

# How I learned to live with divorce

By Tracy Corrigan

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Has the rhetoric about the declining status of marriage been overdone? A new survey by Civitas/Ipsos Mori shows that 70 per cent of Britons aged between 20 and 35 actively want to marry. The proportion is even higher among those living together. Marriage is no longer a social or economic imperative, yet most people still aspire to it.

This latest evidence of the desirability of marriage comes as no surprise to me. After all, its flipside, divorce, is systematically depicted as socially and morally disastrous. Mental illness, gangs and educational underachievement are just some of the ills that judges, teachers and politicians have blamed on "the breakdown of the family" in recent weeks. Then in the next breath they complain about the declining status of marriage.

So why do young people still want to get married? The main reason, it turns out, is the desire to make a commitment to a partner. In other words, it is a positive choice. Meanwhile, the divorce rate dropped by seven per cent in 2006 to 12.2 divorces per thousand married men and women, according to the Office for National Statistics, the lowest level since 1984, and remarriage rates have held steady. There is no need to bash divorce in order to promote marriage.

advertisement  Clearly I didn't walk down the aisle thinking: "Yippee, if I play my cards right, in 10 years' time all this will be behind me and I'll be getting divorced."

When my marriage ended, I felt a sense of crushing personal failure. I also seemed to have committed a social faux pas, judging by the reaction of acquaintances when the issue of my change in marital status cropped up. One former colleague at a party hopped from foot to foot in embarrassment after asking about my family, muttering: "Oops, trust me to say the wrong thing."

When I say I'm divorced, the reaction is often "I'm sorry," as when someone is ill or has died. Having been on the receiving end of such condolences, I am careful to avoid them myself. But when someone says they are getting married, I chime in with hearty congratulations, as when someone has a baby or gets a new job.

In other words, even in our everyday social interactions, we make it perfectly clear that marriage is good, divorce is bad. That's fine, up to a point. But why on top of all the other benefits - companionship, shared bills, someone who has to listen to you talk about office politics - should the married be assumed to be better parents and worthier citizens, too?

"My husband" is a versatile phrase. It can simply be descriptive, as in, "This is my husband, Jim". It can be sweetly proprietorial, as when newly-weds try it out over-enthusiastically. But some people flash it about like a designer label.

At drinks parties, intoned with subtle emphasis, "my husband" can become a badge of superiority, however dreary the specimen of manhood to which it is pinned.

If divorce were less stigmatised, it might be easier to cope with its problems. While most young people want to get married, only 25 per cent believe married people are happier than unmarried people. In other words, they don't really buy the idea that divorce is all bad. It isn't.

First, the social benefits. In their research for *Do Divorcing Couples Become Happier By Breaking Up?* Jonathan Gardner and Andrew J Oswald discovered that British men and women are happier a year after divorce.

Economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers found that more liberal US divorce laws coincided with a one-third fall in domestic violence and a 10 per cent fall in the number of women murdered by their partners.

In economic terms, Tim Harford argues in his book *The Logic of Life* that divorce is "a rational response to

changed incentives" (women's ability to earn money outside the home) and both less marriage and less divorce are simply the result.

Among the under-appreciated potential plus points of divorce are: an improved social life, thanks to unlimited baby-sitting by the other parent; choosing where to go on holiday; not seeing your in-laws; and not being contradicted in front of the children.

The kids, meanwhile, enjoy two lots of holidays and birthday presents, and forge close relationships with both parents. Divorce is disruptive and painful for children, but they learn to be resilient and adaptable. On a bad day, being divorced feels lonely and frightening. On a good day, the sense of independence and self-reliance is exciting and life-affirming.

So that's it, really. Good days and bad days. Just like married people.

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