

# For better or divorce

## More baby boomers seeking a split as they reach retirement age

BY MANISHA KRISHNAN, NORTH SHORE NEWS DECEMBER 18, 2012



North Vancouver's JoAnne Ward, 62, is separating from her husband after 37 years of marriage. The divorce rate amongst baby boomers is on the rise.

**Photograph by:** News Photo, Cindy Goodman

FOR three decades, JoAnne Ward thought about ending her marriage. A couple of years ago, she did something about it.

The longtime North Vancouver resident began living apart from her husband, whom she has been married to for 37 years, house sitting while she sorted through her feelings. Today, at age 62, she is close to reaching a formal separation agreement.

The process has been an "emotional rollercoaster," she said, although she does not regret her decision.

"Everything I've learned has made me a stronger person."

Ward's story is not unique. Divorce rates have stabilized for the general population, but continue to rise amongst baby boomers, who are now reaching retirement age. The phenomenon has been coined

"grey divorce."

In 2011, 16 per cent of Canadians aged 60-64 identified themselves as divorced, up from 14 per cent in 2006 and 11 per cent in 2001 according to Statistics Canada. Amongst 65-69 year olds, 14 per cent were divorced in 2011, a jump in share of three per cent from 2006 and more than five per cent from 2001.

In terms of sheer volume, 144,975 Canadians aged 60-64 were divorced in 2001. By 2011 that number more than doubled to 328,920.

And for the first time in history, more women are initiating the split.

"Often, it's because they're leaving relationships that have been bad for a long time. The kids are now grown-up and are off, and the woman feels she wants to do something for herself," said Deborah O'Connor, a professor of social work at the University of British Columbia.

O'Connor studies late-life divorce and while there is limited research on the topic, she said there is no doubt it is becoming more and more common.

Infidelity and abuse are speculated to be two of the main causes.

Other times, a couple might simply find themselves at a crossroads when their nest empties.

"Often there is almost like a second honeymoon - some marriages really find themselves again and move on and become much stronger," said O'Connor.

"In another group of relationships, people look at each other and realize that they really don't have anything in common anymore, and they're not making each other happy anymore, and they don't want to spend the rest of their lives doing this."

In Ward's case, the early days were "magical," she said.

She met her husband on a blind date in her early 20s and they hit it off immediately, though they took some time to travel before becoming serious.

"He was lots of fun," she said, her blue eyes animated as she reflected on the past.

"We both enjoyed the same sports, we had good friends together, he had a good job. . . . It looked like it was good."

But it wasn't long before a difference in values started to create a rift, she said.

Ward, a teacher who studied marketing and life coaching and has authored several books, said her desire to learn never stopped. All told, she's spent nine years in university. Her husband didn't always see the point, she said.

"I would work and work and work and dream and . . . that drew a lot of tension in the family, because my big dreams were costly," she explained.

The couple had a daughter and a son, now 32 and 28 respectively. Although they were both there for the kids, the distance between them continued to grow, said Ward.

"We would tiptoe around, thinking we would offend the other person," she said. "Both of us would become defensive on sensitive issues, so we would close down rather than solve the situation."

Marriage counselling didn't help. Neither did a relocation to Quesnel for his job - Ward wasn't able to find a solid teaching gig there.

"I just thought, 'OK, I just don't want to do this anymore. I don't know who I am. I'm living far away from my family. I don't have a career anymore. I don't feel like a wife anymore,'" she said.

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Rediscovering one's self can be one of the most positive outcomes of a grey divorce, according to Abby Petterson, a West Vancouver divorce coach and registered clinical counsellor. It might involve working out, taking up a long-lost hobby, getting a new job, going on a first date. It can also be downright terrifying.

Petterson sees separating clients go through four main phases of grief: shock and denial, anger, sadness and depression and finally, acceptance. If the relationship was abusive, there is often a great deal of healing that takes place.

"People come to a place where they're moving on with their lives. They're dealing with the fact that it looks different, they're dealing with all the changes and they're trying to regroup and restart."

Many of the boomers are coming out of traditional marriage roles, said Petterson, forcing them to face tough questions.

"The prospect of being in another relationship can be quite scary. People also worry about 'What if I get sick? Who will take care of me?'"

If the wife was the organizer of family events, the husband may be left out. If the husband primarily looked after finances, that can mean a world of change for the woman.

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One of the reasons boomer women are choosing to end their marriages these days is because, if they've had an active working life, they can afford to.

"They are in an economic position where they are less dependent upon the husband and therefore can do the leaving," said O'Connor, adding unattached women have historically been one of the poorest

demographics.

But getting divorced is no financial cakewalk for either party, she cautioned, citing a costly legal system piggybacked with the reality of living off a single income again.

"For both people it's likely to be pretty devastating and it's going to be more devastating for the least powerful person in the relationship."

Emotionally, the ordeal of trying to reach a settlement takes a huge toll, causing many to give up their fair share, said O'Connor.

"I have people who say, 'I stopped on the Lions Gate Bridge and I had to make the clear decision of whether to jump off or not, and it was at that point I realized he could have whatever he wanted.'"

Divorce can also be a rude awakening for those who find themselves looking at money matters for the first time in their adult lives.

It's a scenario that North Vancouver money coach Annie Kvick sees all the time.

Kvick, who has been working with Ward and her husband for the past three months, said the majority of her clients going through late life divorce are women.

"Unfortunately, still today, we've made great improvements to empower women in finance, but there are still women who are not part of the family finances. They have no idea what's going on," she said.

Kvick helps her clients become financially fit and realize their goals, but she can end up being part-counsellor too.

"Sometimes, the first time I meet my clients they're crying in the meetings because it's the first time they can open up. . . . They're processing so much," she said.

Kvick co-hosts a women's workshop called Transitioning Through Divorce. She advises people to reach out for support through family and friends, and speak to a financial adviser as soon as possible.

"These decisions that you can make when you go through a divorce, they can have a big effect on your future."

For her part, Ward said her lawyers have been blown away at how organized she is - something she credits to the sessions with Kvick.

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On a recent Friday evening, more than 70 seniors gathered at Cheers Restaurant in Lower Lonsdale. They sipped cocktails, enjoyed dinner, mingled and danced. Some belonged to TGIF, a local social club whose members meet at least once a week to hang out and potentially date.

It is much more than just a matchmaking service, stressed owner Len Macht, 77, though he met his third and current wife through the group.

The former body shop owner started the club 25 years ago after getting tired of hearing his peers complain about a lack of excitement in their lives.

"What we found is that most people, they want to go out and have some fun and they want to have permission. This gave them permission to go out and meet a whole pile of really nice people," he said.

"The energy was there and it wasn't a meat market. It wasn't people going out and trying to get into the sack with someone," he explained.

Most of the 200-plus members of the club are 55 and older. Most of them are also divorced or widowed.

There have been plenty of romantic connections over the years, with some couples even getting together, divorcing and rejoining the group.

Ward said it's too soon for her to think about dating. She is still getting over a sense of loss but describes her year as having been courageous and even playful. Little things, like watching live theatre and meditating, make her happy.

"As sad as it is to leave the relationship after that length of time, I'm gaining my independence and my freedom back," she said.

After all, she declared with a laugh, she's planning on living another 30 years - almost as long as she was married - and she wants to enjoy them.

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