



Walkaway wives

Women at mid-life leaving their marriages in a bid for personal freedom is a growing phenomena. **Bettina Arndt** looks at this trend and asks a group of women if it has been worth it.

THERE'S A NEW TWIST to mid-life divorces. No longer are these partings of the ways being driven by a last gasp of testosterone, as mid-life men dump their long-term partners for the thrill of younger flesh. Now it is older women who are on the move.

The new breed of walkaway wife leaves not for another man – but for herself. Remember the movie *Shirley Valentine*? “I have led such a little life,” Shirley mused. “Why do we get all these feelings and dreams and hopes if we don’t ever use them?” Well, it seems as if there are myriad “Shirleys” out there who feel the same way. While previous generations of women had no choice but to stick it out, many wives are now working and able to support themselves. They have gained the power to walk away from their marriages – and many are using it.

Author Mary Moody wrote about her urge to flee, only to discover she was far from alone. “It was almost as if I put up a red flag. I got stampeded by the response,” says Mary, the former TV gardener who acquired a huge fan club through memoirs recording her decision to leave her family and “do something for myself”. *Running Away from Home at 50* was the subtitle of the first

of her books, *Au Revoir*, which described what happened when she took time out from her marriage, moved to France and ended up in the arms of a man from Toulouse.

Her books have struck a chord. “So many women seem to identify with the feelings of restlessness I was talking about,” says Mary, whose 30-year marriage has actually managed to survive her adventures. “That feeling of finally having space in your life to turn your attention to yourself. You start wondering, ‘Maybe there’s something more out there for me.’”

Yet many other women leave and don’t return. Couples getting divorced after 20-plus years of marriage have increased by a third in the past 10 years, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. And long-standing Family Court research shows it is women who are pushing this trend. Women made the decision to leave in two-thirds of the mid-life divorces studied by researchers Helen Gluckstern and Pauline Presland, who surveyed 68 women aged over 45, who divorced after marriages of 15 years or more.

The researchers found it was the prospect of spending the rest of their lives in unhappy, unfulfilling

relationships that inspired these older women to end their marriages. As one woman put it: “At this time of my life, my children have all left home. I felt I was just part of the furniture and needed someone to notice me. I decided if I stayed any longer, I’d be stuck forever.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the changes that resulted from the decision to leave were marked. The researchers found that those who have left long-term marriages report increased self-esteem, new confidence and optimism about the future.

“I grew wings and flew,” says Melbourne academic Kay Margetts, describing her life after leaving her 16-year marriage. Kay says leaving was a tough decision, especially as she was setting out on her own as a single mother with two children. Now, though, the 55-year-old former kindergarten teacher says she couldn’t be happier.

“It has been wonderful for me,” she says. “I’ve been lucky. I’ve experienced both sides of life. I have had children, had what, at times, was a really good marriage. Now I’m able to be single and do all these amazing things.”

Kay started studying for a masters degree when her children were away on access visits and discovered she loved it. >>>

Margaret Pazant, 57
BUSINESS CONSULTANT
Divorcée Margaret says she adores men, but doesn't want to live with one. She travels often on business and looks forward to returning alone to her "feminine, beautiful house".

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNA BERTALLI



Julie Frinsdorf, 45
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER
Being able to manage on her own gives Julie, pictured with her daughter Ashleigh, 10, a sense of empowerment.

That led to a PhD, followed by her current job as a lecturer at Melbourne University. She's backpacked around the world with her children and built her own house.

The level of contentment Kay feels is unusual; divorced people do not generally compare well in the happiness stakes, with surveys showing them to be less content than most married or single people. Yet there are good reasons why these women are different. For a start, they are the leavers, rather than the ones left. That makes a huge difference, says Ruth Weston from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), quoting research which suggests that the person who is left typically has far greater difficulty coping with the separation.

The women also *plan* their exit – the Family Court research showed mid-life women thought seriously about ending the marriage for up to four years before leaving. Many wait until children have finished school – or are at least old enough to cope better with the separation – which means they avoid the conflict often involved in post-separation parenting of younger children. This means they do their grieving about the failure of their marriage long before walking out.

“The day he left was the

day I woke up smiling,” says Victoria*, 47, a Sydney businesswoman who recently ended a five-year marriage. She married for the second time when her two children had already left home. It was

myself ‘Queen Victoria’ and make decisions, just like royalty, about whether I will allow somebody into my bedroom or not,” she jokes.

For many women, however, the decision to leave also

“IT WAS VERY DIFFICULT IN THE EARLY DAYS. I DOUBTED ... I HAD MADE THE RIGHT DECISION. AT CHRISTMAS, BIRTHDAYS, THOSE SPECIAL TIMES, YOU FIND YOURSELF WONDERING, ‘WHAT IF?’ ”

a disaster from the start, she says, particularly when her husband became entangled in her business affairs.

“The whole thing was so bruising emotionally and hugely financially bruising as well,” says Victoria, whose business is still recovering. After years of planning, she finally managed to extract her husband from her family business and persuade him to get a job. “The day he landed the job, I was out,” she says.

She's now happy in a new relationship, but is determined never to share her home with another man. “By 50, you've had your children, you have outgrown constraints, you are free to be happy in who you are,” Victoria says. “It's a wonderful time of life. You decide who you want to spend money on, who you are going to sleep with.” After many years of a strained, sexless marriage, she delights in her new sexual freedom. “I call

brings pain. Kay Margetts says that, although she felt relief, the initial separation was very difficult. “There's so much emotion that goes with ending a relationship that has spanned so many years – houses, experiences, children,” she says. “It had been a good relationship, so there was a great sense of loss, emptiness and despair.”

Julie Frinsdorf, 45, spent nearly a year planning to end her marriage, but found herself full of doubts after she separated. “It was very difficult in the early days,” she says. “I doubted at times I had made the right decision. At Christmas, birthdays, those special times, you find yourself wondering, ‘What if?’ ”

Yet now, eight years later, she's very sure it was the right thing to do. “I'm happier than I have ever been,” says Julie, who works as an administrative officer at Relationships Australia in

Sydney. With her older daughter at university, Julie enjoys living with 10-year-old Ashleigh, revelling in doing what she wants. “Like putting pyjamas on at 7 o'clock if you feel like it,” she says. “Or having pizza picnics on the floor with my daughter. I feel quite empowered, being able to manage on my own.”

And while she loves the freedom, it came at a cost – since leaving, Julie has faced a financial struggle and lives week to week, paying rent.

No matter what the downsides, many of these women, having carved out a better life for themselves, are extremely reluctant to contemplate another live-in relationship. “I'm very content with my life. Would I love a

man every now and again? Absolutely. Would I love him then to go home? Absolutely.” So says Margaret Pazant, a glamorous, exotic and blissfully single 57-year-old.

Margaret's work means she travels a lot, but she's always delighted to return to her immaculate house in the Italian heart of Sydney's Leichhardt. The American business consultant is a veteran of three marriages – the most recent to a man 11 years younger. “Now peace has become a priority,” she says. “I love to have my nice, feminine, beautiful house without testosterone dominating the space.”

Margaret is no man-hater – in fact, she adores men. “They serve a wonderful purpose,” she says, “... when you need a good cuddle, when you want a great intimate evening.” Just so long as they return home afterwards, so she's free to be herself. Free to read quietly,

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNA BERTALLI. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY SAMANTHA POWELL.



KAY MARGETTS, 55
ACADEMIC
Since leaving her 16-year marriage, Kay has gained a PhD and embarked on a new career as a university lecturer.

Many divorced women who have worked hard to achieve some measure of security are determined not to put it at risk through another live-in relationship. "I've been bitten," says Helen*, 53, a Sydney management consultant. She's twice-married and both times was the higher earner, so the divorces proved costly. "I'm very cautious now," she says. "I've done the thing when there was no money. I don't want to do that again. I've got my space, my things and I can manage well with what I have. I wouldn't give it up easily."

Even the happiest of these women will acknowledge the downside – there is still social shame associated with being

of friends that gives women the courage to leave.

Others delight in being free to pursue a passion. Suey McEnnally, 57, is an emerging Sydney artist, who made it into the finals of this year's Dobell Prize for Drawing. She spent 15 years in a de facto relationship, but now says it is pure and utter luxury being on her own, able to pursue her work to her heart's content.

It's rather perilous financially – she's sharing a house with a fellow artist to try to make ends meet – but she's happy. "I may end up a bag lady, but if you are doing something you are passionate about, it is pretty sustaining." ■

* Names have been changed.

"WOMEN AT MID-LIFE OFTEN HAVE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THEMSELVES AND WHAT THEY WANT OUT OF LIFE."

to watch TV in bed, to listen to music, talk on the phone. "When you live with a partner, you have to make concessions, you are always expected to be willing to give in. And for what?"

"Women at mid-life often have a better understanding of themselves and what they want out of life," says Anne Hollonds, CEO of Relationships Australia, NSW. "They are less willing to compromise, to tiptoe around fragile male egos, just for the sake of having a man around."

These escapees from long marriages know all about the negotiating, biting of tongues, the constraints of a long-term relationship. Many feel they couldn't bear to do it all again.

The lesson has been hard-learned for Francis*, 59, a twice-divorced Melbourne counsellor. She remarried 18 months after leaving her first marriage, taking up with an old flame who reappeared in her life. "I was so scared of being alone," she says. The

second marriage lasted only three years and was a disaster. "Emotionally, I felt I was dying," says Francis, who still has moments of panic despite now being convinced she can have a good life on her own. "I get anxious about money and tired of having total responsibility. It would be nice to have someone to discuss it all with."

Money is a major issue for many of these mid-life women, who often end up financially disadvantaged by leaving their marriages. Says Ruth Weston: "Our research shows many women struggle, particularly those who had given up paid work during the marriage to care for the children, with women from more affluent households often losing the most."

"Although financial difficulties were stressful, some women prefer this to what they experienced in marriage. As one woman put it, 'I couldn't wait to get out. I'm broke but happy.'"

unattached. Most have found themselves shunned by former friends and the invitations to couples' gatherings slip away. There are women who can't come to terms with living on their own and many are plagued with doubts about the impact on their children of breaking up the family. The Family Court research found the negative effect for children was the important barrier to divorce for the women they studied, with many waiting until children leave home before acting on their decision.

Yet the strongest message is of relief and freedom. Being free to eat when and if you feel like it. The joy of having time to yourself – many women value having time to spend caring for elderly relatives.

Time for friends is also a huge issue. Most of these women are heavily dependent on their female friends and revel in the long phone calls, shared walks and cups of coffee. Often it is the support

ESCAPE FROM ABUSE

For some mid-life women, leaving a marriage is a matter of survival. The Family Court research found a group who felt they had no other choice but to leave – they feared for their own safety or that of their children. An AIFS study of 650 people looking at the reasons for divorce found 6 per cent of the women cited physical violence and 2 per cent emotional abuse as the reason for the break-up. A further 11 per cent blamed alcohol or drug abuse.

Brisbane teacher's aid Rachel*, 52, lives with her 16-year-old son. Her 18-year marriage ended 10 years ago, but she's not sure she'll ever break free of the obsessive watch of her ex-husband. He's spent years following her around, peering through windows, leaving abusive calls on her answering machine up to eight times a day.

Yet she is content. "It feels good knowing I am in control of my own life. Knowing I don't have to justify every move I make," she says. She'd be very wary of letting go of that freedom. "I couldn't bear the thought of someone coming in and taking over my life again."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEALE DUCKWORTH. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY GAY GALLAGHER.