



Men, Women, and Marriage - The Biggest Midlife Crisis

A LETTER RECEIVED

I recently received this letter from a visitor to the site. It's similar to many I receive, but it does an especially good job of raising questions, providing more examples than most. The letter has been edited to remove any details identifying the individual who wrote to protect her privacy, but in this in no way detracts from the letter's basic points.

"It seems the men in my overall family take flight from their marriages, have affairs, think completely differently from what they did a few years earlier. For example, (1) my dad, good father, decent husband.....turned 55 and had continuous long-lasting affairs. (Mom knew about it. but tolerated it and wouldn't divorce him and he wouldn't leave her); (2) my cousin - a religious man, turned 51, walked in one day and said he was leaving my aunt for another woman. No notice, no signs, just BAM!; (3) my brother-in-law did the same thing, though he and his wife had the 'perfect' marriage of 32 years. He turned 57, divorcing my sister AND his family, even his dog.

"My husband has just turned 47. If he turns on and tunes out like we did in the 60's and 70's, I won't be as devastated as my female relatives because I'm not dependent upon him financially or emotionally like they are. I hear about male menopause but according to the articles, it has to do with impotence. These guys aren't impotent; in fact, they're the opposite. Do men need to go to a proctologist in middle age to find where their heads are? These are (were) smart, family-oriented, caring men who blew out the candles and went into personality disorder warp drive. What gives?"

A REACTION

I will do my best to provide one answer of many possible answers to this question. This site is meant to be "inspirational", but I can't ignore the e-mail that comes in on this topic. I feel I have to say something and I hope it will be constructive. First, I want you to know that I am unmarried and have never been married. During the period when marriage was a real concern of mine, my work in global humanitarian relief kept me constantly on the road visiting and revisiting more than 30 nations on five continents for periods rarely exceeding a year and often



a matter of weeks or months. I couldn't start a family and keep up this work, so I had to make a choice and I did. However, I have had many, many friends who have passed through this kind of "midlife crisis" and, being a single male, many of them, particularly my male friends, shared their reasons and their pain with me. Over time, it has led me to certain conclusions. You can judge whether they're relevant to you, if you're facing this situation.

IN THE BEGINNING...

Not so many years ago, men and women had "roles" to play. These roles offered security, but they also placed restrictions on each sex. Generally, women were to remain at home raising children and running the household. Generally, men were expected to be successful income-producers and "providers" to their families. Divorce was difficult and frowned upon. A divorced woman had difficulty finding a new partner as she was often viewed as somehow being "deficient", or why was she divorced? A divorced man's maturity was suspect and he could find his professional career advancement threatened. There were many other problems as well. If you lived through this period, you know what I mean.

The world changed. Educational levels rose, as did expectations and the need for additional family income. Married women, including those with children, entered the workforce in ever-increasing numbers. The women's movement was inevitable and it finally arrived. No, it's not the "problem". It was necessary and it's done a lot of good, but it challenged the traditional role of the male as much as the female, if less obviously so.

Many women examined their assigned roles and said, "This is no longer acceptable. We want choices." Some men opposed it and many looked on in confusion, trying to figure out what it meant for them. Over time, most have accepted the demands made by women and have readjusted their attitudes or at least moved in that direction. Problems still remain, but anyone over 40 can remember a time when things were much worse.

However, women are part of human society, not a separate society. The women's movement may have been inevitable, but it did not arrive in a vacuum. Men had little choice but to re-examine their own roles as well. For whatever reason, biological or sociological, they did it



differently than women. They didn't form a "movement", they didn't discuss it openly, but they gave it more serious attention than women might have guessed. Because they were less public, women weren't as aware of what was happening on the "other side of the gender gap".

Men have examined their assigned roles and said, "Women insist they have a right to control their own bodies and to chart their own futures. They're right, but that's the way it should work for us too." As there were men taken by surprise by the women's movement some years ago, there are many women today taken by surprise by men's reactions that sound very much like their own. Some have the same negative reaction some men had in the 70's. When both partners insist on being the ultimate authority for their own lives, they may have justice on their side, but they may forget they're "partners". Married or unmarried, once you and your partner aren't "partners", you're facing trouble.

So what do you do about it?

I know that some women will insist that their search for "professional freedom" is far more worthy than a man's search for "social freedom". I know that some will insist that I should have said "sexual freedom", but sex is just one aspect of a much greater social challenge. It's not just a question of "Who do I want to go to bed with?" More than many women might want to think, it's also a question of "Who do I want to share my life with?"

I know that many women will insist that the family unit is being destroyed, the same thing that many men said years ago about women. I know how intensely emotional both sexes are on the subject of their roles. I suspect this essay will make many people of both sexes very unhappy. We all want a simple solution that favors us. That is not the way of the world.

IN THE MEANTIME...?

What's the "solution" to this problem in our society? Time. The redefinition of male and female roles is going to go on until a societal consensus is reached. It won't be done by law, it will happen of its own accord. The majority of today's middle-aged were people who married when one set of roles still predominated and have divorced or are facing divorce now that another set predominates.



Our middle-aged generation has the fortune and misfortune of being a transitional generation. When the rules of the game change enough, the game changes as well and everyone finds it difficult to adjust. Will it just go on, getting worse and worse? No, I don't think so. There's a younger generation that has witnessed this shift and integrated it into their lives, sometimes very painfully as the children of divorcees. Some will repeat the experience of their parents, but many will approach each other and marriage very differently. The generation following them will take the transition even further.

For those marriages that are in the process of collapse right now, there is little I can suggest. Your situation is unique to the two of you and has gone too far for me to do anything. I am not qualified to be a marriage counselor and have no intention of becoming one. I can only reach out at this site and assure you that you are still the most wonderful thing in all creation: a human being. Whatever your age, whatever your circumstances, you have a life and you have the time to do something constructive with it. My other essays attempt to deal with this as best they can.

However, to those of you whose marriages are still stable, hopefully happy as well, I have a few suggestions for each gender. They aren't original to me, they come from the painful words and experiences of my now-divorced friends. They are generalizations, so accept them as such. They won't fit every individual marriage, but give them a chance. Think them through carefully before rejecting them as irrelevant to your situation.

To women, I would say, **it's not just sex**. Men are constantly criticized as being driven purely by sexual lust. But if there's another thing that men value highly, it's friendship. Male bonding is a reality and take it from one man, it's a real need we feel, although we may not talk about it very much. We want to "bond" with our marriage partners as well. When that friendship disappears over time, we look elsewhere and real sex is easier and quicker to find than real friendship, so it often substitutes when we're under stress. Thus many divorces "caused" by a man's sexual infidelity have roots in a loss of friendship. If you examine your marriage, think of it from that perspective.

Finally, if you raise this subject with your husband, don't demand an answer on the spot. Don't even say, "Come back to me when you have an answer." We don't communicate the same way you do, give us time.



You might be surprised what we'll come up with if we don't feel under pressure.

To men, I would say, **open up**. Almost every letter I get from a woman on this subject includes the word "suddenly" as in, "suddenly, he told me he was leaving". We don't communicate with women enough. We know that, but it's part of the way we're brought up to be men, to bear unhappiness in silence without "whining". Communication is not whining. Going out, looking for a sexual adventure, may provide some short-term release from the pressure of an unhappy marriage, but it's just another form of whining. If you read my advice to women above, take your wife by surprise. Raise the subject of your friendship with her yourself and it's importance to you now, while it's still healthy or at least has a chance. It can't hurt. It might help.

Finally, I'd like to assume your wife was your friend when you married. If she wasn't, if she was primarily to be a "live-in" sex partner, you have only yourself to blame. Common sense alone should tell you that. If it's not working any longer and you want out of the marriage, be honest with yourself and be gentle on her. If you have children living at home with you, your responsibility is even greater. You made the mistake, not them. Before you walk out on them, sit down and talk seriously with yourself. Two wrongs will not make a right.

I know one thing for sure. If I say nothing more, I will receive e-mail from men whose wives are the ones having the midlife crisis, men who are trying to save their marriages or who failed and are recovering from a divorce. You're right, it's not just a matter of men leaving women. Such is gender equality in the 21st century. I can only hope that some of the remarks above, taken in the context of your situation, will be of help as well.