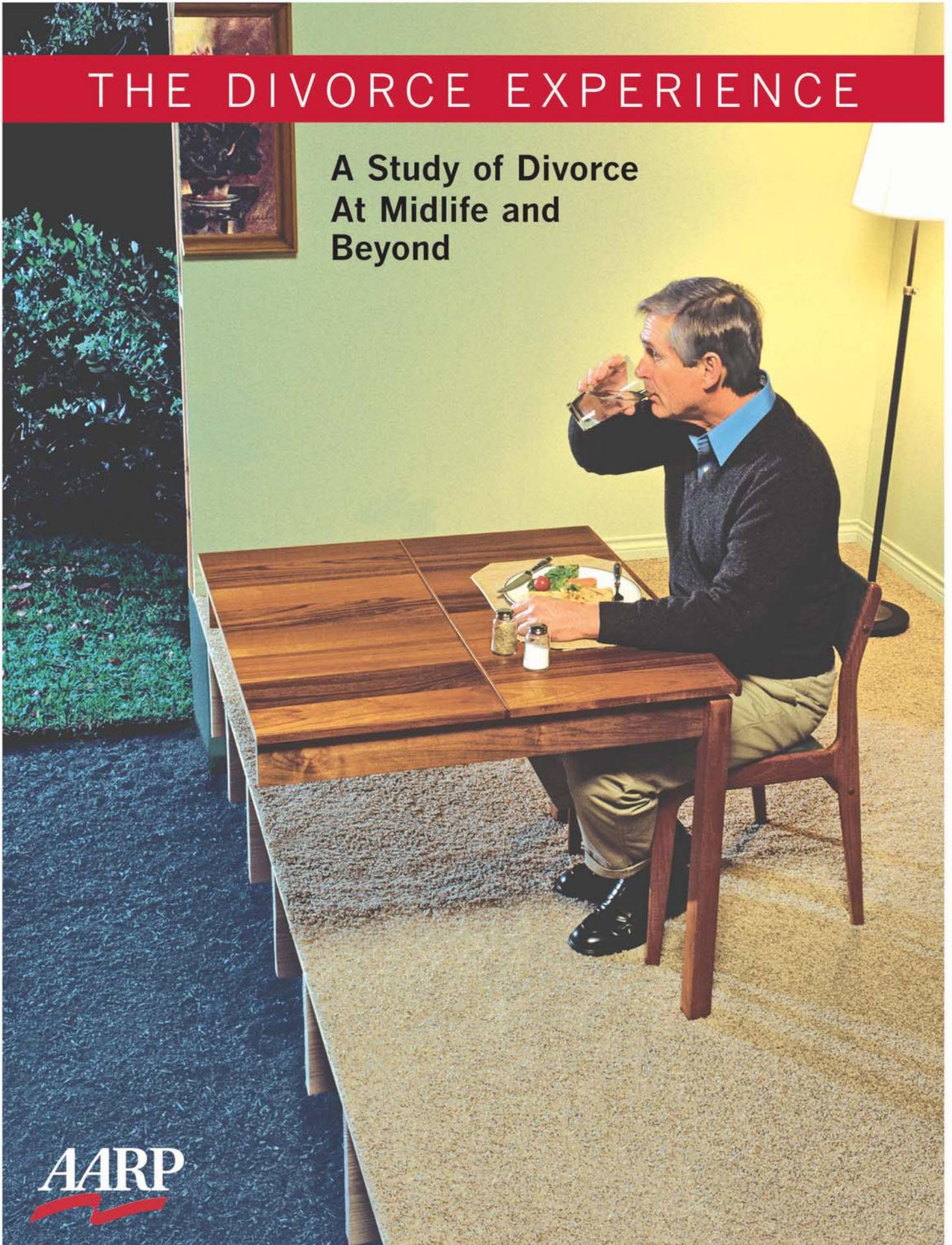


THE DIVORCE EXPERIENCE

A Study of Divorce At Midlife and Beyond



AARP



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Executive Summary

*Conducted For
AARP The Magazine*

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Survey conducted by
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many midlife events cause turmoil. Children leave the nest, a major illness comes, a parent passes on. For some, divorce ends a long marriage.

These and other events become common at a stage in life when people worry about getting older, reflect on their mortality, and ponder about what has been and could have been. Experiencing one midlife event after another may lead to stress and feelings of devastation.

This groundbreaking study, *The Divorce Experience: A Study of Divorce at Midlife and Beyond*, is the first of its kind to document what has become a common experience among midlifers and older people. The study examines the circumstances surrounding divorce at midlife and its impact on men and women. We also wanted to look at how people cope with life and their well-being after divorce, as well as their sexuality.

The results are based on interviews with 1,147 respondents -- 581 men and 566 women ages 40 to 79 who were divorced at least once during their 40s, 50s, or 60s. Some are still divorced, some have remarried, and a few are widowed. Respondents represent divorcees and remarried divorcees in the United States population who divorced when they were between the ages of 40 and 69.

The Impact of Divorce

Compared to other losses that may occur at midlife or older, people age 40 and older generally feel that divorce is more emotionally devastating than losing a job, about equal to experiencing a major illness, and somewhat less devastating than a spouse's death. When two or more life-churning events occur near the same time, one can only imagine the emotional devastation someone has to face.

Contrary to our expectations, we found that even at an older age, people think long and hard not only about how divorce may impact their future, but how it may impact the welfare of their children. Staying married because of the children is by far

the predominant reason some people take so long to decide about getting a divorce, despite serious problems such as abusive spouses. Verbal, physical, or emotional abuse leads the list of causes for marital dissolution, followed by differences in values and lifestyles, cheating, and alcohol or drug abuse.

In addition, regardless of whether their divorce was more emotionally devastating in their 20s and 30s or in later life, those who experienced divorces both at a younger and older age gave concern for their children as the major reason one was more emotionally devastating than the other. Women gave this reason more frequently than men although children are the top concern for both groups. Men, being the non-custodial parent most of the time, are especially concerned about their post-divorce relationship with their children.

At the time of their divorce, 76 percent of people ages 40 to 79 who divorced later in life had children, the majority of whom were under 18 years old. Although more than a third of those with children (37%) report that their children were supportive, and an additional 17 percent say that their children were “OK” with it, 28 percent recall that their children were somewhat upset, and 18 percent say their children were very upset, about their divorce.

Along with emotional turmoil, people report other difficulties. Foremost among these is dealing with uncertainty or not knowing what’s ahead, cited by 40 percent. Many suffer from loneliness or depression (29%), as well as feelings of desertion or betrayal (25%), a sense of failure (23%), feeling unloved (22%), and feelings of inadequacy (20%).

People also face many fears. Greatest among them is the fear of being alone, named by almost half (45%). Divorcees also fear failing again (31%), being financially destitute (28%), never finding someone to marry or live with (24%), staying angry/bitter for a long time (20%), staying depressed for a long time (16%), and not seeing their children as much (14%). Women are especially vulnerable financially and are more likely than men to be troubled about becoming financially destitute. Even with this greater vulnerability, women tend to have no choice, as they are more likely to fault their spouse, especially with abuse. Thus women usually initiate divorce, many times surprising their spouses.

Coping with Life after Divorce

Despite the worry, torment, and fear they go through making the decision and going through the divorce process, divorcees cope fairly well with life after divorce. The majority feel they are on the top rungs of the ladder of life. Their outlook is on a par with that of the general population age 45 or older, and better than that of singles ages 40 to 69. Those who remarried give themselves a better current outlook on life than those who did not remarry, or those who are either separated or widowed. Three in four (76%) claim they made the right decision to dissolve their marriage. Indeed, their buzzwords are freedom, self-identity, and fulfillment.

However, stress remains, although we cannot determine how much of this stems from the divorce. About half (49%) say they suffer from more than the usual stress or greater. More women than men (63% versus 44%) suffer highly from stress. Depression plagues some (28%), with no difference between those who remained divorced and those who remarried. The rates of high stress and depression are similar to the rates among singles ages 40 to 69, reported in another AARP study in 2003. Again, women report depression more than men (35% women versus 21% men).

Sexuality

After their divorce, people dated primarily to prove either to themselves or to their spouses that they were getting on with their lives. About a third (32%) remarried. Perhaps because of their long shared history, a few (6%) remarried the same person, or had sex with their spouse occasionally or often for several years after their divorce (4%).

The majority (56%) report sexual touching or hugging in varying degrees of frequency (daily to once or twice a month), while 38 percent of the total claim not doing any of these at all. Many women, especially those who have not remarried (69%), do not touch or hug at all sexually. An even larger majority of women who have not remarried do not engage in sexual intercourse (77% saying not at all), in comparison with about half of men (49%) who have not remarried.

Age Differences

Sixty- and seventy-year-olds appreciate life after divorce most, saying that they like doing things for themselves and having their own identity. However, what they hate most is not having someone to do things with.

Forty-year-olds' major concern is their finances, but they are more likely than older divorcees to have dated after their divorce or even before their divorce became final. They wanted to prove that they could get on with their lives.

Fifty-year-olds seem to have the most difficulty with divorce, evident in their greater likelihood to say that their divorce was more difficult than a major illness. This could be because, unlike forty-year-olds, they worry that they are not young enough to have a good chance at remarriage; and unlike sixty- or seventy-year-olds, they are more concerned about their future at a life stage when a midlife crisis commonly occurs. Fifty-year-olds like best not having to deal with another person.

Racial/Ethnic Differences

African Americans find divorce less emotionally devastating than suffering a major illness or even job loss. African Americans are less fearful than whites of financial hardship, of failing again, and of not finding someone after their divorce.

While whites are more likely to think that finding their own self-identity and not dealing with another person are pluses, African Americans are more apt to appreciate having the house the way they want it after their divorce.

Religious Differences

Baptists (grouped separately from other Protestants because of their large number), Catholics, and Protestants other than Baptists differ in many respects from those with no religious affiliation. Baptists and those with no religious affiliation often are on the ends of the spectrum: Baptists found the most comfort in their religious faith or prayer while in the throes of divorce, while those with no religious

affiliation did not. Baptists are the most likely to have the brightest outlook on life, and those with no religious affiliation the worst. However, like those with no religious affiliation, Baptists have the least desire to remarry.

Those with no religious affiliation are the most likely to fear for their finances after divorce but most apt to appreciate their freedom.

These differences may be linked to other characteristics that are associated with one's religious faith. One of these characteristics may be age, because people may be more likely to become religious or spiritual as they get older. In addition, the majority of African Americans are Baptists, while the majority of Hispanics are Catholics. Whites most frequently report their religion as Protestant. The sample did not allow analysis for groups affiliated with other religions.

Implications

As life expectancies increase and baby boomers replace their more traditional elders as seniors, it is likely that the number of people going through divorce at midlife or older will increase. Those who experience this event late in life are also likely to leave a long marriage. Yet, there is little awareness and understanding of divorce in the latter stages of life and its impact on older persons.

Knowing what the greatest difficulties are, such as loneliness, depression, and feelings of betrayal and failure, support systems should develop services to ease them. Knowing what the concerns are, especially relating to finances and children, legal and support systems should increase efforts to alleviate them. Knowing what the greatest fears are, such as being alone, support systems should make information available to help deal with them.

While older divorcees may rely on friends, family, and religious faith for support, they do not go to organizations in the community, government agencies, and national organizations representing older persons. This study is an effort to heighten awareness, advance the dialogue, and inspire more research. More importantly, we hope that communities and institutions will be better able to help meet the needs of people who divorce at midlife or older.