

Divorce: Women who walk

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By GAIL ROSENBLUM - Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune

Alicia Lahti knew that people viewed her 23-year marriage as happy. And why not? Her husband was "a wonderful man," she said. Together they built a home and careers, traveled and raised two "brilliant kids," now 17 and 21.

So relatives and friends were shocked when, a year and a half ago, 46-year-old Lahti asked for a divorce. "I loved my husband, but I was not in love with him like you should be in love," said Lahti of St. Louis Park. "It was very hard to tell him. Society teaches us to be a good mother, good wife, to stay together for the sake of the children. But it's OK to move forward."

A growing number of women seem to be drawing the same conclusion. Although the first-time divorce rate has been declining since the 1970s, and now hovers just under 50 percent, there's been an unmistakable increase in the percentage of midlife women like Lahti doing the asking. A study commissioned by AARP in 2004 revealed that nationwide, women in their 40s, 50s and beyond now initiate 66 percent of divorces. More than one-fourth of their husbands, the study reported, were stupefied. Never saw it coming.

"I am a divorced father who was simply dropped by his wife," e-mailed Curtis from St. Paul, who asked that his full name not be used to protect his children. His "past" wife, as he calls her, has moved away and he does not keep in touch with her. "There was no drug, alcohol, infidelity or abuse reasons. She simply said that I was 'boring' and

'spent too much time with the kids.' This is the most common scenario in the majority of divorces. It's not neat and clean like pro-divorce people want to make it out to be."

While "boring" may make some wince, it's not far from the reasons many women give for leaving. Physical and emotional abuse, infidelity and substance abuse are still high on the list, but women more often speak about simple unhappiness, lousy communication and loneliness.

Facing decades of good years ahead of them, financially healthy and not constrained by the stigma of divorce that kept many of their mothers married, they make the leap.

A year ago, Karol Thompson, 58, called a divorce lawyer after "hanging in there" for 16 years of power struggles and difficult stepfamily dynamics. "Inside, you still care about what people think, but you have to be true to yourself," said Thompson, a Minneapolis mother of two grown children.

The decision was not easy. She's living off credit cards, she said, and looking forward to getting on track financially. She's moved from a beautiful lake home with gardens and loons to a small apartment. Sometimes she fears what the future holds for a woman nearing 60. But she feels that she did the right thing. She is reconnecting with girlfriends, attending plays, learning photography and doting on her grandson.

"I'm just trying to get those voices out of my head," she said, "and enjoy the quietude."

While many men are blindsided by their wives' departure, many women say they sent out signals for years. In the AARP study, about one-third of women 50 and older said they began thinking about leaving at least two years before they did it. One in 10 women thought about it for a decade or longer. "I never talked to people about issues in my marriage," Lahti said. "I held everything in. That was terribly wrong."

The problem may be in how women send signals, said Neil Chethik, author of the new book, "VoiceMale," featuring men's candid opinions

about marriage, sex and housework. Women like to talk it out, he said, which is difficult for many men who are not as well-trained in the face-to-face emotional approach. "Men resist and resist and then the woman stops pushing it. Frankly, that's when I say to men, 'Watch out.' When she turns off, it's not that she's forgotten. It's that she's started to give up on the relationship."

One reality for men, Chethik discovered in his research, is that marriage is often good enough for them. "But women feel like, if it's not very good and growing and getting better, it's not good enough."

Still, not all divorces are initiated enthusiastically. Some women, particularly in high-income couplings, may feel pushed to petition for the split, to take back control after a husband announces he is leaving her for someone else. Deirdre Bair, author of "Calling it Quits: Late-Life Divorce and Starting Over," calls this "CEO-itis: If he's going to ditch me, I'm going in there to get mine first."

That doesn't mean that these women aren't devastated. Aside from the emotional toll, some older women have never balanced a checkbook. Kent Peterson, a certified divorce financial analyst in Waverly, Minn., said that 90 percent of his clients seeking financial advice prior to divorce are women. "Most are over 40 because, at that point, they have significant assets to protect and divide. Once they understand how this can be OK, they feel they can move ahead with confidence," he said.

Bair's research, which included interviews with 184 women and 126 men from their early 50s to 80s, supports the finding that women are generally the instigators, and not just in the United States. "All of a sudden, it's women in record numbers all over the world," Bair said, including Australia, New Zealand and Switzerland. In Germany, "it's an epidemic." The biggest reason, she said, is "emotional distance. (Women) said, 'We just didn't have anything in common; he never showed me any affection, or a compliment or a birthday present.' They just didn't want to be a part of that relationship anymore."

Men leave for many of the same reasons, she said. They fall out of love or into love with someone else. They're tired of doing what others expect of them.

Not all make the dramatic leap to divorce. Bair said she was stunned by the number of couples in her research she calls "divorced while married." These couples, she said, "live separate lives within the same house. They eat meals separately and have separate bedrooms. They have separate friends and separate activities but, when the kids come home or company comes in, they pretend they're together and everything is just fine."

While women who do walk sing the praises of freedom, many men left in the lurch quickly get down to the business of recoupling. In the AARP study, more than 80 percent of men in their 50s had a serious, exclusive relationship as quickly as two years post-divorce. (And despite their cry for freedom, 75 percent of women did, too.)

Lahti and her former husband (who politely declined to be interviewed) divorced using the more amicable approach of collaborative law. The process was completed in under two months. After a year of "learning to love myself and becoming whole again," Lahti said, she's slowly getting back into dating.

Even though it was a "respectful divorce," Lahti said it wasn't easy on anybody in the family. Her son lives with her, but he sees his dad whenever he wants.

"If he wants to be with his dad on Christmas, I say, 'Go. Have a good day.' In the long run, it's a blessing for everyone," Lahti said. "I sure hope that, if (my children) are in a relationship or marriage that is not loving and joyful, they will have the courage to move on in a respectful way."
