

From 'I do' to 'I don't'

Like Al and Tipper Gore, more elderly couples here are heading for a divorce



Lin Wenjian

The latest divorce figures from the Singapore Department of Statistics (DOS) make for uncomfortable reading: More married couples here are calling it quits after saying "I do".

Divorces rose from 3,336 cases in 2000 to 5,402 last year.

Not just younger generations are opting for splitsville, either. An increasing number of older couples are ending their unions more than 30 years after vowing "till death do us part".

There were 341 such cases last year, compared to just 157 a decade earlier.

These have come into the spotlight recently after the split of high-profile couple, former United States vice-president Al Gore and his wife of 40 years, Tipper.

The former high school sweethearts said they had grown apart and there was no third party involved.

LifeStyle spoke to several counsellors and experts about why even long-term marriages fail. The reasons given by them were varied.

Head of the family life education department at Fei Yue Community Services (Tiong Bahru), Ms Evelyn Khong, said for many of these couples, "the intimacy is long gone, passion has faded and the 'feel' for the spouse is no longer there".

Counsellors at her centre are seeing more elderly married couples seeking marital counselling, she said, though she declined to reveal numbers.

"The seniors who have attended our sessions are between 50 and 59 years old," she said. "Some of them have already split up and some are on the verge of a break-up."

Another reason for the break-up of long marriages is the "empty nest syndrome". This refers to a feeling of loneliness that parents may feel when their children grow up and leave the family home.

A marriage counsellor at Hope Worldwide Singapore, a charity organisation offering family counselling and education services, Ms Karen Louis, said: "When a couple's focus has always been on the kids, they would not have nurtured their marriage. So when the kids leave the house, the couple will have nothing in common to talk about."

Divorce lawyers report a similar trend.

Partner of law firm Chia Wong LLP, Ms Wong Kai Yun, like other people interviewed for this article, noted that cases of divorce involving couples married for more than 30 years are on the rise.

She has handled six such cases so far this year, and believes some of these divorces are fuelled by financial reasons, particularly when couples reach 55, the age when they can withdraw their retirement savings from the Central Provident Fund (CPF).

Ms Wong, who specialises in family law, said: "They are in a potential 'tension' age where they can withdraw money from their CPF. They are thinking that they are at the end of their lives and they just want their financial freedom."

Another lawyer, Mr Lim Chong Boon, director of PKWA Law Practice, is also getting more clients who seek advice on divorce issues but he noted that they are accompanied by their children.

"The reason more people are filing for divorce after being married for more than 20 or 30 years is that they have the support of their children, who are usually grown-ups," he said.

"The children see that their parents are unhappy in their marriage and so they support their decisions. The couples would not have done it without their children's blessing."

Both lawyers were unable to provide the exact number of cases their firms have handled.

One example of a child who supported his parents' divorce is Mr X.J. Lai, 30. He accompanied his parents to a law firm when they divorced two years ago, ending a marriage of 33 years.

While their relatives were shocked when they heard the news, Mr Lai, who is a civil servant, felt that it was a "good thing".

Mr Lai, who has an elder brother, 33, said: "From the time I was in primary school, my parents were already sleeping in separate rooms and they hardly talked to each other. At first, I didn't understand why they did so but when I was doing my national service, my mother told me it was because my father was unfaithful."

Although hurt by the revelation, he never confronted his father, now 64.

He said: "There is no point in doing that. Right now, I only want both of them to be happy."

His mother now lives with him while his father lives on his own.

Divorces involving such estranged couples were also not a bad thing for two siblings whom Mr Ang Thiam Hong, a marriage counsellor of Edora Counselling Services, has seen.

He said: "The brother and sister – both adults – whose parents have been fighting for years, were saying, 'What are they waiting for? They should have done that a long time ago.'"

But not all long-time marriages are in the doldrums. Many elderly couples here remain in hunky-dory relationships even after decades of being together.

Housewife Phua Ah Moy is one such happy wife.

She celebrated her 40th wedding anniversary in January this year by renewing her marriage vows with her husband, retired deliveryman Tan Hock Chai, 64, at a ceremony organised by the People's Association (PA).

The 61-year-old, who wore a kwa, or traditional Chinese wedding dress, at the event, told LifeStyle: "My husband and I did it because it was meaningful. We also wanted to set a good example for my children, as young people these days split up too easily."

The Tans' two sons and a daughter are aged between 30 and 39.

Director of family life and active ageing at PA, Ms Joan Pereira, said: "Getting parents and grandparents to say 'I do' again after they have been married for so long is a good way to promote good family life and to bring family members together for a happy occasion."

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Additional reporting by Huang Huifen



PHOTO: PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION

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MADAM PHUA AH MOY (above left), who renewed her wedding vows with her husband of 40 years, Mr Tan Hock Chai (centre), with guest of honour Mr Lim Boon Heng, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and deputy chairman of the People's Association