

Ep #4: Breaking Free: Challenging the 50-Year Marriage Myth



Full Episode Transcript

Welcome to the Stay or Go podcast, where we're changing the dialogue around divorce so that no woman ever stays in her marriage out of fear. Get ready to dispel myths, learn life-changing tools, and build a solid foundation in yourself from which to make your decision. And now your host, me, Britta Jo.

All right, y'all, I am so excited to talk about this topic. I think that's because, as some of you may not know, but we're early days in the podcast, so I'll just bring it up now, I was raised Mormon, and in that faith, there is a huge emphasis on marriage, especially, I feel like as a woman, because your whole role within that culture is to get married and to have kids and to be a wife and to be a mother, which are all roles that are defined through the act of marriage.

So I grew up very caught up in this idea and this goal of being married to someone for a very long time. And that's all I saw in the relationships around me. Very few people that I saw in my church were divorced and nobody that I knew in my immediate family other than my great-grandma who I think we all thought was crazy, so, you know, I was definitely a part of this idea that the goal was marriage for 50 years.

What's changed that for me has been my own experience, like in the trenches of marriage, and then the gift I have in getting to deeply explore and work with my clients on their marriages and see what it's like in their marriages as well. I mean, I get some of the most in-depth, vulnerable, raw views into their lives and from that I take away my own theories and my own, you know, pick up and see the patterns kind of flowing throughout all of it so I am very very excited about this idea, which is that I don't think that we should keep holding up the standard or the goal for everybody that when you get married a good marriage is one that lasts for 50 years.

And here's why. So I just want to start off by explaining why I don't think that should be the standard. Because when you go into a relationship with your focus being the length of time, you can really lose sight of the quality of the relationship. This is the whole, you know, quality over quantity.

And I want to caveat this whole episode by saying this isn't for everybody. Some people are absolutely OK with a marriage that is more about function, right? The role of the marriage is to raise kids and to make money together and they're not interested in the marriage being a source, in the partnership being a source of growth, a source of connection, a source of intimacy. So know that for yourself as you listen to this episode, where you're at on that, what do you actually want from the marriage for yourself?

And then the other piece I noticed that causes a problem when we go into a marriage expecting it to last for 50 years, and this comes out of, you know, when a lot of people make their vows, it's till death do us part; I'm making this commitment for the span of my life. As humans, that can put your brain into a little bit of, "okay, I can coast now mode," which a lot of you may relate to in your own marriages where we're no longer showing up in the ways we did back when we were dating, because now that person is locked in there. They cannot leave this relationship unless they actually go through legal means and a divorce to get out of it.

I think it can kind of in an unintended way, disincentivize your brain to keep investing because it's like, "this is a sure bet." And I want to offer that that might not have been as dangerous 50/60 years ago to just kind of coast with another person, but nowadays, I think you can end up living with someone who can have a radically different and almost even conflicting worldview from your own.

And that's because we live in a world where there is so much more information available to each of us as individuals.

I have my own theory that people are changing a lot more than they used to in the past. In the span of a lifetime, somebody can radically experience like a 180 of their viewpoint more regularly I think than it was for most people in the past.

I want to start by diving into that idea that in the past, people stayed relatively the same belief-wise over the span of their lives. Thinking about my parents' generation and my grandparents' generation, you were raised in a place where you stayed there, you ended up spending most of your adult life with people that you grew up around, you spent a lot of time around family. If you think about it, you're being exposed to a very small circle of opinions, ideas, and culture.

Now, in my parents' generation, we get a widening of that, right? We're seeing advances in travel. People are tending not to live as much where they were born and raised. You have cell phones now, so you can keep in touch with your family from longer distances.

But it was still limited to some extent. I mean, I remember when I was a kid having to use an encyclopedia to look up stuff. Like you had to go to a library, you had to go to books or TV to get knowledge. And it was not TV where you could just select whatever you wanted to watch. It was like, whatever's on the TV is what you're watching.

There wasn't as much exposure to all the different ways you could live life and all the different ideas. And you're, I think your family and your culture or your religion that you were, you know, born and raised with had a lot more sway.

So in my parents' generation, we saw some advances. But then my generation and even watching my younger siblings, it is so different. And that massively comes from the internet.

With the internet, we now have access to Google anything whenever we want. And it's right at our fingertips. Anybody can post a blog, or post a video on Tiktok or Instagram, so you're getting exposure to a much wider range of people and their lives and the way they view the world.

What I've seen is people who probably just 50 years ago in our parents' generation or in our grandparents generation, where they probably would have just stuck with what they had been taught by their parents, now they're seeing other ways of living that resonate more with them, and it causes them to start thinking outside of the box, to open to other possibilities.

And personally, I love this. I think it's amazing that people are now allowed to share what they think, how they feel, how they're living their life, and other people get to see that and through that discover more about themselves and realize that there are other ways of living that are possible.

Where in my grandparents and parents generation, those lifestyles, those views, those ideas, they would probably have only been exposed to them very, very rarely and by people who would have been seen, you know, more like on the fringe of society.

So it's opened up this beautiful array of seeing other people in lifestyles that many of us just 30/40 years ago wouldn't have been able to access or see as easily.

What I see that doing is it is speeding up the rate of evolution of an individual over the span of one lifetime. So, where my parents' generation, you know, when they got married, they had similar values, similar ideas, and over the span of those years in their marriage together, they

stayed pretty much the same. I am seeing that a lot of women especially who got married in their early 20s, end up kind of going through this awakening, where they can be radically different in their late 30s - have very different desires, very different wants very different worldviews and beliefs.

Why that's a big deal is because, when you marry someone, usually you're marrying because you have a lot of the same beliefs, ideals, you have a lot of things that are going to work well together. And if that changes over the next 10 to 20 years, well, then something's gotta give, right? Either the relationship has to evolve with that changing of the individuals, or we're left with a relationship that's really stymieing the individual growth.

I am just like the prime example of this. When I got married, at 19, I was very much indoctrinated and following a map that had been given me by my parents, by my culture, by my religion. It wasn't really something that I'd chosen for myself, I just, you know, I was a product of all of that programming that I'd been raised with.

And then in 2017, when I started therapy, I was still very much a devoutly Mormon housewife that was closely tied to my family of origin, and also, very confusingly, I was deeply unhappy.

And then within two years of doing therapy, I had learned so much about the relationship with my mom and really identified that there was a lot of unhealthy codependency and narcissism. I had ultimately decided religion was not for me, and that my idea of what love was, and how to show it did not mesh with my husband's at the time.

This was like, a massive 180-degree switch for me. And I know, I'll talk more about this in the future, because each one of those big shifts, took a lot of learning how to think for myself, learning how to trust which thoughts and beliefs felt good for me personally over what the collective in my life had been telling me for so long. So some of you may see this in your lives.

And what I see with my clients is, I'll see clients who got married with very traditional gender roles as the foundation of their marriage, right? Like he's going to work, you're going to take care of the kids, and then as they go through the marriage, eventually, they may not want to be kind of pigeon holed into that role so steeply. I know that was definitely part of it for me, as well.

I'll see clients who have, you know, their husbands have outdated ideas around sex, like, "You need to give it to me, even if you don't want to," or "Oh, men have higher sex drives, and I need it." So that's like a worldview that he holds, that I'll see my clients waking up to these other ideas of like, "No, I get to say no, and my body is my own. And just because I'm married to you does not mean I'm obligated to give you sex."

I've even seen and I love this in some of the really expansive people that I've gotten to meet through my mini sessions, partners who want less traditional monogamous relationships and feel like they want to explore more and have more freedom within the relationship, but the partner they married was when they were into a monogamous relationship, and that was what felt good for them.

And what you tend to see when the emphasis is placed so much on the marriage lasting and the length of the marriage, I see women who start burying their desires, start denying their growth and really, in a lot of ways, atrophy within the relationship to try and stay small enough to fit within the constraints of the marriage. Instead of realizing, okay, the marriage we picked at the beginning is maybe no longer fitting where I'm headed, so it's time to update the marriage. It's time to check back in with my partner. Where are we at on our life goals and on our worldviews? Are they still compatible?

And that's what I want to offer is that I want marriage to be viewed more as a conduit for growth for both individuals instead of just "Oh, marriage is good, and we should all stay in it for 50 years." Really checking back in with what is the quality of that marriage?

And I know some of you will be able to relate to what I mentioned earlier that sometimes we have partners who get into the marriage, and they tend to sit back and not invest anymore. Because it's like, "yeah, I'm married, it's all good." Where you may feel this desire for more connection, more intimacy, more growth, and your partner's like, "Nah, man, I'm good." Well, what do you do in that instance, right?

In the past, we've been taught, stay in the marriage make it work at all costs. And, as I will expound in other podcast episodes in the future, I really think this does a huge disservice to, especially ourselves, when you're the one in the marriage that is having to get smaller to stay in it, but our children as well, because we show them that the institution of marriage is what matters rather than the individuals that are within it, and how they're thriving or not. And for many women, this presents as a sense of settling, you know, "okay, well the marriage, like, it's not actually what I want, I'm not happy, but it's okay." Or "I'm really miserable, but this is what you do for your kids."

And I guess, I think, to some extent, I understand how in the past, women didn't really have that option to leave, you know, the institution of marriage was what you had to stay in, you didn't have an opportunity to go provide for your kids if you left, or in you know, in some instances, even be able to retain custody of them. But we have made so many advances in that area, that now women really can leave the marriage and still thrive.

Which takes me to where I've ultimately landed on what I for myself believe the goal should be for a marriage, and that is that both individuals are able to grow and thrive together and individually.

I want a partnership where we are both getting to heal and grow and there is deep connection and intimacy and love. And I know for myself that if that is not the case, then it's time to take a deep dive into what's not working. Checking in with my partner, like "what are your goals? What are you wanting?" And if it can't be changed, then move on.

Now, to do that, you have to know for yourself what you actually want out of a relationship. And a lot of you who get on mini-sessions with me, I see this theme that most of you are really wanting more intimacy. I call it like "Soul-Knowing" with your partner. You're wanting, not

only you know, I love the word intimacy rather than like sex because intimacy includes that deep emotional connection that then leads to sex being so enjoyable and fulfilling.

For a lot of you, you don't have that. And sex has just become either perfunctory, it's just something you do to get by, or it's not even happening at all in your marriage. And in the past, as women we've been sold this idea that our sex drives are less or we don't want it as much but that is just not the case. A lot of you are coming to me saying I want intimacy; I want that connection.

And I will tell you, when you are in a relationship where you do feel seen, you do feel known, and you are given all of the beautiful space to grow, that is just a natural part of it. And for some of you, that may not be possible in the relationship you're in right now, because of the dynamics, the amount of years that the dynamics have been the same.

I know, when I left my marriage, there was this deep realization of how we'd been doing these patterns for so many years, and the amount of time and work that it would take to change, it was just too much for me. And I knew I didn't want to spend my time that way. I wanted to spend it, investing in something new.

Now, critics of this idea that, if you are not happy in the marriage it is okay to leave and to seek a relationship where you can grow and have the things you want, will definitely point to statistics. And I'm just gonna say it right now. I am like very, not anti-statistics, but I'm pretty skeptical of them, because I feel like statistics are focused on the group, which is really helpful if you're a government or a large entity trying to help lots of people at once. But that is not my focus. As a coach, I care deeply about the individual. And I know that Statistics kind of blanket statement everybody.

So they would point to, you know, lowered satisfaction in second and third marriages, increased risks of divorce, and your remarriages. And my caveat to that, and what is the most important part, I would say, of this theory and this episode is, that can totally change when you do your work before leaving the marriage.

So hear me out. Relationships are mirrors. Boy, do they ever trigger our deeper childhood wounding and insecurities. But that is such a gift, because that shows you where your work is. Where the work is for you to heal, and to come into deep love with yourself. And when you do this work, you heal the brain patterns that ultimately got you the results in your first or current marriage, so that you don't repeat that in your future relationships.

So one of my goals with all of my clients, and something that's very important to me with women who get divorced, is cleaning out that brain, before you leave, so that you don't go back and end up putting in the exact same furniture.

I use this example of how your brain house has all of these things that you've picked up from your life, from your parents, from your religion, from your culture, and a lot of them are old and outdated and things that don't serve you. But if you don't clean them out, you're going to end up with a marriage very similar to the first one. Because that's what you took with you. Even if you leave the marriage, you're taking the brain with you.

And that's why I do have clients who come to me and they're in second marriages, and as we work together, all of a sudden, there's this moment where they're like, "whoa, even though I thought my second husband was different than my first, there's a lot of things that are really similar. How did this happen?"

For me, it took about two years in therapy to do the work enough to have found myself and built enough trust in myself to be ready to leave. And I ultimately left when I realized that the marriage was starting to hurt me more than provide opportunities for healing.

There was a very specific moment where it was like, "Okay, this is complete." It's like the scales tipped and we started to move into, "I am starting to hurt and not trust myself and lose my trust and my partner to an extent that I'm going to have long term recovery repercussions. It's time to go."

Now, it does not have to take that long, okay, I never I don't like dropping numbers in my podcast because I never want you to compare yourselves to my journey. So I'm just gonna make that caveat now, like, when I tell you a specific number from my journey, "oh, it took me two years in therapy before I left. " I don't want you to ever think "oh, well now I need to go spend two years in therapy before I leave." It's not like that. Everybody's journey is their own speed. And I see that with my clients.

I have some clients who, when we work together for three months, like a month and a half in they are ready, and we make the decision, and we start moving forward. I have other clients who work with me for those three months and continue working with me. And sometimes, you know, we'll continue working together for, I have a client who I've been working with for over a year, and then I'll have clients who, maybe we stopped working together, and they find other coaches or other venues, you know, other people that they end up working with, and then I hear back from them later on. And they've made the decision, you know, a year or two down the road.

But the most important thing is that I don't want anyone to spend 50 years with someone that they don't enjoy being with. And I mean, unless they want to. Which that's the crazy thing, there are people out there that want that, and they want that for their own specific reasons. But I have just, you know, I suspect that is not the people listening to my podcast.

So if you are someone that is like, I really just don't like the person I'm with. And you're planning on staying with them for 50 years, that is like a personal prison. And that's when you need to ask yourself, why? Why am I telling myself I have to stay with this person?

If you're doing it for the money, or the kids or fear of the judgment, that is all a gift when you answer that question, because when you answer that, that's when you find out where your path is. What your work is. It's when you get curious and you start exploring those parts of yourself. "Okay, why am I afraid, I can't make enough money to support myself without my spouse? What am I worried will happen to my kids?" When you do that, then you start opening to finding those solutions, finding different ways to get those needs met without having to get them met in a marriage where you're deeply unhappy.

So I want you to see what else you might be capable of. I want you to think about what you would want most in your relationship. And if you're not getting it here, realizing that 50 years of this, is that really, you know, at the end of those 50 years, is that really what you want to look back on? Would you feel proud of it or not? And not just assume like I think so many of us have done in our society that, "Oh, 50 years, that's awesome! Congratulations!"

Whenever I see people who have been married for 50 years, I'm always like, "But how good was it really?" and if it was great, fabulous, but if it wasn't, I kind of wish they'd had the opportunity to have someone say to them, "Hey, you don't have to stay and be miserable. There are lots of other ways to do this."

We have so many more options now. So many. That's another gift of the internet; so many options for mental health, for healing, for working with therapists, for working with coaches that can help you to learn your brain and to change those patterns.

So the takeaway from this episode is realizing that we are living in a drastically different world than the world of our parents and our grandparents. The Internet has changed things, technology has changed things. And many of us still have ideas about marriage that I think are outdated and can be very harmful when we prioritize an institution over the individuals within it.

So if you happen to be one of those people who is in your marriage and is like, "I'm not sure how happy I am, I don't feel like I'm growing. My partner and I do not seem to have the same worldviews." Know that I hear you and I see you and I want you to get curious. I want you to start leaning in asking yourself, "What do I really want? What if there could be something different?"

Alright, y'all, that's all from me this week. Remember to like and subscribe to the podcast and share it with your friends who might be interested. I'll see you all soon.