

Why Relationships Break Down after Decades

How does a 27-year relationship break down, after building a life together?

It's more common than you might think, explains Kylie Dunjey, the Executive Director and Counsellor at Relationships WA — divorce after decades of marriage is on the rise.

"We're seeing more of what we call grey divorces," she told ABC Radio Perth.

"The stats [show] there's been a significant increase during COVID especially. We've seen seven times more Australian spouses researching separation."

Growing older, growing apart

Jane* met her husband when she was just 18.

When he asked her for a divorce after "a long time together", she was furious.

"I spent all my adult life with this man [and] he decided he just had to leave.

"We have three kids so I was really angry because I just thought, 'You marry and you marry for life. You've got to work and work hard at it.'"

Ms Dunjey says many couples grow apart as they age, until they find they have nothing left in common.

For some ABC Perth listeners, the end of their relationship was inevitable.

"I signed the divorce paperwork on the weekend, ending a relationship that began over 27 years ago. I feel melancholy about it, but it was a slow death, so I did have time to adjust. It wasn't a happy marriage, but I won't mourn or celebrate its passing." — Ken

"My marriage of nearly 30 years ended after my husband found a younger partner. It is devastating; the loss, hurt and pain is ongoing even after being divorced for five years. The rejection is a daily struggle for me." — Melissa

"Ending relationships after 20 plus years is always really difficult ... You lose a lot but you also gain in other ways, it's made me stronger and happier. When it's no longer good, it's time for change as you are destroying two lives, plus the ripple effect on everyone else attached to that relationship. Very settled after a long road to happiness." — Wanda

Finding financial security after divorce

The need to find a job and re-establish financial independence following a marriage breakdown or death of a partner can be a challenging experience.

A lifetime of assets

The division of assets after a lifetime together can be tough.

Ms Dunjey explains that with more working women than in previous decades, women now have the freedom to divorce and remain financially independent.

However, this is not the case for all Australians, with older women still the fastest growing demographic in our homeless population, with divorce contributing to the problem.

Many older women facing separation have spent much of their lives out of the workforce to raise children, so they haven't been able to accumulate enough superannuation.

Ms Dunjey explains how these women are "looking at not many more working years to create wealth in, and set themselves up for stability and security".

"It often comes as quite a shock," she says.

"They haven't planned it to go this way and [they end up] worse off financially."

Some ABC Radio Perth listeners have been able to keep their finances together after divorce, but for others, raising a family alone has been tough.

"Financially [it was] really, really hard. But the kids are much happier and I'm much happier. It's just a really strange place to be in your life when you never, ever thought this would happen." — Jane

"I left after 10 years ... financially, it's not been easy, but my kids have had a stable home and there has always been food on the table, clothes on their backs, fuel in the car and someone watching them excel at life. I left for the sake of the kids. It was the best thing I could have done for them." — N

"I was married 17 years. We split in 2012 but maintained a financial relationship ... we never fought over money or kids and neither myself, my ex-wife or the kids suffered financially. It was just a matter of blocking out noise and agreeing to a long-term arrangement. It can be done." — Seeya

Making it work

While relationships do go stale, Ms Dunjey says it can still be possible to restore love and avoid separation.

"Often there is so much that can be resuscitated in an ailing relationship once people actually start to deal with the things that have created the space between them," she says.

"Some couples have pushed so much under the rug for so many years that there's no space in the room for either of them to exist anymore.

"There's just been so much avoidance."

She explains that by working on communication and dealing with issues directly, it's possible to resolve some of those old resentments and meet each other in a meaningful place.

Pete* was married for 27 years before splitting up in 2019 when his relationship grew stale.

While they both made the most of separation, after a year they "missed each other enormously".

"Laying a new set of ground rules, we got back together and have not looked back. Things are different but fantastic."

Ms Dunjey says that when couples find new ways to navigate their relationship, they can learn to maintain it.

"[They say], wow, we get to keep all this lovely history, we get to keep the dreams we had of being grandparents together, retiring together and of enjoying what we've worked so hard to achieve financially," she says.

*Name has been changed for privacy.