage and usually without the wife's knowledge. Serious emotional involvements came with the middle years. For those women who admitted they had had affairs, it was usually with only one partner and was viewed as a means of affirming themselves as women after being ignored as wives. Both men and women viewed extramarital affairs as very destructive to the marriage.

Mid-Life Change. The male mid-life crisis, as described in popular literature, was evidenced time and again in the broken marriage. The story most often told by the ex-wife was of first noticing he had a new obsession with his appearance—buying a new ward-

robe, exercising and losing weight, getting a new hair style. Next came absences from home, lack of interest in family matters, irritability, absent-mindedness, and finally came the revelation that he was involved with another woman. Some men moved out of their homes with no word of explanation to their wives. Others tried to maintain both relationships indefinitely, making promises and then breaking them.

In most instances the wife filed for divorce after an extended period of time — when she finally decided he was never going to return to his former self. In approximately 12 per cent of the marriages represented, the wife indicated the marriage had been good until the husband went "berserk." The majority indicated there already were problems in the marriage before his "crisis" was experienced, so his affair served only as the catalyst for the divorce.

The woman's mid-life transition more often involved growth experiences than having an affair. Therapy, for example, might have led her to be-

come a more assertive and independent person, no longer needing a bad marriage. Husbands usually interpreted this as a menopausal symptom and never understood what happened.

CONSEQUENCES OF MID-LIFE DIVORCE

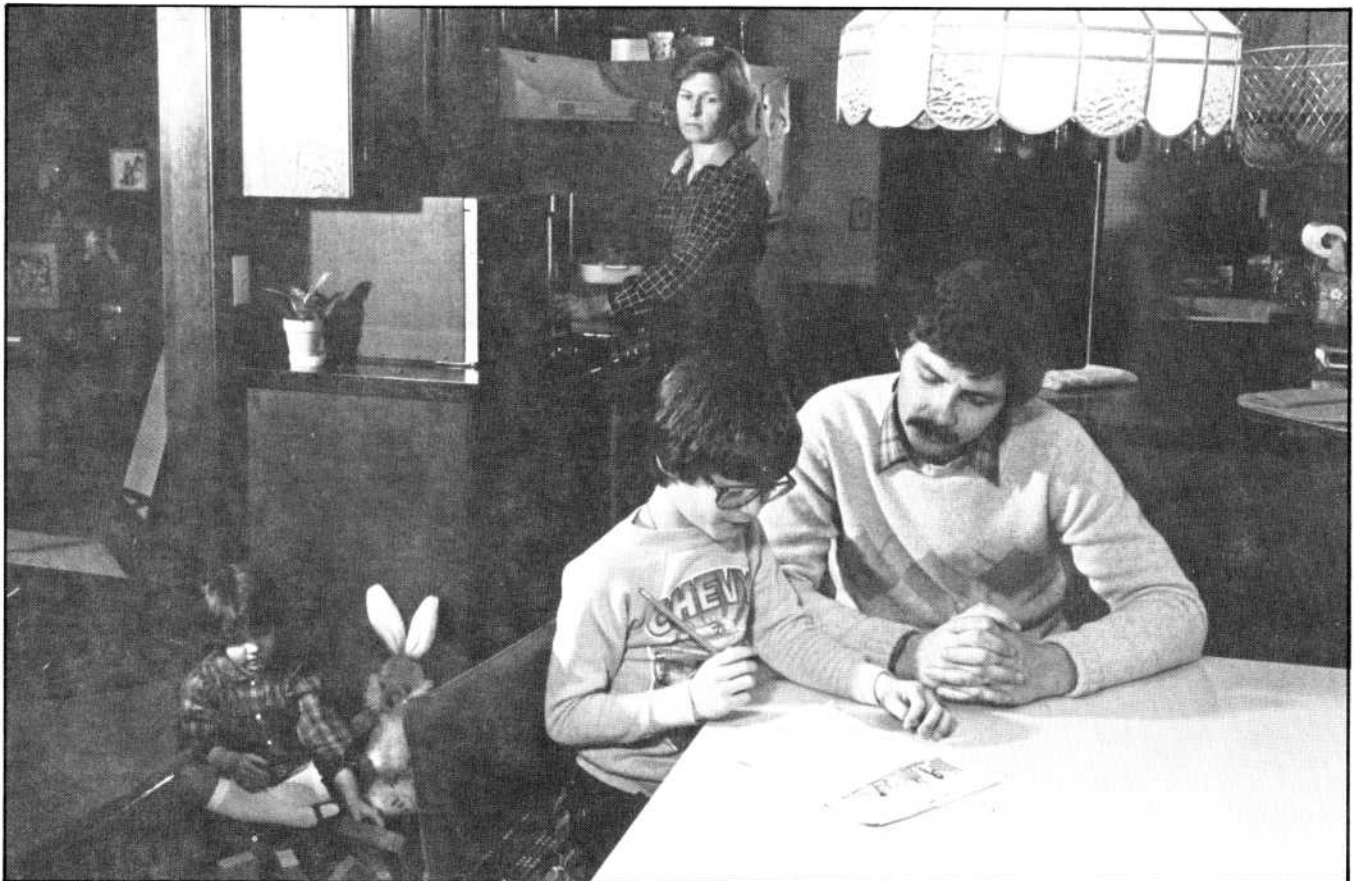
It should be stressed that for the majority of the marriages represented in the divorce study, terminating the marriage eventually was regarded by both partners as the healthiest solution to a very destructive or empty relationship. Their strongest regrets were that they had not initiated the separation years earlier. By the time they were interviewed, one year after the divorce, 75 per cent of the subjects felt very positive about their decision. Of the remainder, some still considered it a tragedy that should never have occurred, and others had a resigned attitude toward it since they had no choice in the matter.

The long-term consequences of mid-life divorce are very different for

men than for women. When subjects were contacted for a follow-up study five years after their divorce, it was discovered that most of the men had remarried, and all but a few of the women had remained single. Of the men and women who remarried, one-fourth subsequently had redivorced by the time I contacted them (and several more have left their marriages since that time).

An interesting finding of this study was that those men who had divorced for the second time expressed greater satisfaction with their lives than those who were still in their second marriages. In terms of total life satisfaction, remarried women fared better than remarried men. However, women who had divorced for the second time indicated low satisfaction with their lives and had no desire to try marriage again.

The most common problem in the second marriages, for those who were still married and those who had redivorced, was related to children and/or conflicting loyalties. A typical example would be a man who remarried



"For the sake of the children" was the most often stated reason for remaining in a marriage longer than either partner wished.

very soon after his divorce, perhaps to the woman he was involved with while he was married. She was much younger and had small children. Upon remarriage he suddenly found he was back at a much earlier stage of his life — and enjoying it less. As with most second marriages, the participants are not as likely to put up with a bad marriage for very long, because they have been through divorce, and they know they can survive another.

Another common problem is represented by those people who carry their earlier marital problems into the new relationship without making any attempt to solve them. An example seen in several cases was alcoholism. Men rarely received any counseling in the process of divorce or remarriage. Many did not ever come to terms with what had happened to them.

On the other side of the coin, for many men and a few women, the new marriage represented a peaceful happy existence they had never experienced before. They married people who were much more appropriate for them and enjoyed a dynamic, loving relationship and felt the high price of divorce was not too much to pay for the positive change in their lives.

For the many women who remained single, the picture was not so rosy. Low satisfaction was indicated in the areas of work, standard of living, personal relationships and concern for their future. Most of these women had not prepared for careers of their own; rather, they had provided support for their husband's vocation. As a result, they were in low level jobs at the time of divorce, if they were working at all. Many felt it was too late to go back to school, and it is very difficult for a middle-aged woman to start a new career without such training. As a result, following the divorce they continued to settle for work that was not satisfying or financially rewarding, and this, in turn, affected their standard of living.

Moreover, the generation of women included in this study were brought up to believe they had to have a man in their life in order to be fulfilled. Suddenly they were cast into an all-female world, because women outnumber men at this stage of life due

to the death-rate differential, and because middle-aged men frequently marry much younger women, leaving a surplus of middle-aged and older women. There were few opportunities to meet men and form new relationships. Both widowed and divorced women at mid-life found they must reconcile themselves to the reality of female companionship.

On the positive side, women who had not remarried expressed more satisfaction than men with the relationships they had maintained with their adult children. They also tended to have fewer health problems than the men. While their self-esteem did not keep pace with that of the men, in most cases it was higher than it had been while they were married.


IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CURRENTLY MARRIED

For many people mid-life divorce is a new beginning — an opportunity to correct a mistake that was made early in adulthood, or to bury a relationship that died somewhere along the way. There is no doubt that many of the divorces could have been avoided if the marriage partners had realized what was happening to their relationship in time to do something about it. A few of the couples made hasty decisions based on the turmoil they were experiencing during a mid-life transition, and professional counseling might have prevented a final break-up. The pain of the divorce often affected many more people than the two marriage partners, and if it is possible to avoid breaking up the family, every effort should be made to do so.

Some changes are occurring today that will affect the mid-life marriage of the future. The most common characteristic of all the broken marriages examined was early marriage. Today the age at first marriage is going up, and more women are completing their own college educations before they marry. Fewer women are entering marriage totally dependent on their husbands for support, and more couples are working toward equal relationships. Since parenthood doesn't follow as quickly after the wedding, those couples who make mistakes in mate selection may choose to terminate the marriage be-

fore they have so many children they can't afford to get out. Early divorce results in increased opportunities for women to remarry or to invest in their own careers at an early stage of their lives.

But perhaps recognizing the value of a marriage that continues through the middle years and on into old age could be the greatest incentive for investing continued effort in one's marriage during the transition years. The rewards of such timely effort are many. One woman described such a marriage as it can be:

I believe that middle-aged marriage, lived as it should and can be, offers qualities that nothing else has ever superseded: a shelter where two people can grow older without loneliness, the ease of long intimacy, family jokes that don't have to be explained, understanding without words. Most of all it offers memories. 



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