

Lifestyle / Family & Relationships

The Naked Truth | How to avoid a ‘grey divorce’? Expert tips on keeping your marriage happy in older age, and how to salvage it when things aren’t right

- ‘Grey divorce’ – divorce among older adults – is on the rise, driven by increased life expectancy and changing societal attitudes, among other factors
- Open and honest communication that allows each other to freely express feelings and concerns is essential to saving a long-term marriage, a psychologist says

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For those who wish to avoid a “grey divorce” - divorce among older adults - it is important to engage in activities that you both enjoy as it creates an opportunity for meaningful conversations and the chance to create new shared experiences. Photo: Shutterstock

While divorce rates in general have been rising, the phenomenon of divorce among older adults, often referred to as “grey divorce”, has been particularly notable.

Many factors contribute to this growing trend, but experts believe that increased life expectancy and changing societal attitudes have played a part.

As people are living longer, healthier lives compared to previous generations, it means that individuals may have more years ahead of them after reaching middle age or retirement. As a result, they may reassess their priorities and seek happiness and fulfilment in new relationships later in life.

In many cases, older adults have achieved a certain level of financial stability and independence, enabling them to consider divorce instead of feeling trapped in an unhappy marriage because of economic constraints.



Persistent conflicts and deep-seated resentment can detrimentally affect a marriage in the long term. Photo: Shutterstock

Societal perceptions about divorce have also shifted and it is no longer as stigmatised as it once was. Individuals feel more empowered to end unhappy marriages, even in the later stages of life. There is greater acceptance and understanding that personal happiness and well-being are important at any age.

Furthermore, gender roles and expectations within marriages have evolved significantly. Women, in particular, have gained greater independence and opportunities for education and career advancement. This shift has influenced marital dynamics, and those who feel unfulfilled within their marriages may be more willing to pursue divorce.

Dr Quratulain Zaidi, a clinical psychologist and founder of MindNLife, a Hong Kong-based private psychology practice, explains that “grey divorces” are often driven by individuals’ desires for personal growth and self-discovery.

“As time goes on, some individuals may find that they have grown apart from their partner and choose to end their marriage in search of a more fulfilling life,” she says.

“After dedicating years to family and career, some individuals may feel the need to break free from their assigned roles and explore new aspects of their identity, pursue individual interests or seek personal fulfilment.”



Dr Quratulain Zaidi is a Hong Kong-based clinical psychologist and founder of MindNLife.
Photo: Dr Quratulain Zaidi

The primary cause behind such divorces is often prolonged emotional disconnection, she adds.

“As couples journey through life, they may experience this emotional distance due to various factors, including a lack of communication, unresolved conflicts that persist, or a gradual drifting apart.

“This emotional distance ultimately leads to feelings of loneliness, dissatisfaction, and a yearning for a more meaningful and connected relationship.”

Another factor that contributes to divorce is a change in priorities and goals.

“During life transitions, such as empty nest syndrome and retirement, individuals often reflect on what truly matters to them and how they envision spending the second half of their lives. If partners have divergent visions for their future and are no longer aligned, it can ultimately result in a decision to seek a divorce.”



One step in maintaining a long-term marriage is to dedicate regular, uninterrupted quality moments to reconnect with your partner. Photo: Shutterstock

Additionally, Zaidi cautions that persistent conflicts and deep-seated resentment can detrimentally affect a marriage in the long term.

“Research suggests that only around 30 per cent of conflicts among couples can be resolved, while the remaining 70 per cent of issues are perpetual and cannot be entirely resolved.

“If these perpetual issues go unaddressed, they can breed resentment or lead to recurring patterns of behaviour that erode trust and intimacy.

“When such issues remain unresolved, they become significant sources of tension and unhappiness, ultimately culminating in dissatisfied marriages and eventual divorces.”



Encouraging each other’s individual goals and aspirations, while supporting each other’s development, is crucial

Dr Quratulain Zaidi, founder, MindNLife

For those who wish to salvage a long-standing emotional partnership, Zaidi provides the following advice.

“Maintaining a long-term relationship requires continuous effort, patience, commitment and understanding. It is crucial to prioritise effective communication, cultivate emotional intimacy, share experiences, seek professional help when necessary, adapt to life transitions and offer unwavering support regardless of circumstances.”

She emphasises that the most challenging situation occurs “when individuals give up on their relationship and see me as their last resort”.

“Every relationship is unique, and in some cases, one partner may already have emotionally checked out by the time they seek assistance. Therefore, I often recommend dedicating a time frame of 12 months to actively work on the relationship,” she says.



Finding ways to grow as a couple, whether through acquiring new skills, pursuing shared interests or embarking on new adventures, can invigorate your relationship. Photo: Shutterstock

To achieve success, first it is essential to create a space for open and honest communication, one that fosters active listening and allows each other to freely express feelings, concerns and desires.

“Effective communication forms the foundation for understanding and resolving relationship challenges, while also promoting emotional intimacy,” Zaidi says.

The next step is to prioritise meaningful time by dedicating regular, uninterrupted quality moments to reconnect with your partner. Engaging in activities that you both enjoy creates an opportunity for meaningful conversations and the chance to create new shared experiences.

Furthermore, Zaidi suggests putting effort into reigniting romance and passion in the relationship. Planning surprise dates, expressing affection through both gestures and words, and exploring ways to bring back the sparks of physical intimacy all contribute to keeping the flame alive.

Zaidi advises couples to embark on a journey of personal growth together.

“Encouraging each other’s individual goals and aspirations, while supporting each other’s development, is crucial,” she says.

“Finding ways to grow as a couple, whether through acquiring new skills, pursuing shared interests or embarking on new adventures, can invigorate your relationship.”

Luisa Tam is a Post editor who also hosts video tutorials on Cantonese language that are now part of Cathay Pacific’s in-flight entertainment programme.