

COUPLES OPEN UP
ABOUT **THE CHALLENGES**
OF MONOGAMY AND
REDEFINE THE RULES OF
LONG-TERM *love*

THE HALF- HAPPY MARRIAGE

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JOAN THOMSON* CONSIDERS HERSELF MATED FOR LIFE.

She's been married for more than 30 years to a man with whom she's raised two kids, now in their twenties. She and her husband have their differences: She votes Green Party, he's a staunch Conservative; he likes to putter on his boat while she'd rather visit art galleries with her friends. They've experienced their share of secret betrayals over the years — she has had a couple of affairs and suspects he has too, although they've never talked openly about it. They don't have sex much anymore. She resents still having to pick up after him. "Sometimes I feel more like a caregiver than a wife," admits Thomson, 55, who works in administration for an Ottawa-based non-profit organization. She has contemplated divorce, but chooses to stay with her husband — partly out of parental duty (their kids still live at home), partly for the comforts of habit and also because, well, divorce is messy. But it's more than that — "I still do love him and, after all these years, he is my family," she says. "Besides, I don't know anyone who is really completely happy in their marriage."

Call it the half-happy marriage — not bad enough to initiate divorce proceedings, but not burning with passion or even simmering with contentment. Sound familiar? It's not uncommon for midlife malaise to creep into what might have begun as the strongest of relationships. The twin goals of child rearing and mortgage paying may have put the two of you on the same team as a couple, but now that the kids are almost grown and the house is practically yours, you may find yourself humming The Supremes tune "Where Did Our Love Go?" You still care about your partner, but it's not the same; you aren't "in love" anymore. And there may have been hurts along the way. Perhaps he cheated. Perhaps you did. You'd never admit this to your friends, but your marriage sometimes feels, well, disappointing. Like many of your peers, you've thought about divorce (the highest divorce rate in Canada is among middle-aged couples), but you tend to agree with Margaret Atwood, who has observed: "A divorce is like an amputation: you survive it, but there's less of you."

So if splitting up isn't the answer, your only other option is sticking it out. Or is it?

According to Pamela Haag, author of the new book *Marriage Confidential*, there are legions of ambivalent couples stuck in half-happy or "low conflict" marriages. They may not be throwing dishes at each other, but the sizzle has long gone. When she interviewed couples, she found the problem "wasn't a matter of the toilet seat being left up, or of easily remedied flaws, but a collusive, ineffable shortcoming such as withered passion, boredom, lack of connection, lost affinities, or a

world-weariness that beset their married life." Despite their disappointments, however, many couples told Haag they were more or less satisfied. "They weren't contemplating separation, despite the absences and the longings in their marriages."

Baltimore-based Haag says discontent with her own 13-year marriage prompted her in part to write the book. "In my own case, I really can't tell if my marriage is woeful or sublime," she admits, referring to "unarticulated grievances, deferred fulfillments and lost ecstasy."

Marriage Confidential examines the reasons why so many couples are living "semi-happily ever after" and describes how even well-intentioned men and women can become dispirited in listless, albeit high-functioning marriages. Haag says the problem is seldom the individuals involved, but their ideas of what marriage should be. Perhaps, she argues, the time has come to rewrite the rules. "It's not my proposition that marriage is obsolete. But I do feel it has to evolve to new forms."



WE HAVE UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

"Most of us go into marriage looking for someone to complete us, rather than completing ourselves," says Renée Newhouse*, a 48-year-old Montreal mom of one. "When I got married 20 years ago, I remember thinking, Here's a guy who is always going to entertain me." After weathering some rough patches — her husband had an affair and also struggles with addiction issues — she now has a more pragmatic attitude about what it takes for a marriage to survive. "Sure, the fantasy was way better," Newhouse admits, "but, despite everything we've gone through, my husband and I are connected in a way I can't describe — there is a deep love there and I see the humanity in him. Either one of us could have left the other many times, but we've chosen not to. I believe my grass is green; it may not be the exact shade of green I hoped it would be, but it is green."

When she got married 15 years ago, Shanice Wynne*, a 41-year-old mother of three in Vancouver, thought "the whole thing would make me happier." Until a recent marriage retreat, Wynne and her husband had come close to separating several times over the years. "I kept seeing all the things he *wasn't* doing — he wasn't the dad volunteering at school or being more involved at home. So he was living with someone who was constantly disappointed in him and I kept imagining other marriages were stronger and better." Since going on the retreat together, Wynne says they are both working harder on their relationship. "He works his ass off at a job he doesn't always love, but feels compelled to be the breadwinner. My husband is old school — he's the man who brings home the bacon — and I never really appreciated that before."

WE DEMAND TOO MUCH FROM OUR PARTNERS

"One of the more damaging ideas in the romantic ideal," suggests Haag, "is that we can be the world to each other — like an overworked stagehand on a movie set trying to do the job of a thousand people. It puts an almost unbearable emotional strain on a marriage." Wynne says she's come to see that her husband simply can't — and shouldn't be expected to — fulfill all her needs. "You have to have a life that's your own. You need a couple of girlfriends to bitch to. I love talking with other women about their lives. And I love my job. All of these things bring me added pleasure."

WE ALWAYS PUT THE KIDS FIRST

Haag calls them "Royal Children" and "The New Spouses": kids who are put front and centre in a marriage and catered to, often at the expense of the adult relationship. We sleep with our kids, instead of our spouses; we arrange play dates for them, but rarely set aside time for our partners. In our eagerness to raise perfect kids, we drain the energy from our marriages and redirect it all to parenthood.

Perfectionism and attachment parenting "don't really predispose us toward an easygoing, nonchalant marriage once we opt for children," observes Haag, who notes that while having children is one of



the primary reasons for getting married, studies overwhelmingly show that adding kids to the mix lessens marital satisfaction. "This is one of the paradoxes of the parenting-centric marriage, in which parenthood is both the inspiration for the marriage and its apparent downfall."

WE UNDERESTIMATE THE CHALLENGES OF MONOGAMY

"Is having sex with only one person for 40 years realistic for everyone?" asks Toronto sexologist Jessica O'Reilly. "I'm not sure, but I don't think it's natural." O'Reilly says she has midlife couples in her practice who have found ways to forgive each other their affairs or have even opened up their marriages to allow for outside sexual activity instead of opting for separation. Says one of the wives interviewed in Haag's book: "It's just *unrealistic* to think that the person you talk to about hiring a plumber is going to be your big love affair."

"What is a mystery to me, and a thing of beguiling beauty, is the genuinely sexually contented long-term marriage — a monogamous dam, lovingly constructed to manage the wayward lusts of nature," Haag writes.

That said, she doesn't want to suggest couples give up trying to construct that dam. She believes what might help is for spouses to be honest with each other. "It doesn't mean your spouse loves you less when he admits **Continued on page 91**"

the abundance of serotonin transporters in the brain. This, in turn, was correlated with a decrease in the amount of drug-dependent and self-destructive behaviours that had previously afflicted many of the church members. In short, the scientists recognized the therapeutic benefits of ayahuasca as a powerful natural antidepressant that had received little recognition outside the Amazon.

After emerging from a light sleep, the group forms a tight circle. Everyone is eager to share thoughts, relay visions and hear what guidance the shaman might impart. We pass from person to person an immense pipe stuffed with tobacco leaves.

As the morning sun splinters through the window, I can see once again the mix of people with whom I've spent the night. They range in age from early twenties to mid-sixties, more women than men, and include business execs, therapists, yoga teachers, artists, writers and blue-collar workers. Among them is a former elite athlete who says ayahuasca has been a godsend, a kind of miracle cure for unexplainable attacks of spontaneous paralysis she's suffered through the years that the medical profession has been unable to diagnose.

After leading countless gatherings, Niwe believes, for most, the ayahuasca ceremony is a spiritual pursuit, a reconnection not only for mind, body and soul, but also for a larger integration of self and the divine source of all creation.

THAT'S A HEADY concept. However, as the shaman reminds me, ayahuasca gives you what you need, not always what you want, and it takes time to absorb the insights received. I'm still synthesizing my new-found peace of mind, learning to recognize when my harshest critic — me — attempts to thwart my creative work. Little by little, I am gaining ground. **M**

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that monogamy is difficult," Haag points out. "It's challenging to have lifelong, absolute monogamy — and it's challenging to try non-monogamy too." Couples who strive for sexual exclusivity really do need to work at it. "They can find ways to play both spouse and mistress — or lover. They need to be open to what the spouse wants, and try to infuse some of the novelty of a non-monogamous life into a monogamous one."

WHAT WE CAN DO TO CHANGE

Rather than pen another self-help guide with trite advice on how to prop up a flagging marriage ("*Go on dates!*" "*Have sex in a different room of your house!*"), Haag says she wanted to "show the millions of us who are in these ambivalent marriages we're not alone." To that end, she polled almost 2,000 people, read marriage studies and conducted her own investigative research to identify the non-traditional ways half-happy couples are staying together.

What Haag found was that many marriages are not at all what they seem on the surface. On the extreme end, she points to the estimated two to four million swingers in the United States, and the "don't ask, don't tell" marriages in which couples turn a blind eye, within certain rules, to extracurricular sexual activities. (For example, some give the nod to the "50-Mile Rule," allowing casual sex outside the monogamous radius of home if one of the partners is out of town. Others might be lenient about cybersex, and not consider it actual cheating.)

Then there's the growing incidence of polyamory, also known as ethical non-monogamy, where couples decide their marriages can tolerate other intimate attachments and thus are honest about the other sex partners they have. Haag estimates that five to 10 per cent of American couples have open marriages. She calls these folks "marriage pioneers" with

"Oreo marriages" — traditional on the outside, untraditional on the inside.

It's not just sexual boundaries shifting among half-happy couples — they are also living together in different ways. Some take "marriage sabbaticals" and live apart for periods of time to pursue different interests. Haag posits many couples "yearn secretly for adjacent but separate houses."

That was true for Aspasia Dassios, a 49-year-old Toronto teacher who lives apart from her husband. Dassios was fiercely independent — working in Europe for 15 years, travelling to 30 countries and having several long-term relationships — before getting married for the first time 3½ years ago to a widower with two kids. They lived in the same house for two years before deciding their marriage had a better chance of surviving if they lived apart. "Once we were together under the same roof, all we talked about were domestic chores, mortgage payments and kids," admits Dassios. "The daily routine sapped our sexual energy, and I lost my sense of humour." The two see each other regularly and often spend several days together, but they don't plan on living together again for an extended period of time. "We function much better and are much more loving in this arrangement. He likes being a single dad and I like being a mom and wife part-time." While their unique arrangement raises a few eyebrows, Dassios says, "I can't tell you how many women have said to me, 'If only I had done that with my husband — we never would have gotten divorced!'"

Dassios' arrangement may be a harbinger of modern marriage. Think back 60 years or so, when we didn't hear about interracial or same-sex marriage, or unions with stay-at-home dads and female breadwinners. Maybe there's a way to "evolve marriage to suit our times, or the changing temper of our marital love. This, to me, is the real lost opportunity and potential [for our] generation," writes Haag. "Maybe marriage survives best by swaying a little with the winds rather than bracing against them." **M**

*Names changed by request