

# *(yes you)* should know about marriage

**K**ate Figes has made a career out of being a nosy parker. For her latest book, *Couples: The Truth*, she spent three years asking 120 people questions about love, sex, about who does the washing-up and who pays the bond, children, infidelity, living happily, and unhappily ever after. Awkward questions, asked in the twinkliest way imaginable, are her speciality. Her research into the state of the modern relationship, not only marriage but also committed cohabitation, makes for riveting conversation.

'What I was most surprised by when researching the book was, given today's notion that marriage is miserable, mundane, how many people do make it work,' she tells me. 'We are all doing much better than we give ourselves credit for. When you talk to people and listen to their stories, most people want to make relationships work.'

Why, then, is there so much negativity, fear even, around the topic of modern marriage? 'We like to look at the disasters more than at happiness.

Also, you only tend to hear about other people's relationships once they have broken down. Very few people want to talk about what is going on inside their marriage. Which means you have no way of judging whether what you are going through in your own marriage is normal, or abnormal, and what you should do about it. And so then all you ever see are the disasters. And you think, aahhh, divorce is some kind of car crash that is going to happen to you, but you have no real idea how to stop yourself from getting there.'

It seems paradoxical that the more fearful we become about marriage, and its failure, the more expensive our weddings become. Yet Figes believes the two are connected. 'We

need to put marriage onto a pedestal, to show that we value it, because we want to believe that love can last a lifetime. And many of us feel that if we spend enough on our wedding, maybe we can beat the odds on divorce. We also love the traditions of the wedding day – even though many of them are not age-old but 20th century. And we believe that,

by buying into these "old" traditions, we are getting married in the right way and increasing the odds on marriage lasting "like it used to".'

Figes, who has been happily married to Christoph, a teacher, for more than 20 years, and with whom she has two daughters, identifies the current period as one of almost elemental renegotiation between men and women, particularly in the sphere of cohabitation and parenting. She writes that 'couples

are arguing their way towards a more democratic fairness, compromised by the assumptions they have grown up with about how men and women should be as "husbands" and "wives".' Yet, there remains 'this idea that love will just see you through,

that you meet this person and that it is all going to be all right. There is very little discussion. I was surprised by the number of people who don't talk about basic things like whether or not you want children, or where you want to live. There is this notion with relationships that somehow you trust an external force – love, or the institution of

*You only tend to hear about other people's relationships once they have broken down.*

# What everyone (yes you) should know about marriage

marriage, or romance – to keep you together, when it is the two of you that have to do it. All I wanted to do with the book was to say to people, “Take responsibility for your relationship.”

But can relationships skills really be learnt? ‘If you take a heart disease metaphor, we know you shouldn’t eat too many saturated fats and that you should exercise to keep healthy, I think you could say there are similar things in relationships.’

And what are those things? ‘A sense of individual self and respect for the other person’s sense of self. That is the number one thing, because from there everything else flourishes. The courtesies of daily life – good manners, tolerance, forgiveness, a sense of humour. Then there is the ability to talk when you are unhappy about something before it becomes too entrenched a resentment. To accept imperfections, to be realistic as to what a relationship can offer – not expecting it to make you secure, rich, happy. It can’t do all those things – those things have to come from yourself. And finally, when you have difficult times, to learn from them.’

Figes has robust views on ‘learning from’ infidelity in particular. ‘Couples betray each other in all sorts of ways. Why is it that a sexual thing is more of a betrayal than lying about the fact that you haven’t been paying the bond? Infidelity is going to be the subject of my next book. Most people have affairs for complex relationship or personal reasons. It is not just necessarily that they are not getting enough sex in their marriage. If you address that, then you have a chance to rebuild your relationship on a better footing. I think that from the research – the stuff I am

looking at now for the new book – most people who do forgive affairs move on to something better as a result.’

Has she experienced infidelity herself? ‘No. I have been married for 21 years and, no, I have never wanted to and, as far as I know, neither has my husband. But both of us had lots of sex before we got married; we had lots of other partners.’ Her own marital challenges have been her struggles with undiagnosed postnatal depression – which prompted her to write *Life After Birth* – and a period when her husband Christoph was out of work for 18 months, ‘a hugely challenging period for us both’.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle was to get married in the first place. Her mother, Eva Figes, the author of the feminist tract *Patriarchal Attitude*, divorced her father when Kate was five and never remarried. ‘My parents made all the mistakes that couples made at that time, when divorce was rare. You don’t want to enact the same things on your children as were enacted on you.’

She spent much of early adulthood in a series of destructive relationships and, while she says she consciously chose Christoph ‘because he was completely unlike the people I’d had relationships with before... someone I could be content with’, she only agreed to marriage at his insistence, and ‘spent the first 10 years wondering when he was going to leave me’.

She moves on to one of her favourite themes, the importance of difference, of space, in a relationship. ‘There is the idea in this confessional culture that you have to be everything to each other, so therefore we are very confused about where the borderline lies between being totally honest, and holding back. In fact, it is important to preserve your own separate sense of space. Your partner has no right to know everything in your head. The most successful relationships consist of two autonomous grown-ups who are able to be together, respect each other’s autonomy, and be apart,

and trust when they are apart that the foundations are still solid. It is a very unromantic notion in a way that you should be these two separate beings, but that is how it is more flexible.’

Figes says that the strongest marital structure is that of a triangle. ‘We may be each other’s most important person, but that does not mean we do not need anyone else.’ That said, she tells me that she was struck, during her research interviews, ‘by how many different ways there are of being a couple’. She is particularly optimistic about the rise of the so-called ‘peer marriage’, in which the importance attached to work is similar, domestic responsibilities are fairly evenly split – though at 60–40 the woman is still doing the lion’s share – and both partners have equal influence over key decisions. ‘Research

shows that when couples feel more equal, they are happier. They are more invested in each other’s emotional contentment. What’s more, the whole stability of a relationship often depends on how much a man is willing to accept his partner’s influence.’

So the sensible husband will let his wife get her own way? ‘If a man wants to stay with his partner it is in his best interests to listen to what she wants, and change.’

Figes observes that most divorces are triggered by ‘disappointment rather than irretrievable breakdown’. She quotes statistics that suggest it takes couples six years to go to counselling for a particular problem, by which time it is usually too late. Figes advises, ‘At the first hint of trouble, such as that you are arguing badly, just go to someone who interprets what you are both saying, so you really understand each other.’

Do people give up too readily on marriage? ‘There are people who do divorce too easily. It is a bit like moving house – you don’t realise what you have lost until you have moved. Shared history and a shared understanding can matter hugely. But then the other side of the coin is that there are people who don’t divorce who should. So there is

*Most people who do forgive affairs move on to something better as a result.*



[na  
Nov  
yea  
our  
Par  
coll  
Rath  
Pant  
iden  
to pi  
in h  
bota  
inno  
key  
rang  
Pan  
coll  
shar  
rest  
Fusi  
smo  
hair s

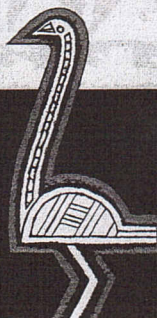
slightly  
**Loves to  
travel light.**



OBiKWA is now available in a 25% lighter, eco-friendly bottle. So every time you open a bottle, you'll be producing less waste and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Which means you can help save our planet one OBiKWA at a time.

**OBiKWA**

GO ON. STICK YOUR NECK OUT.



**Not for Sale to Persons Under the Age of 18.**

## What everyone (yes you) should know about marriage

that question of how unhappy do you have to be. Only you can work it out, but at least try and go into it with your eyes open.'

Of course we, as a society, are much exercised by our seesawing rates of marriage and divorce, and what they may say about us. Yet fascinatingly, Figes points out that prior to 1850 it was only the wealthy, prompted by dynastic and inheritance concerns, who chose to marry. 'Up until the end of the 19th century many more people cohabited in common-law unions than married, just as they are beginning to do today.' What is more, the average length of the modern marriage – about 13 years – is the same as throughout much of history. According to the historian Lawrence Stone, it was only between 1920 and 1950 – 'when death rates of young adults had dropped precipitously and divorce had not yet taken on a major role' – that the average marriage lasted much longer.

So our collective sense of failure in marriage and personal relationships is based on a historical misapprehension? 'Yes. This has been instilled in us by the 1950s – it is amazing how powerful that decade and its values are. That ethos that we think has been with us forever – men as the breadwinner, women at home – it wasn't like that in the past. Yet we think that is the norm, and that we are all betraying old values.'

The fact is, says Figes, that whatever happens to rates of marriage and divorce, our commitment as human beings to commitment itself remains undiminished. 'These relationships matter to us as much as they ever did, in terms of support, care, community, love. Where we haven't quite yet made the leap is to taking responsibility ourselves for everything, even divorce. People behave so badly: they'll give all their money to solicitors rather than sort it out amicably. We have got to be much more grown-up: there is no reason why you can't separate sensibly when it has come to an end, however hurt you may be.'

Endearingly, for Figes herself, endings are the last thing on her mind. 'The thing which for me is incredibly life-affirming, and which I was reminded of through talking to people for the book, is how you have the chance to grow up again. Even if you had bad childhood experiences, as I did, if you go into your relationship with your eyes open you can be reborn, through the stability and nourishment and love that you get.' Or as she puts it with moving absolutism in *Couples*: 'I can say with complete confidence that an intimate, committed relationship holds the power to heal old hurts.' ♣