Reflections on ageing
The role of relationships in later life

Edited by Chris Sherwood and Jessica Faulkner
In the autumn of 2013, Relate, the UK’s leading relationship support organisation, celebrated its 75th anniversary. As the charity grows older and we reflect on 75 years of experience, the anniversary led us to thinking about our own ageing society, and how relationships fare as we grow older.

This prompted us to launch a campaign to raise awareness of the importance of relationships in later life. Our aims were to encourage debate in society, within the voluntary sector and in government, so that we would all become more aware of the issues we face as we grow older, and the role that relationships can play in that process.

Our society is rapidly ageing. By 2025, half of the UK adult population will be over 50. This represents a seismic shift in the demographics of our society and will impact on every sphere of our lives. As we mentioned in our report *Who will love me when I’m 64?*, this doesn’t necessarily have to be the doom-laden future so often painted by the media. As a society, we have tended to focus on the challenges of an ageing population – the health care issues and the cost to the public purse. But at Relate, we see a different future – one where the positive aspects of later life are celebrated and capitalised on.

For this different future to be realised, we need to put relationships at the heart of society. We believe that strong relationships are the key to a happy and productive later life, and that they represent a significant and untapped asset in terms of preparing our society as a whole for ageing. Healthy relationships make people happier, stronger and more resilient as they grow older. They can reduce the negative impact of ill health and contribute towards care, productivity and community life. This is the reality that we want to see for our future.

We welcome thoughts, comments and wider debate on this collection of essays and the issues they raise. I’d also like to thank the contributors to this collection, who have offered not only their time and expertise, but often their own personal experience to help us to paint a picture of relationships in later life.
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Introduction

Chris Sherwood and Jessica Faulkner, Relate

We are living through a huge demographic shift in the UK. There are now more pensioners than there are children under 16, and by 2025 half of the UK adult population will be over 50. This demographic shift will transform every aspect of society from family life to employment, leisure activity to social care. Nesta estimates that public spending on our ageing society could exceed £300 billion by 2025, as a result of the costs of social care, long-term health conditions, pensions and benefits.

Too often the terms of debate about our ageing society are skewed towards the negative aspects - the so called ‘demographic timebomb’. Despite the obvious challenges that it will pose, an ageing society is something that we should celebrate: people are living longer, are able to enjoy themselves and can contribute to society in ways we could not imagine as recently as half a century ago.

Relationships are central to a good later life but are often missing from the debates around ageing. In a survey that Relate ran with Ipsos MORI, 83% of people over 50 agreed that strong personal relationships with family and friends was the most important factor for a happy retirement. Relationships play a significant role in our wellbeing as we get older - providing social interaction, intimacy and support. A wealth of evidence shows that they promote happiness, protect physical and mental health and increase longevity. Our relationships with partners, family and friends will play an increasingly important role as we age - providing practical help, companionship and support. The ability to form new and sustain relationships is critical in ensuring that we stay connected and continue to contribute to society as we age. Yet, it is concerning that the survey also showed that one in five people aged over 50 lack the confidence to form new friendships and relationships, which could lead to a lonely or isolated later life.

In our 75th year, Relate has launched a campaign to ensure that relationships are seen as a critical element of later life. We initially focused on the relationships of the baby boomer generation – the cohort of people born between the mid 1940s and the mid 1960s, who are now moving into or considering retirement. This is a generation that redefined relationships, with higher divorce rates and more fluid family structures. Although undeniably a heterogeneous group, baby boomers are more likely to be healthier and wealthier than their parents. And just as they pushed the boundaries in their youth, their inventiveness means that they will be likely to continue to redefine relationships as they age.
Older people’s experiences and expectations are as diverse as any other age group - perhaps even more so, depending on who you consider to be an older person. As editors of this collection of essays, our parents and grandparents fit into this group, yet their circumstances, outlooks and experiences could hardly be more different. They are certainly not all looking for the same things from their relationships.

One of the reasons for commissioning these essays was to begin to show the breadth of experience and diversity within this group that we call older. Only by uncovering these personal accounts can people really start to appreciate what the challenges and opportunities that come with growing older are. These essays come from a diverse range of contributors who offer their perspectives on relationships in later life.

What is apparent from this collection of essays is the common need for good quality relationships. This is true at all life stages but is often overlooked as people get older. We lose a partner in our 20s, it’s a tragedy. When the same thing happens in our 80s, we tend to see it as less traumatic. As Katharine Whitehorn’s essay poignantly points out, this is not the case. And why would it be?

The flip side of this is beautifully expressed in Anjula Mutanda’s essay, where she argues that passion, desire, sexuality and the need for closeness is not something which diminishes with age. The doork should not be closed on couple relationships when people reach a certain age - it’s down to the rest of us to challenge our own expectations of how older people should behave.

Stereotypes that we so often fall back on have implications on all aspects of life and are reflected in this collection of essays. Lou Scott-Joynt brings these issues to the fore as she considers how our ideas of ageing shape our expectations of our own futures and those of our loved ones. Whilst Keren Smedley describes three older people’s differing experiences of wanting (or needing) to continue working including a 60 year old man with young children and a woman in her sixties who had been written off by her colleagues. John Field challenges the perception of adult learning as only about career development and reminds us of the benefits of continued learning to develop new relationships and interests in later life.

Dr Dylan Kneale and Patrick Sholl consider the additional pressures on LGBT relationships, especially for those individuals who have grown up against a backdrop of rapidly changing attitudes towards same sex relationships over the past forty years. Whilst Geraldine Bedell describes how technology is enabling older people to improve and explore existing relationships, find new ways to communicate with friends, family and lovers and make new connections.

Exploring what the key ingredients are to sustain a relationship through the life course is another theme that comes through these essays. Charles Handy in his essay ‘The Changing Contract’ describes how his marriage with Elizabeth has lasted the course because of the changing implicit contract in their relationship. He says, half seriously, that when others are talking of their second or third marriages, that he too is on his third marriage but in his case this has been to the same woman, which has made all the difference. Finally, Angela Neustatter describes how ‘home’ has been an important factor in her relationship with her partner.

Relationships of all types are crucial to our enjoyment of later life. But if we are to make a real difference to our futures, we need to challenge how we see those relationships too. In these moving and articulate essays, we show the full colour, passion and intensity of couple, family and social relationships in later life. We hope that you find these to be as enjoyable to read as we did.

Chris Sherwood is Director of Policy and External Affairs at Relate and Jessica Faulkner is the charity’s Senior Communications Officer.
It was a day laden with romance, of anxiety mixed with joy. It was our wedding day. We had made promises to each other, raised glasses, cut a cake and waved goodbye to assembled guests. We were on our way.

To what? We had never sat down and talked about it, about what it would be like, who would do what and what would be the priorities. We were good together. We would go on being good together. No need to spoil it all with plans and job descriptions as if it was a business. Being fifty years ago, it was just assumed that my career would have priority, would determine where we would live and how we would live. She, Elizabeth, would have the main responsibility for the home, and for the children when and if they came. Whatever interests and talents she would develop, and there were to be many, would have to be fitted into her domestic priorities and my life. I assumed that she thought so too. I don’t remember asking her.

Looking back, it was incredibly selfish of me, particularly as my career took me into evermore absorbing areas, from business to academia to the Church. What added to the problem was that each job came with less, not more, remuneration than the last. That left Elizabeth to fill the growing financial gap, which she always and valiantly did, running her own interior design business and later leasing and letting out a succession of small apartments, all whilst still managing the home front.

As one result, I never gave her any money to buy food or household necessities. She took care of all those out of her earnings, leaving me to look after the regular outgoings, the mortgage, the utilities, the repairs and, of course, the booze. That was unusual. My father had given my mother a regular monthly allowance, which she was expected to account for. I remember her agonising over her accounts, trying to remember what she had spent on what. A frequent item seemed to be SPG which I took to stand for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, a missionary charity dear to my parents’ hearts, until my mother confessed one day that it stood for Something Probably Grub!

In that respect we had moved on, or society had. I was not the boss in the home, even if I was still the main anchor of our lives outside it. Yet, once again, we never formally negotiated these arrangements. They just emerged as circumstances dictated. I am ashamed, now, at how little I contributed to the domestic scene.

Charles Handy

Charles Handy is a leading business thinker, social philosopher, writer and broadcaster. He has had a varied and prestigious career, starting out as an oil executive and later becoming a professor and then the known and loved voice of Radio 4’s ‘Thought for the Day’. Charles has been married to his wife Elizabeth who was a counsellor with Relate and is now a distinguished portrait photographer. They have been married for 51 years and have 2 children and 4 grandchildren.

Photo: © Elizabeth Handy

The changing contract

Charles Handy

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leaving early in the morning in our only car, returning late in the evening after
the children had gone to bed, letting my wife take the children to school on her
bicycle, to do all the shopping and housework and still find time for her work.
But we were both the children of our time and that was the widely understood
pattern of marriage among our friends and colleagues.

Why did we not discuss it more formally, I wonder? We had made that set of
vows and promises to each other in front of a bunch of our friends and relatives,
contracts to love and care for each other, but the detailed specifics of what and
how had never been spelt out. The necessary appendix to the formal contract
had been omitted. Like almost everyone else, we made it up as we went along.
As we did so, we began to realise that we each had different notions of what that
appendix should contain. Because we had never spelt these out, unspoken
resentments smouldered and occasionally flared up.

The truth is that every relationship is based
around an implicit contract, a balance of
expectations. Unless these are spelt out
misunderstandings are inevitable. Moreover
the contracts need to be fair to each party. Many
years earlier, in the course of my business career,
I had to negotiate a contract with a Chinese agent
in Malaysia. We agreed the terms, shook hands
and shared the traditional glass of brandy. I then
took out the official company contract form for
him to sign. He was indignant. ‘What is that for?’
He said angrily. ‘Don’t you trust me? The contract
will only work if both of us get what we want out
if it. A signature should be unnecessary. In fact, it
makes me suspect that you think you have got a
better deal than me and want to lock me in to it.’

I persuaded him that it was only a company formality, but I took his point. I have
never forgotten it. If both parties don’t feel the deal is fair it won’t stick, in business
or in relationships.

We would have avoided much unhappiness had I remembered my Chinese
contract experience, if I had made a series of deals as we went through life,
deals that gave both of us enough of what we wanted to ensure that the
contract worked. That original Chinese contract was also time limited. It had
to be renegotiated in due course. So it is with those implicit marriage contracts.
Circumstances change. Jobs change. Kids grow up. People die or fall ill.

So it was for us. When I was fifty I ran out of jobs. There were none that I wanted
that might want me. Too early and too poor to retire I became a self-employed
writer and lecturer. The freedom was exciting but the income precarious and I
found it embarrassing to ask for it. My wife came to the rescue. She became my
agent and business manager and was very good at it. So good, in fact, that I got
both busier and richer. Until the day when she in effect gave in her notice. Her
life, she said, had become submerged in mine. She had recently graduated with a
degree in photography after five years of part time study, and now wanted to fulfil
her dream of becoming a professional portrait photographer. My life was now in
her way, even if it had taken her most of the first fifty years of her life to get there.
Largely my fault of course.

This time we did sit down to a proper contract negotiation. We agreed to split
the year in two. For the six summer months her work would have priority in our
diary, with my providing some background support. I would concentrate on
research and writing and take on no outside commitments. The winter months
would be free for my speaking engagements, with her help in organising them.
Furthermore we decided to split the cooking and catering, with each doing half,
she in our London apartment, I in the country cottage. We were fortunate in that
we were both independent workers, the children had left home and we were free
to organise our lives as we saw fit.

Not everyone has that degree of freedom, but most couples do need to rearrange
their relationship in mid-life as their circumstances change, when children go
or work dries up or changes. Too often one party makes a unilateral decision
to change the contract without discussion, even, in some situations to look for
another partner altogether, often someone with whom they have worked. We
were lucky. We were able to help each other and to share our work and that
brought us together in a new relationship.

That contract lasted for over twenty years. They were fruitful and enjoyable
times. Then circumstances changed again. I was approaching 75, a time when I
was required by law to convert my savings into an annuity. That meant that I did
not need to earn as much as in the past. I had a pension of sorts. At the same time
our children belatedly began to produce grandchildren. I had not realised how
our children would later produce grandchildren. I had not realised how
rewarding, but also how time-consuming, these little people can be. Clearly, life
had to change once more. This time it was going to be more like what people think
of as retirement, in that paid work no longer dominated our two lives, but retiring
was not how it felt. We were busier than ever, but differently. A new contract was
needed.

First there was our work to consider. Since we no longer needed so much
money-making work we could afford to do more voluntary work in addition to a
continuing rota of lectures and exhibitions. We began to combine our skills and
interests on a number of joint pro bone projects, making photo documentaries
for voluntary organisations. No longer did we split the year in two because we

Charles Handy
now worked together. Then there were the grandchildren. We needed to make
time for them, partly to give their parents time off. That was good work, but it was
assuredly work and work we did together. Living now on a fixed and probably
declining income we also needed to simplify our way of life, downsizing and
discard instead of accumulating. So much that we had once done now
seemed unnecessary, even pointless. Life moves on and leaves a lot behind.

It was important, therefore, that we took time to reflect on how best to use the
remaining years in our life, now that ambition was pointless and achievement
meant something different than worldly success. People turn philosophers as
they age, wondering what the purpose of it all is, whether it was all wasted effort,
what is still left to do. Energy may be declining but you hope that wisdom, or
rueful experience, has increased. These last years are precious years and we
needed to make the most of them. The new contract needed careful thought.

I have long seen the shamrock, the three-leaved
Irish plant, as an important symbol, three leaves
combining to make a whole. I have used it in a
variety of contexts but now I wanted to use it to
describe how it might define our purposes at this
stage in our lives. The three leaves would be Body,
Mind and Spirit. Together they would make for
a fulfilling life, the whole shamrock, with Money
providing the stalk, the essential support that we
would be stupid to ignore. There had to be enough
money but money was always going to be the
means and never the end, never the point.

The Body is crucial. When the body crumbles
everything stops or changes. We resolved to eat
less and exercise more. Easier to say than to keep
to, but we try. To have regular check-ups was another resolution. Troubles spotted
early are more easily dealt with. Body and Mind interact. An active Mind both
needs and makes a healthy Body. There is much research that shows how work
keeps one fit. A recent study by the Institute of Economic Affairs found that those
who described themselves as fully retired, doing no active work, were 40% less
likely to describe themselves as having very good health compared with those
still working. More worrying, the chance of a diagnosed medical condition rose by
60% if you were not working, and depression by 40%. Work exercises the Mind.

Work also provides us with a social network, or rather several of them. That
is important to the Spirit. The Chinese have a saying that happiness is having
something to work on, someone to love and something to hope for. These three
ingredients are, to us, what makes life worth living. It gives us a purpose, a purpose
which for us is increasingly focussed on the next generation and our hopes for
them and their descendants, both in our family and wider. Life without others
seems meaningless, so we have resolved to give as much time as we can to seeing
old friends and family. Loneliness is the new poverty of the developed world. We
are determined that we shall not suffer from it but we have to invest in others if we
are going to matter to them.

Of course, we are the fortunate members of a fortunate generation. Many will
envy the apparent ease of our lives, although it did not seem easy at the time. Not
everyone will have the freedom to make the choices we did. But whatever our
circumstances we all have choices. If we are lucky enough to be in a relationship
those choices have to take account of the other person. And they need constant
revision as our lives change. Otherwise they won’t work. We learnt that the long
way, often the hard way. But it was worth it. I sometimes say, half seriously, when
others are talking of their second or third marriages, that I, too, am on my third
marriage. But, in my case, they have all been to the same woman, and that has
made all the difference.
Starting fresh: the challenges of forming new relationships in later life

Anjula Mutanda

Regardless of age, we all need meaningful connections to others throughout our lives in order to nourish our emotional, physical and psychological well-being. Within our present culture, however, desire, intimacy, or falling in love is deemed to be somehow inappropriate for older people. The message from society and the media is that this is the domain for the young. There is consistent messaging in advertising material for example about anti-ageing creams – to combat any signs of age and experience. Images of older people being vital and sexual beings are few and far between. The importance of good relationships in later life has become low priority in our culture.

I think two powerful things take place which cause this. Primarily there is a subtle changing of attitudes towards the ageing person by society as a whole – which pays less attention to the older person, validates them less and even subtly airbrushes them out of vision. We tend to put older people ‘in a box’ and tell them how they should behave and what they should think. This has a deep impact on the psychological and emotional self of older people. The societal message then becomes internalised, and perhaps also the belief that to be more invisible, and less acknowledged, is the norm as we age. We may all unwittingly reinforce this belief amongst ourselves.

Whether it is subtle or in your face – perceptions of older people remains stubbornly stuck in the image of tired or worn out people waiting for death, or grumpy old men and women. When we’re being more positive, we allow the stereotype of the benevolent grandparent to make an appearance – all talcum powder and sweetie tins, but we fail to see older people in the same light that we see the young – independent, sexual, capable.

Our society’s obsession with youth worship creates, maintains and reinforces the belief about what we should accept as we get older. This is bound to have a psychologically negative outcome, and this will only increase as our society ages.

Anjula Mutanda

Anjula is a consultant social scientist, psychology and mental health expert, TV presenter, author, psychotherapist and life and careers coach. She is also author of How to do Relationships, published by Relate and Vermilion.

Anjula is trained in managing critical incident and post-trauma cases. She works with a broad range of client groups, from individuals with self esteem, confidence, and body image issues, to couples counselling. Anjula’s work as a television presenter includes fronting Body Language Secrets for Sky 1 and she was a regular contributor to ITV’s This Morning for five years.
The changing make-up of our society should serve as a wake-up call about the needs of an older population. By 2025, according to research, half of the UK adult population will be over 50. And think about this – the average person retiring aged 65 can now expect to live for a further 22 years.

The identity of an older person is also changing significantly from previous generations. There are more choices, more opportunities, and those entering their late 50s are reflecting just how much getting older has shifted – socially, emotionally and psychologically. The reality might well be shifting, but society’s views are largely lagging behind.

Watching a recent episode of The Apprentice, I stared at my TV open mouthed, at the breathtaking stereotyping of older people being perpetuated. One of the teams struggled to design a dating website for the over 50s. A comedy of errors and assumptions ensued about what old’ people would be looking for in a new romance, further worsened when the team of under 35s confessed that they didn’t really know what the over 50s were like. It’s interesting that for many younger people, anyone over 50 is essentially categorised as ‘old’. The floral wallpaper they selected as background for their website might not be the sort of thing Helen Mirren or Colin Firth would go for, but we very rarely give airtime to these different images of ageing. I’m hoping their views were in the minority, but I doubt it!

But things are clearly shifting. The divorce statistics are increasing amongst the over 60s, which suggests to me that people are feeling more able to end unhappy marriages, and perhaps make way for something new. Research from King’s College and St Thomas’ Hospital has also found that rates of sexually transmitted diseases have doubled for people in their 50s, 60s and 70s in the past ten years.

We shouldn’t be too surprised about this. Public health campaigns about sexually transmitted diseases are focused on the young, as they are perceived to be more at risk, because they have more sexual partners and are less inclined to practice safe sex. The statistics however state something quite different. Older people are having more sexual partners, and they too may also be under the illusion that they are immune from getting sexually transmitted diseases. Sex education has moved on significantly since most older people were at school, but very little effort has been made to spread the word. Is this because we didn’t realise that older people might be sexually active, or because we preferred not to think about it?

In a recent discussion programme for BBC Worldwide, where I was exploring the use of condoms across the globe, one of the most alarming revelations came from a group of British women in their late 40s and early 50s, who admitted that they were either too embarrassed to ask a new sexual partner to wear a condom, or were of the belief that after a certain age, they didn’t need to worry about sexually transmitted infections anymore! Where is the safe sex awareness information for older adults, and are doctors advising their patients on safe sex practice in older age? Or are they also of the belief that this isn’t relevant after a certain age?

On a societal level, we are failing our older selves. We may prefer to be in a state of denial, whilst continuing to repeat stereotypes of ageing that we are comfortable with. Until of course, we are faced with the reality of getting older ourselves.

There is a growing concern from mental health experts about the increasing experience of loneliness in older people. This is reflected in a recent Age UK survey, which found that one third of older people report feeling lonely some or most of the time. It’s not rocket science that loneliness and lack of meaningful connections to others can impact on a person’s emotional and general health. We know this to be true for all other age groups, but somehow we find it more acceptable that older people might well be lonely.

So what about on a more personal level – what happens if you are faced with voluntary or involuntary aloneness? Maybe you go through a divorce, or your partner dies – circumstances which in themselves can be very stressful and introduce terrible feelings of loneliness and depression. Once you have coped with your loss, is the expectation that you will now remain solo, relying on the generosity of family members to remember to visit you? If we challenge ourselves personally on this, is this a future we would be willing to accept?

I think that perhaps there is a collective belief, that at a certain stage in life, it is acceptable to embrace being on your own, tucked away with a rug over your knees, staring into the middle distance. But is it ok to continue a life deprived of another meaningful relationship, or the opportunity to experience someone new and have sexual feelings again?

Once an individual has dealt with their own doubts about moving on and starting a new relationship, they often find that there are many other barriers to their starting anew. Dating and relationships over a certain age are in general an ignored sector. You only have to turn the TV on and watch reality dating shows to have this point hammered home. The screens are filled with nubile young women or buff young men, on the hunt for someone to call their own. Dating tips on how to flirt, what to wear, and how to exude sensuality are aimed firmly at the young.

We may prefer to be in a state of denial, whilst continuing to repeat stereotypes of ageing that we are comfortable with.
It is hard enough to start again, but feeling as though this is not the done thing, would leave anyone feeling reluctant to take that step. You may be left wondering how exactly you fit in, when the culture around you is telling you that you don’t belong to certain groups anymore and nor should you!

Meryl Streep in the rom-com It’s Complicated, portrayed an older woman going through divorce and experiencing the world as a single woman again. It wasn’t a bad depiction, except she had all the odds stacked in her favour. A loving family, a fabulous career, cash rich, access to therapy whenever she needed it, lots of accepting and supportive friends and being pursued relentlessly by her ex and another suitor! This attractive picture of love later in life is all very well, but it completely and magically bypasses a lot of the realities faced by real people.

I prefer the more deeply moving portrayal of the challenges of getting older in the film, A song for Marion, which not only more honestly reflected the challenges of adjusting to a new life after the loss of a life long partner, but also how the baggage from the past impacts the present, and in turn could block future relationships.

You may even feel frowned upon by your peer group, who feel that it’s not the done thing to entertain thoughts of a new relationship in later life.

The emotional baggage from a previous relationship, or unsupportive family or friends, depression after loss, or a lack of confidence to go out and embrace new experiences, are real issues faced by older people everyday.

The unexpectedness or unpreparedness for being alone and older, without future plans, could also spell crisis for many.

What if you are that person who met the love of your life when you were 20, and had a happy relationship for decades, or found that you and your partner rubbed along nicely being each other's life-long companion? Suffering the loss of this emotional safety net would shock you out of your comfort zone. After all, roles would have been established over time, familiar patterns internalised, habits (good and bad) accepted, and plenty of memories shared. Fear may lie at the heart of even considering a new relationship. You may understand better than anybody else that companionship, connectedness and intimacy is good for you, but the thought of having to go out into the world again may fill you with dread.

Or you may feel excited by the possibility of starting again, but worry deeply about what your friends and family may think of you. You may even feel frowned upon by your peer group, who feel that it’s not the done thing to entertain thoughts of a new relationship in later life.

For those with children, moving on to a new relationship can be especially difficult.

It is not uncommon to find that your grown-up children suddenly, and without warning, revert to a younger age, when having to confront the possibility of their parent(s) dating again. They may put up resistance either overtly or covertly - make negative remarks, or behave unsupportively, because they find it difficult to deal with their parent having individual needs. Your kids may have freeze-framed you in the role of parent/grandparent/carer/money lender – but not even entertained the thought of you as a sexual being, amorous, desirable. Why would they? They’ve had all their lives to perhaps cast you in a role that naturally suits them and a challenge to this can be deeply painful to handle.

Your kids may be genuinely happy about you dating again, but feel the need to protect you - and thereby issue warnings about dating the wrong type of person. These warnings often mask their own anxieties. This uncomfortable role reversal may prevent you from stepping out of your comfort zone.

Your family may accuse you of betraying the memory of their other parent. This type of emotional burden could prevent you from moving on. I remember a woman telling me how badly her children reacted, when she moved a few photos of their dad from the living room into the spare bedroom. For her, it had been a cathartic act – a reflection that she was beginning to accept that he’d passed a way a few years before. But for her children, it was an undeniable act of betrayal to their father’s memory.

You may scupper yourself by looking in the mirror and considering how your body has changed, and how much easier it was with a partner who knew you “warts and all”. The thought of being intimate may leave you feeling less confident about your body image and unwilling to share that vulnerability with someone new.

In the media, there’s always much discussion on how to improve body image and confidence, which is great. But guess what – the vast majority of this body talk is aimed at the young. And when it comes to older people, the focus is often far more negative. Even celebrities (particularly women) as they age, are put under the microscope, and their older bodies and faces are mocked. Only ten years ago, stories about Madonna’s body image were, on the whole, that of a positive strong female role model. Now, at 54, her age is mentioned repeatedly with negative
undertones and more often than not, her body is the focus of derision. Is it any wonder that we mere mortals feel less confident as we age?

When it comes to relationships, it’s natural to arrange our identity around a significant relationship, and couples, whether comfortably or uncomfortably together, often have arranged patterns of behaviour, that work for them both. The transition from being in a long term relationship, to alone, and considering dating again, would naturally precipitate old anxieties, perhaps introduce some new ones and knock confidence.

It is also normal for emotional baggage from a painful long term relationship to get in the way of forming a new relationship again. There may have been trust issues that caused the break down of the relationship, and you may reject the idea of allowing someone new into your life.

There are many challenges that older people have to face when contemplating a new relationship in later life, and I’ve raised just a few of the common hurdles here.

So is there a way forward? I believe that there is a great need for our society to focus positively on the ageing process so that we can move away from pigeonholing older people. We need to be more open to accepting older people as individuals with their own identities and needs, and we need to accept that building and maintaining good relationships is a part of this.

Giving older people a more accurate and public voice is a step in the right direction. This is a major challenge - one that can only be met by a multi-disciplinary approach that includes policy makers and programme makers, Government, the media and voluntary sector organisations.

Investing money and effort into more inclusive and positive campaigns that cover relationships and emotional well-being in older age is essential. We need to change the cultural script from anti-age to pro-age. Of course changing opinions and ditching stereotypes takes time and effort, and there has to be a willingness to do so. As individuals, we also need to take responsibility for our own attitudes. Are we ready to accept that our parents might have sexual needs? Can we cope if our mothers and fathers move on to new relationships with new people? Do we all make a stand when older people are stereotyped in the media and in everyday life?

Relationships matter whatever age you are. In fact, in my opinion, matter more as we get older. Later life is full of transitions, such as retirement, ill health, or becoming grandparents, and it’s good relationships that help us to weather these turbulent times.

Yes there are personal emotional road-blocks that can get in the way as we age, which may prevent some people from reaching out and getting support. Organisations like Relate and AgeUK do a wonderful job of supporting people through difficult times, and I would like to see more campaigns showing the positive work of such organisations.

The value of emotional connectedness cannot be underestimated, and it is vital to cater to those needs as we get older. It’s not just about ensuring that older people are fed and watered in order to ensure well being. It is also to ensure that psychological, and emotional needs are met, so that later life can be a fruitful and valued time, rather than that rather grim idea of older people simply waiting for death.

We need to challenge and then change our collective thinking about how we view getting older both on a personal and societal level, because we don’t just stop living, loving and wanting to be wanted when we get past a certain age.
I feel passionately about life after 50. My interest not surprisingly started soon after my 50th birthday during a conversation with four old school friends. We spent the evening reflecting on our lives and reviewing whether we had followed the paths we had laid out for ourselves at 16 when one of the group had left school. We were surprised as to how little had actually become reality. We all had certainly had our ups and downs but on the whole life was OK, just very different. One thing we had all expected was that our lives would follow a similar path to our parents in terms of family life and relationships. A couple of us, unlike our mothers, had expected to have careers, although if I'm honest, not to be the main earner or for the family to be dependant on our income. The other two saw themselves living a life much like their mothers.

I have worked in the field of therapy and people development for nearly 30 years and, the more I talked to others who are in their 50s or older the clearer it became to me that my group of friends were no different to most people at this age. My essay is going to look at a couple of aspects of later life, how life has changed in the workplace since we started out as young people and the issues that are raised working later in life as many of us find we both have to and want to. I have recently written a book, ‘Live the Life you Love at 50+ A Handbook for Career and Life Success’. I will quote from this book within my essay.

I was born in the 1950s into a traditional family where my father worked full-time and my mother, after both her children were in primary school, worked part-time. Even that was fairly unusual as most mothers stayed at home. Education was important to my parents so I was encouraged to stay on at school but with the expectation that I would, when I married, work part-time and be supported by my husband.

Many of my female contemporaries left school at 16 and started working while looking for a husband. Young men expected to find jobs and support their families while household chores and bringing up the children were left on the whole to their wives. By the time I was in my late teens, the beat generation, free love and women’s lib were high on the agenda and my childhood expectations had already changed.
In the 1960s, when many ‘baby boomers’ started work, the office was a very different place to how it is today. Managers and directors usually had their own offices, men were the bosses and women were the secretaries. Workplace hierarchy was usually firmly established – most of us were used to doing as we were told. It was very rare for women to hold senior roles, and it was also rare for people to be managed by anyone younger than themselves. Working hours were fixed and people rarely worked late. Home life, due to lack of technology, was usually entirely separate from work life.

Nowadays, the work place is almost unrecognisable. Open plan offices are the norm, with much of the old hierarchy appearing far more relaxed. Laws protect women from being discriminated against in the workplace and many senior roles are held by women. Internet technology has advanced by leaps and bounds. Flexi-time and job sharing are now accepted practices in many workplaces, allowing employees to work different hours to meet their other demands.

Everyone, everywhere has an internet enabled mobile phone so emails can be picked up on the move. Texts became the preferred way of communicating with friends and emails are now the currency in offices with people speaking to each other in person less and less.

In the modern workplace, the boundaries of the working week have become blurred for many. People are increasingly expected to be available all the time. Add to this social media, including Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, and we are never out of communication with anyone for more than a minute or two unless we consciously turn one of our machines off. Today’s fast-paced, ever-changing world has been a challenge for many of us. Coped with this, the ‘virtual world’ has not stood still and every day there appears to be a new social media tool to learn (or, as some have decided, to avoid!).

As the office hierarchy is less defined, we are all more able to participate in office life in an active way and have a say in the decisions that are being made. This brings with it some negatives – office politics! When decisions were made for us, we tended to accept what we were told. Nowadays, we rightly want to influence our environment and this can lead to different factions being created and sometimes manipulative and bullying behaviour which for many can be difficult to manage. To cope with the new office politics, we’ve had to learn new interpersonal skills such as assertiveness so we can stand up for ourselves when the change isn’t good for us and we want to offer our opinion to our bosses.

So what does this mean for us older workers? It certainly means we’ve had to accept change, adapt and be flexible. We’ve had to learn to juggle work and home and the demands both bring. I’m going to look briefly at three case studies that illustrate the issues that many people have talked to me about.

Liz, 61, was asked by her 35 year old manager to come and see me for me some 1:1 coaching as he found it impossible to have her in the team and although it was never stated I think he saw this as a necessary part of performance managing her out of the organisation. She was clearly distressed and struggling at work. She said it was now spilling into her home life, as she was so miserable. She felt sidelined and said that no one noticed her anymore and if she did offer her opinion in meetings she would notice people visibly responding in a negative way, especially her manager who was only a couple of years older than her son.

Some would, for example, be looking at their phone, others would throw sideways glances at each other whilst others would be all too ready to interrupt her and tell her that she hadn’t understood the issue or that they didn’t want to hear how it always was.

I asked her what impression she thought she was giving to her co-workers and why she felt she was either ignored or attacked.

The modern workplace has little resemblance to the one that most of us entered. It may have been a more rigid and traditional environment but we knew where we were; jobs were stable and a job for life was a norm. It was rare for anyone to change their career unlike today when many have a ‘portfolio career’. Being available by email and text 24/7 is now the order of the day and the boundaries of the working week have become blurred for many. People are increasingly expected to be available all of the time. Add to this social media, including Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, and we are never out of communication with anyone for more than a minute or two unless we consciously turn one of our machines off. Today’s fast-paced, ever-changing world has been a challenge for many of us. Coupled with this, the ‘virtual world’ has not stood still and every day there appears to be a new social media tool to learn (or, as some have decided, to avoid!).

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I asked her what impression she thought she was giving to her co-workers and why she felt she was either ignored or attacked.
Her response was, ‘they think I’m past my sell by date so they aren’t interested or I’m too old fashioned to be of interest.’

As she was talking she became increasingly distressed and said, ‘I’m talking for them, I don’t know what they think really as I don’t engage with them much because I think they think I’m too old. I’ve lost all confidence and I know this affects, how I dress, how I respond to people, the friendships I make and so on.’

I asked Liz if she wanted to do something about this. Her answer was very clear, she wanted to fit in, be part of the organisation and be seen as someone who wanted to contribute and who others wanted to listen to. She was not ready to retire emotionally, intellectually or financially.

Liz’s self image was now leaking into all her interactions and she was coming over as a ‘grumpy old woman’ and who wants to spend time with one of those?

Liz is not alone, so many of us have bought into the societal view that we aren’t wanted. We are left feeling that we are of little value and that we should be giving up our positions in the workplace. Furthermore some of us feel guilty that we are holding senior positions that we are told are the right of younger people. Whatever the reason we feel less positive about ourselves, act it out and low and behold our worst fears become true.

Martin arranged to see me as he had just turned 60 and was really fed up with his job. He wanted to leave but felt anxious about applying for anything new. He felt trapped by his age. He had divorced ten years ago and had a second family. His younger children were nine and six and he knew he needed to work for quite a long while.

Another factor that affects a number of older workers is that tertiary education was not common for all. Very few went to university: in the 1960s, eight per cent of young people went to university, today, it’s forty per cent and rising. Many left school at 16 or 18 and went straight into a job, often secretarial. Many learnt at the side of the more experienced worker, a practice known colloquially as ‘sitting by Nelly’.

Some of us, like Martin even at the top of their tree, feel trapped in their job because they don’t have on paper the qualifications that are often demanded in a job specification and therefore don’t feel they can move. A further block for some are fears about losing their memory as they approach their 60s, and being slower at learning new skills, especially technological ones. Any permutation of these perceived problems could hold us back and whittle away our self-confidence. Martin and I talked about how to build his self-confidence and to take pride in what he has got – wisdom, knowledge and experience.

My last case study to illustrate the challenges we face comes from Sally.

She had become a grandmother a few months ago. She was thrilled and adored her new role. She came to see me, as she was feeling really anxious. She is single, having divorced a number of years ago and works full time. She has helped her grown up children out a couple of times financially and this has been a bit of a strain. She hasn’t ever told them that at times she’s struggled to make ends meet.

Sally felt this was the modern dilemma for a grandparent and reflected on her life when she was a new mother and she hadn’t gone back to work until her children were at primary school and then only part time. Her mother had never worked and was happy to spend time with her children whenever Sally wanted. It raised for Sally all the issues I touched on at the start of this piece about expectations and how the world had moved on. The work Sally and I did was on changing some of her beliefs about what was right and proper as we were living in a different world.

It’s easy for us to believe, as we’ve seen in the case studies, that we’re no longer of value and that most employers would rather we were retired and sipping cocoa by the fire. However, this may be true for some, but not for all of us by any means! Many organisations value their older staff. They are in the main, hard working, reliable, very committed and willing to learn. As we’ve discussed, many older people will find themselves having to stay in the workplace longer than they may...
When we married in 1965, I knew that my husband Michael was responding to a vocation to become an Anglican priest and I felt that my own calling was to be there alongside him – though becoming a Bishop’s wife was certainly not in our marriage contract – and so I guess I was aware that lunch at home on many days would be on the menu for us as a couple.

In fact, “He married me to be the breadwinner for the first two years of our life together” is closer to our experience. Days after returning from our honeymoon we moved into a 200 year old cottage in Cuddesdon in Oxfordshire, with one cold tap, no bathroom and a chemical loo up the garden, where we spent a cosy and happy almost two years, while he was in training for the priesthood at Cuddesdon Theological College. I taught Latin, so that we could have some lunch in the brief moments when he touched down at home. On six days a week his day began at 7.10 am with Mattins and Meditation in the College Chapel and ended there with Compline at 9.45 pm. He sometimes came home briefly during the afternoon. I’ve often mused on the fact that, whilst this pattern instilled excellent spiritual habits for a lifetime in Christian ministry, it encouraged a distinctly questionable work/life balance for married bliss or the demands of family life.

In this essay I want to explore from my own experience and that of family and friends, including some of my counsellor friends within Relate, some of the things that happen to couples when in later life they suddenly find themselves together at home, after a working life which has taken one or both of them out of the home on most days. I hope to reflect on how relationships and the balance between partners may change; on feelings that may be around at the point of retiring from a job, which will probably have been a person’s way of life for many years; on the opportunities and the limiting factors which later life may bring. But first, I’d like to share something of my and our own journey.

In January 2009, we attended a pre-retirement course, made available to clergy and bishops in the years before retirement actually happens. For us, retirement would mean leaving the absorbing, time-hungry, diary-bound, committed life of a diocesan bishop and his wife, with its constant expectations, demands and pressures, as well as many blessings and privileges. It involved moving out of our very large 300 year old “tied cottage”, set in a beautiful garden, an oasis of peace

Keren Smedley

have imagined because of family circumstances, or because their pension pot isn’t what they expected. Older people are not devoid of responsibilities because their children have grown up. Many have older parents who need support and would find flexible working as useful as young parents do. As a society we need to move with the times and offer support and encouragement for people of all ages to work if they want to. Both employers and the older employee need to work together to make this a good experience for both. I believe the embracing of older people in the workplace is our next big challenge as a society, as the scales tip and we are in the position of having many more older people working for longer.

For many of us life has not turned out as expected, some bits will, without doubt, be better than we imagined and others will present us with a challenge. What I do know is that we are resourceful and will without doubt find a way to live the life we want. We fortunately live in a time where we don’t have to cope on our own and we can call upon counsellors, coaches, friends and family to help us to fully enjoy our later life.

All quotes are from Live the Life you Love at 50+ pages 4, 5, 42-46.

When I’m sixty-four
A celebration of the third age!

Lou Scott-Joynt

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in the middle of Winchester, into a small house somewhere beyond the diocesan
boundaries. As yet, we had no home to go to, and we knew that the transition
wouldn’t be easy and the downsizing would be horrendous. But we genuinely
looked forward to living more simply, on a much smaller scale and in a less
public way.

Looking back, I think perhaps that I had too many hopes and aspirations about
what I would like to do, once we retired; I don’t think that Michael, in his constantly
full life, had time to think much about his Third Age. Central for me was the
longing to have more time for our family who, I feared, had been much too far
down our diary priorities. Grandchildren grow up so quickly; we have one ten
year old and three six year olds, and I know we’re not alone in watching our
children trying to balance life as parents of young children with the demands of
full time work. I knew that it would be good to be able to support them more.

The course was enjoyable and useful; it gave time to reflect with other couples on our hopes and
fears, and how we might begin to prepare for living on a reduced income in a house which actually
belonged to us. Perhaps it also helped to prepare us for the unforeseen shock which lay ahead. We
duly retired in mid-2011 and moved 30 miles east into West Sussex. Then nine months later, just as
we were beginning to explore various retirement options, out of the blue Michael had a stroke.

Before it happened, I used to walk down the street noting white sticks and walking frames,
wheelchairs and mobility buggies, and ask myself what it would be like one day, when one or both of
us might be coping with loss of mobility or some failing sensory function and might consequently
become more or less dependent. Would I remain gracious and grateful, hopeful
and interested in others, and as determined to cope as my very arthritic
grandmother? “Don’t pick that up for me, dear. I need to work out how to do it, so
that I can manage when you’re not here.”

I suppose that we’ve had our own rather personal rehearsal since Michael’s stroke
in March 2011, two days before my seventieth birthday. He came home after
five and a half weeks in hospital with a zimmer frame and wheelchair and his
speech still impaired. But with wonderful love, prayers and support from family
and friends – and from our new village community – he continues to make an
amazing recovery, though it’s still work in progress with his right hand, arm and
leg. Living a day at a time, laughing a lot, being constantly thankful for every small
step, accepting the situation as just one of the challenges of being human, rather
than a matter for bitterness or self-pity – all these have helped us cope and now
thrive, as we learn to live a “new normal”.

We belong to what is sometimes called the sandwich generation: many people at
our stage of life find themselves stuck between supporting elderly parents on one
hand and their children and grandchildren on the other. One in four grandparents
look after their grandchildren on a regular basis and 40% of parents continue
to support their children financially well after they have left home, even taking
out joint mortgages to help. Carers for elderly and other relatives reputedly save
government anything between £21b and £87b per annum in care costs.

The experience of close friends of ours illustrate this beautifully. He retired from
the Civil Service on his sixtieth birthday; she continued to teach for a year or
two and struggled with negative feelings about his constant presence at home,
which deprived her of space she had always had and hadn’t realised how much
she valued. He tended to comment and be concerned if she wasn’t home by the
time she had said she would be back. Meanwhile he had a portfolio of interesting
retirement responsibilities, many of them continuing what he had been doing
before retirement: involvement in their local church, governor of a primary
school, chairman of a youth project on a large run-down London housing estate.
Then they were constantly travelling between London and the West Country
to care for her mother in her nineties and to support their two sons and five
grandchildren. They seemed to us no less busy and stretched than they ever
had been and, sadly, to have little time for themselves and for leisure. They have
had a lifetime of responsible, different and absorbing careers, punctuated by an
excellent family life with their two sons, elder relatives and plenty of friends; and
stimulating holidays abroad. And always the work routine and the structure that
gave to life, when they were both out of the house all day – since she used to
get home earlier and have a little space – which was suddenly disturbed by his
retirement, so that for a while life felt out of balance and distinctly uncomfortable.

On the other hand, I was speaking to Peter, a retired consultant anaesthetist, in a
Hampshire church one Sunday, who said that retirement had never felt difficult
to him or to his wife Carol (who was standing nearby). He had given up work
gradually and had accepted one or two short term, part time roles before he
retired completely. He had an absorbing, lifelong interest in woodcarving and
fishing, in both of which he delighted more and more. “And,” he said, “I’ve always
encouraged Carol – a nurse, so we’re complementary – to have her own interests
and friends. That way we have always had stimulating things to talk about....and
now we also have time.” He came across as a deeply contented person, sustained
in and through a good marriage.

And then there was the 62 year old cyclist I met on a train going north to York. He
turned out to have been a primary school head teacher in the same Berkshire

Lou Scott-Joynt
Lou Scott-Joynt

primary school for 32 years. Two years earlier his successor had been appointed and he agreed to job-share with her for a while. He went down to three days a week for a year, though he continued to take the lead in his school; then he reduced further to two days a week and she took charge, while he acted as her mentor. In that way he felt that the school was having a seamless transition and he was gentling his way into retirement. He was on his way to York by train, intended then to cycle north for three days to Berwick-on-Tweed to be with his sister on her birthday.

We are told that our life expectancy at 65 has risen by about 20 years over the last 25 years, though certainly not for everyone or in all parts of the country. It does not necessarily follow that longer life means more time in perfect health, though it may do. A higher incidence of chronic illness puts increasing strain on the medical services and perhaps too increasing strain on marriage and other close relationships. I'm certainly aware of many more golden weddings being celebrated, but the lengthening of married years can take its toll, especially where there are unresolved issues in a creaky relationship. I heard some time ago of a couple, both in their nineties, the wife in a wheelchair, and both very deaf, who were brought to Relate for help, because during a row they had begun to hit out at each other and there was concern for their mutual safety – possibly also for their mental health. I just think with sympathy about the pressure and sadness – and frustrations – of your marriage partner disabled and hard to communicate with, because of hearing loss on both sides.

So what are the opportunities and the limitations of becoming older? For many of us, there will be a rich vein of opportunity in later life, though constrained probably by less money. To mention a few possibilities: travelling the world, hobbies, offering our time, skills and experience as volunteers, time with friends and family, University of the Third Age, golf, more time to enjoy music or theatre, if you can afford it, or to walk, garden or read.

However, for many people there are more difficult and even distressing aspects of becoming older. I was shocked to hear from a friend who was having difficulties with her eye following a cataract operation. The consultant told her that he had been reading her notes and had had no idea how old she was – in her eightieth year, though she didn't look it. "What do you expect," he said, "at your age?" Sadly, ageism is clearly alive and well.

A counsellor friend of mine told me a moving story of a couple who came to her at Relate for help. They were in their eighties. She had terminal cancer and they were finding themselves overwhelmed by terrible feelings of anger: the husband, because she was about to leave – abandon – him; the wife resentful that his life would go on when hers ended. They had sixty years of a loving, supportive marriage and were appalled at what was happening to them now. The counsellor was able to help them to externalise the anger and give it a name, and a way of dealing with it, so that they could unite against the anger – and the cancer – and re-find their loving, trusting, accepting closeness for the time they had left. She spoke of the privilege she felt when working with older couples and how in this case she had, "a sense of two who had become one. It felt to me as if there was a parallel with the beginning of life, when two are one as mother and unborn child, and in so many ways the end is like the beginning in human life. It was very moving."

And yet here also is the anomaly within marriage. One partner does get to know the other through and through but still there remains mystery at the core of the other's being. So reassurance and a secure grounding, yes, but still always more to explore and discover to the end of our lives together.

Loss and dependency seem to be particular themes of later life and quite a number of older people suffer from depression. Retirement may bring loss of status, when it can be hard to adjust to not being 'someone' and to no longer having a role in the outside world. And with that can come a sense of loneliness and isolation away from the world of work, and the loss of the friendships and company of the workplace.

One friend, whose husband had recently retired from a significant and demanding political post, told us: "He doesn't seem to realise that I have had a life too." A need to reclaim status may lead to issues about who is in charge and, if both partners start to perform roles in the home which hitherto have been the domain of one of them, usually the wife, this can lead to conflict – going shopping, for instance, or managing the house or garden. On the other hand, there may be a swapping of gender places, if a retired husband becomes more passive and his wife more assertive or powerful in the relationship.

Similarly, there may be changing intimacy and sexual needs on both sides. I heard of an older couple who were referred to a Relate sex therapist for help. The therapy went well, but the therapist reported that the husband was feeling rather worn out, since his wife had now become orgasmic and couldn't get enough sex. Research has shown that up to 35% of women and 30% of men aged fifty or more suffer from sexual dysfunction. Help is available through Relate and other agencies, if that is what is wanted. However, for many, the urgency of younger sexual needs may well give way to the comfort of gentler sex in later years.

Sadly, while divorce rates generally are going down, divorce rates among the over-60s seem to be on the increase. Much is required of each partner for a long marriage to continue to be satisfying and mutually sustaining and those who counsel older couples speak of idealisation and hopes sometimes being dashed: the wife who looks forward to life together and to her husband giving her more love and attention, only to discover that post retirement the golf course, or directorships, or new interests engage him more than interest in her, leading to a
crushing sense of disappointment and even bitterness in her. Or the husband who, aware of getting older and fearful of losing his sexual attraction – as well as his hair! – takes up with a younger woman and abandons his wife of 30 years or more.

Marriages need nurturing at any stage and good communication is so much the key to a healthy relationship: the capacity to listen, to say ‘thank you’ and ‘I’m sorry’, mutual love and cherishing. Sadly, retirement and more space and time may in fact exacerbate issues that have been lurking unresolved between a couple for a long time, hidden beneath the demands and busyness of everyday life.

Not surprisingly, the losses of old age often mirror the loss through death of someone close and the journey of working through grief, of letting go of idealised expectations, the readjustment and rebalancing which inevitably follows death. If the rebalancing process can be achieved, and it will be a variously large or small task for different couples and individuals, then dreams and hopes, opportunities and possibilities for a rich retirement experience (even if not rich financially) are endless.

Neither Michael nor I entered marriage with particularly helpful models or experience of marriage and family: Michael was an only child and for various reasons was at boarding school from the age of five. I was the eldest of three. My family life was chaotic, financially strained, and often not very happy, with hardly any extended family, though I was never in any doubt about our parents’ love for us. My parents died, five months apart, in the year before we married and my younger brother a few years later. Young as Michael was when we married, he was then and remains now my totally committed and wonderfully faithful husband, lover, friend, supporter and encourager. And to some extent he had to be mother and father to me too through long years of working through feelings of loss – and a degree of recurrent depression that for me at least accompanied these feelings. There have been many challenges, adjustments and new insights in our relationship over the years, not least while I was training as a Relate counsellor in the late 1980s.

Now that we have come through the strains and anxieties of Michael’s stroke and his ongoing journey back to health, we are enjoying the new normals of our retirement life, which includes lunching together on most days: our growing family, travel, having more time to enjoy friends, music, books, theatre, walking (somewhat more limited these days), as well as continuing to use our experience and gifts where we can, in the service of God. We rejoice too in the lessening of the treadmill which a pressing life brings. There will be further adjustments and testings and we don’t know what lies ahead in the area of health and strength. But we are confident that God will be with us, and will continue to hold each and both of us in his hands.

Edited and updated from a talk given in 2008 as part of ‘Space in the City’, a regular Winchester churches lunchtime series.

Lou Scott-Joynt

Lou is a retired Relate counsellor and supervisor. She was a trustee of Relate until this year and has previously served as Chair of Relate Winchester. Prior to this she taught Classics, RE and sixth form General Studies for a number of years. Lou is married to Michael, the former Bishop of Winchester and they are both currently settling into an active retirement.
Adult learning is one of the easiest and most enjoyable ways of meeting other people. An organised course provides a kind of neutral space, in which different people can come together without having to justify themselves in any way, other than their shared interest in the topic. Focusing on the skill or subject is itself a way of sparking conversation - and of course it helps to keep your mind active. And there is abundant evidence that participating in adult learning has significant benefits for individuals and for the community. Yet many in our society appear to place little value on learning for older adults.

The UK offers a huge variety of adult education activities, from evening classes to weekend schools, and field trips to online courses. Some lead to qualifications, others can be studied simply for their own sake. And they are extremely popular: the most recent official survey found that seven of every ten adults in the country had taken some kind of organised learning in the previous three years.

By international standards, Britons do well, with only the small Nordic countries regularly reporting higher levels of participation in adult learning.

And we also have excellent evidence to confirm the value of all this learning. Researchers who have asked older learners say that they report a range of benefits; they particularly value the way in which continuing their education helps them keep their minds active, acquire new skills and knowledge, and meet new people and make friends. They also generally say that they relish their learning: a good tutor, a sense of achievement, and a congenial group of fellow learners combine to make learning a rich and enjoyable experience.

As well as listening to what learners say, researchers have other ways of finding out what impact learning has. They also talk to non-learners, to find out why they don’t take part. And they also tend to look for other types of evidence, including whether or not we can find external and objective evidence of the impact of learning. In recent years, social scientists studying adult learning have shown that it produces measurable changes in health and well-being, and also promotes people’s involvement in their wider community, as well as their ability to influence their own lives. There are even studies showing that participating in adult learning leads to higher levels of tolerance of others and helps to increase civic participation. Other research has found that learning helps people encounter transitions more successfully, and handle major changes in their lives.

John Field

John is a Professor in the School of Education, University of Stirling, where he specialises in adult learning. He has written and spoken widely on social, political and historical aspects of adult education and training. His recent publications include a number of papers on learning in later life, and he co-edited the Sage Handbook of Ageing, Work & Society. His latest book is Working Men’s Bodies: work camps in Britain, 1880-1940, published by Manchester University Press.
These are truly valuable outcomes of learning, but the problem with many of these studies is that while they are extremely authoritative, they look at the adult population as a whole. More recently, though, researchers have started to turn their attention to learning in later life. The most systematic study undertaken so far, by researchers at the University of London’s Institute of Education, suggests that learning in later life produces gains in well-being, particularly if the learning is of a relatively informal character. Conversely, lack of learning can inhibit well-being. Finnish social scientists have found that poor education is associated with loneliness in later life. Other studies have confirmed this link, and have also in turn shown that loneliness is associated with decreases in cognitive function. So it isn’t just that learning promotes sociability – relationships also matter for learning. We need other people to challenge us, support us and accompany us if we are to maintain our capacity to learn.

From a different perspective, neuroscientists have explored the ways in which learning in adult life leads to measurable changes in particular areas of the brain – a critical finding that confirms that the brain continues to develop through adult life. And we also know that education can be important in delaying the effects of such illnesses as dementia. We are still in the early stages of this important work, and we don’t yet know much about the role of learning in later life in relation to cognitive resilience. Nevertheless, these are really encouraging findings which support other research suggesting that adult learning has a role to play in maintaining people’s ability to live independently and productively in later life.

So it is heartening that so many older adults embrace the opportunity with relish. Seniors flock to local authority courses (which often offer a fee concession to the over-60s), as well as to classes offered by voluntary groups like the Workers’ Educational Association, or by other public bodies such as museums, sports centres, cinemas and theatres. And look at the success of the University of the Third Age, which has local groups in virtually every community in the country, who manage their own programmes with a minimum of outside support. For many people, then, retirement from full time work brings the time and freedom to join a course. According to the English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing, over two out of five 50 to 69 year-olds take part in some kind of organised learning activity. However, this tails off sharply with age, with a big drop among those who leave the workforce, and particularly steep falls in formal education and training among the older groups. Tragically, when we come to the oldest groups, the level of participation is tiny. One authoritative national survey, conducted by the National Institute of Adult Education, reported in 2013 that the proportion of adult learners among the over-75s was half what it was among 65 to 74-year-olds.

So our society is not doing enough to support learning among older adults, and in particular it is failing the oldest members of the community. And there are also marked inequalities in participation among older adults. People who stay in work beyond retirement are more likely to continue their education than those who leave the labour market. Women are more likely to take part than men. And, most worrying of all, people who have the highest levels of education already are much more likely to carry on learning in later life.

It is relatively easy to explain these patterns of unequal access to learning. One is that quite a high proportion of older adults has had limited access to education in the past. For anyone born before 1956, the official school-leaving age was fifteen; for those who grew up outside the UK, the official leaving age was lower, or even non-existent. It is not surprising that survey data show that high numbers in these age groups have basic problems with some types of literacy. Many older adults quite simply are anxious about returning to an experience that they left behind so long ago, and sometimes did not enjoy.

This is essentially a question of motivation. While some older adults are delighted that they can now spend time learning what they want to learn, others are more reluctant to expose themselves to an unfamiliar experience. And one of the main motivators for younger adults – namely the likelihood of improving their wages and employability as a result of participating in learning – is not nearly so relevant for those who have retired from the workforce.

A second problem is that opportunities for part-time study have been cut off from older adults. While participation rates for the working age population remain high, in recent years one provider after another has reduced or withdrawn the types of provision that older people find attractive. Government is responsible for much of this change. By concentrating public funding on courses that lead to qualifications, government has effectively encouraged institutions to withdraw from programmes that do not involve tests and assignments of various kinds. It has also encouraged colleges and universities to concentrate on full-time courses, and to reduce part-time courses.

Yet these are exactly the sorts of learning that older adults prefer. Retired people in particular no longer need to gain qualifications. And our society has even found ways of discriminating against older adult learners. For some types of course, you will find that funding is only available if you are under a certain age. This can affect charities as well as government; thus the Hilton Foundation only
funds education and training for disadvantaged young people provided they are under 25. This is because policy makers and employers alike believe that they should concentrate their investment in young people, as they will be in the workforce for a long time, and thus repay the costs of their training.

A third problem is that some new types of learning are not well-suited to older learners. Unequal internet access is itself a barrier to participation. Consistently across countries, surveys have reported significant differences in internet use for members of different age groups, with older adults reporting much lower levels of internet activity than younger people. Often, when asked, some older adults will simply say that the internet is somehow beyond them. This is changing, with rising use among the over-60s, leading some market researchers to talk about the growing number of ‘silver surfers’. All the same, important new developments such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) or mobile learning are simply passing many older adults by.

We have seen that adult learning has important benefits for older people, and is particularly important in bringing them together with others. Yet we have also seen that our society does far too little to support learning among older adults, and that within our education and training system, ageism begins at 25. What do we need to do to improve the situation?

The first thing, in my view, is to change mind-sets. This starts with those people who don’t see learning as something they can do. You really are, as the cliché has it, never too old to learn. And even those who hated their schooldays often find that they love learning in adult life. But as well as changing the minds of reluctant learners, we also need to work on the attitudes of policy makers, voluntary organisations, and those who lead educational institutions.

Second, we need to celebrate and grow those organisations that provide the types of learning best suited to older adults. I am particularly taken with the rapid growth of self-help initiatives, where people organise their own learning opportunities. The Universities of the Third Age, who now have groups across Britain and Ireland, are self-governing co-operatives who arrange their own learning with no regard for qualifications or other external demands. For those who cannot find a University of the Third Age (U3A), there are plenty of other initiatives, from reading circles to Men’s Sheds, which allow people to share interests and develop their know-how with other people.

And finally we need to factor adult learning into public policy in new ways. This should start by acknowledging that many older people already have valuable skills and knowledge; they can share them not only with other older learners, as in U3A groups, but also with younger people, through intergenerational learning programmes. And we need to understand that while adult learning is good in itself, it is also a catalyst for a broad range of policy goals, including health and well-being. It can be particularly valuable for the ‘older old’, who are most likely to be isolated as a result of losing friends and family. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education publishes a range of free material for staff working in care homes (available at http://tinyurl.com/yg9t9q9). But this and similar initiatives will remain scattered examples unless and until resources are committed to ensuring that every older adult has access to a range of learning that will help them make the most of their lives.
Opening doors: do older LGBT people have different outlooks on relationships?

Dr Dylan Kneale and Patrick Sholl

Introduction

On July 17th 2013, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 received royal assent. This Act gives Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people the right to marry their same sex partner; previously LGBT people only had the right to formally commit through a civil partnership. But the new legislation does not allow LGBT people to demand marriage in those religious institutions that do not support the Act, and while a symbolic step forward in many ways, in practice many LGBT people may still continue to face hostility and discrimination in many spheres of life. The debates that took place around the Act are perhaps illuminative of many of the arguments and stereotypes made of LGBT people. For example the contribution of former Conservative minister Baroness Jill Knight to the House of Lords simultaneously illuminated her trenchant viewpoints on gay people, transgender people, childless heterosexual couples, and lone parents; perhaps not entirely surprising given her previous track record which included being the mastermind of the notorious Section 28:

‘Of course, homosexuals are often very delightful, artistic and loving people. No one doubts that for one single moment. However, marriage is not about just love. It is about a man and a woman, themselves created to produce children, producing children.

This bill is either trying to pretend that it can change men into women, or vice versa, or telling us that children do not need a father and a mother and that a secure framework for children to be brought up in is not really important anymore.’

Nonetheless, for older LGBT people, the Act represents a real watershed moment of progress in LGBT rights. The current generation of older LGBT people have been largely responsible for the progressive expansion of equality in legislation, since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967 through to the present day. Such rapid changes mean that life for LGBT people differs greatly across generations, with younger LGBT people being more likely to live in more accepting environments, as evidenced in the falling age at which people come
Being older, being LGBT and being in a relationship

Kurdek’s review of (mainly US and Scandinavian) research on gay and lesbian couples showed that many of the factors that predict relationship quality, such as self-reported skills in conflict resolution and satisfaction with their relationships, did not differ systematically between opposite and same sex couples (Kurdek 2005). Perhaps most tellingly, he cited research that showed how the relationship quality of gay and lesbian couples is relatively high at the start of the relationship, although decreases over time, mirroring trends observed among heterosexual couples. However, he also presented evidence, which was dismissed as inconclusive because of the size and derivation of the sample, which suggested that LGB relationships had higher rates of breakdown. Kurdek’s later work (2008) suggested that LGBT couples, particularly lesbian couples, actually had higher levels of relationship quality than heterosexual couples, although the study was based on a convenience sample of US couples, as opposed to being representative. In one of a handful of UK studies that has explored differences in relationship quality by couple type, recent evidence suggests that ‘non-heterosexual participants are more positive about and happier with the quality of their relationship with their partner and their relationship maintenance than heterosexual participants’ (Gabb et al., 2013, p20). Internationally, most studies tend to find little difference in composite measures of relationship quality (Patterson 2000, Julien 2003).

However, there are many gaps in our knowledge before we can make any statements on differences in LGBT relationships with any certainty. Firstly, we know little about relationship quality among LGBT couples of all ages in the UK – Gabb and colleagues’ (2013) study being a welcome exception. Secondly, the body of literature on the lives of older LGBT people is underdeveloped, including research on the romantic and social relationships of older LGBT people. In fact, the conceptualisation of age and ageing among LGBT people can differ substantially from that of heterosexual people. The invisibility of (chronologically and socially) older LGBT people in studies may reflect the tendency for age and ageing to be studied independently of sexuality and gender (see Harries and de las Casas 2013 for recent work on this issue). Finally, the literature on LGBT people and relationship quality is dominated by studies that are dependent on qualitative methods, or for those with a quantitative approach, are characterised by convenience sampling, making it hard to generalise their findings to wider populations. So while the literature suggests there may be few differences in couple relationships between LGBT and non-LGBT couples, we actually know very little about how this may apply to a representative population of older LGBT people in the UK.

Being older and LGBT: impact on relationships

If the experience of being LGBT could impact on relationships, then what are the mechanisms through which this could occur? Several studies have proposed theories to explain why we could expect differential relationship quality among LGBT people, the most prominent of these being the minority stress model.

Minority stress

Identifying as a minority group, or having this identity ascribed to one’s self, can lead to unequal treatment in society at large, which increases the risk of psychological distress. This experience has been termed ‘minority stress’ and has been linked to long-term adverse health outcomes (for example Meyer 1995; Meyer 2003). Meyer’s framework for minority stress identified external factors, including experiencing events such as violence and discrimination, and internal factors including the expectation of rejection, concealment of identity, and internalised homophobia, as being routes to higher risks of mental health issues (Meyer 2003). Of these, internalised homophobia has been identified as having the most detrimental impact on relationship quality among LGBT couples, being associated with negative perceptions of couple relationships and wider social relationships (Otis et al 2006; Frost and Meyer 2009). Internalised homophobia in this sense describes the process by which LGBT individuals may internalise heteronormative societal practices and behaviours, changing an individual’s perceptions of themselves, including their self-worth. In relation to the impact on relationship quality, at the core of this internalised homophobia is the ‘prevailing stigma of being LGBT and the unsubstantiated notion that LGB are incapable of intimacy and maintaining lasting and healthy relationships’ (Frost and Meyer 2009, p98). Such internalised homophobia may not only deter LGBT people from...
embarking on long-term relationships in the first place, but may also decrease LGBT people’s ability to gain satisfaction from relationships through difficulties in being intimate or open with a partner, or trusting a partner. However, other factors, besides minority stress, may also influence the stability of LGBT relationships. Life course patterns of LGBT people follow a plurality of routes, many of which do not involve parenthood, and LGBT relationships may be less bound by children.

relationships among LGBT people aged 50

Our approach

Elements of minority stress, and particularly internalised homophobia, are found to impact on relationship quality both directly but also indirectly through raising the risk of mental health issues (Frost and Meyer 2009). However, the jury is still out on whether relationship quality and stability is comparatively better or worse among older LGBT couples in representative samples. Here we explore the supposition that older LGBT people will report poorer relationship outcomes, both in terms of relationship quality and stability, than their heterosexual counterparts as a consequence of minority stress.

We examine some of these issues among older LGBT people using (partially) representative data from a sample aged 50 years old. To do this, we use data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS), which represents a census of all births occurring in one week in 1958. The study has collected data from cohort members at various points during childhood and into adulthood and collected data from 9790 people at age 50. It is on this latest sweep that our analyses are focussed. Therefore our analyses are not based on older people per se, but on the next generation of older people and depict the relationship histories of those who are approaching retirement. We develop a proxy for being LGBT through examining cohabiting histories since age 16, as well as reports of non-cohabiting relationships at age 50. In addition, this was not a targeted or convenience sample; therefore our sample size of LGBT people aged 50 reaches only 105 cohort members - just over one per cent of the cohort (1.1%). We examine whether study members are currently in a relationship and their satisfaction with that relationship. Using these longitudinal data also means that we can gain insights into the relationship histories of study members, including the number of cohabiting partners and the longest length of cohabiting relationship that they have experienced.

What did we find

Of the 105 cohort members we identified as LGBT based on cohabitation histories (50 men and 55 women), almost two-fifths were in a current relationship compared to almost nine-in-ten people we identified as non-LGBT. This means that people we identified as being LGBT (through their cohabitation histories) were twice as likely not to be in a relationship at age 50 as those who were identified as non-LGBT (23% vs 11%). When we examined the quality of these relationships, we found that those we identified as LGBT had virtually identical levels of current relationship quality as those who were identified as non-LGBT. If minority stress leads to poorer relationships for LGBT people, we found the strongest evidence of this in measures of relationship stability, with the partnership histories of LGBT people suggestive of difficulties in forming stable and long-lasting cohabiting relationships. LGBT people were entering their 50s with experience of shorter relationships compared to non LGBT people – just 19 per cent had been in a relationship for longer than 20 years compared to 60 per cent of those with only opposite sex cohabiting histories. Conversely, LGBT people were more likely to be entering their fifties having engaged in a greater number of cohabiting histories - a fifth entered their fifties having formed cohabiting relationships with at least four people compared to ten per cent of non-LGBT people.

| Table 1: Relationship history and current relationship quality by LGBT status |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
|                            | LGBT history | No LGBT history | Total      |
| Not in a current relationship | 22.9 | 11.2 | 11.3 |
| Currently in a relationship | 77.1 | 88.8 | 88.7 |
| Total                       | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| N                           | 105 | 8973 | 9078 |
| p                           | <0.01 |         |       |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship quality</th>
<th>LGBT history</th>
<th>No LGBT history</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>very unhappy</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somewhat unhappy</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neither unhappy or happy</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somewhat happy</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very happy</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>7970</td>
<td>8051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.964</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Length of longest relationship (incl. cohabitation that turns to marriage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Non-LGBT</th>
<th>LGBT</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-5 yrs</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>78.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 yrs</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>93.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15 yrs</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>104.0</td>
<td>105.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-20 yrs</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>127.0</td>
<td>128.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20+ yrs</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>601.0</td>
<td>596.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

chi2: 105, P < 0.01

### Number of different cohabiting/marriage partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Non-LGBT</th>
<th>LGBT</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One partner</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td>62.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two partners</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three partners</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four partners</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

chi2: 105, P < 0.01

Some of these differences may have been due to differences in background characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, and we control for these characteristics (preceding cohabitation) in regression models. After controlling for a limited set of characteristics reflective of childhood circumstances, we still find that LGBT people were less likely to have had longer cohabiting relationships than non-LGBT people. LGBT people were also more likely to have had a higher number of cohabiting partners (full output not shown here). We obtained predicted probabilities from these models that reflect the likelihood of reporting a particular number of cohabiting partners or length of relationship and present these for study members with the most ‘typical’ combination characteristics in the sample. In this case this meant being in the top quintile of ability for maths and reading at age 16, living in owner occupied occupation at age 16, and having a father in social class 2 at age 16. For our ‘typical’ 50 year olds, we find that LGBT status has a profound impact on measures of relationship stability – much more so than gender. For example, for our ‘typical’ 50 year olds, we would predict that over ten per cent fewer non-LGBT as LGBT people would have had one partner, with multiple cohabitation more common even after controlling for background characteristics. Similarly, while we would predict that over half of our ‘typical’ non-LGBT study members would have had at least one cohabiting partnership lasting 20 years or longer, we would predict that less than a fifth of the ‘typical’ LGBT study members would after controlling for background characteristics.

**Figure 1:** Predicted number of cohabiting partnerships by LGBT status and gender

**Figure 2:** Predicted length of longest cohabiting relationship by LGBT status and gender
Summary and Discussion

In our explorations of the relationship histories of a group of older LGBT people, we found few differences in our measure of current relationship quality based on whether or not respondents were LGBT, even in bivariate analyses. These results mirror the emergent findings of larger studies into differences between LGBT people and others (Gabb et al. 2013). Evidence of relationship stability did differ substantially by LGBT status, even after controlling for other factors5, as we discuss below. Our results do come with the caveats outlined earlier, including our small sample size of those we identified as LGBT and our methods of deciphering LGBT status; these are likely to lead us to underestimate rather than overestimate differences in relationship histories by LGBT status. Many of these limitations follow the lack of representation of LGBT people in large studies, in part driven by a chronic lack of data on sexual identity. We would not be the first to advocate for better data on LGBT people (for example Cameron et al. 2009), or sexual behaviour in general. Overall, our results lead us to conclude that if minority stress does impact on the relationships of LGBT compared to non-LGBT people, that this is most prominent in measures of relationship stability.

These results lead us to consider a number of alternative questions; for example if LGBT people are as likely, or more likely, to enter into cohabiting relationships initially, why are these relationships more likely to break-up? Some might say that the absence of children in many LGBT couples may give less incentive for unhappy relationships to continue. For example, LGBT people may be ‘less bound by children’ than non-LGBT people (Cross-Barnet et al. 2010). LGBT people may be less likely to be burdened with a long-lasting unhappy relationship and to be productively working through a series of cohabiting relationships to find ‘the one’. However, a minority stress framework emphasises that the higher level of apparent relationship instability is due to societal expectations and attitudes that LGBT relationships are less meaningful and are somehow destined to fail from the beginning. They may also stress that LGBT people will have changed their psyche around relationships in response (Frost and Meyer 2009). Another aspect of minority stress could focus on the relationship between couples and the social support available to them at times of relationship stress. Opposite sex couples are more likely to have been in receipt of informal and especially familial support for the relationship, particularly around times of relationship crisis. Additionally, for those same sex couples that did approach couple counselling, heteronormative and even hostile attitudes from counselling providers may have meant that in previous decades, support was not available when needed.

These results suggest that if LGBT relationships differ from non-LGBT relationships it is likely to be most evident in the duration of relationships and attitudes to, and processes around, partnership dissolution. For older LGBT people, the evidence suggests that they are less likely to have found ‘the one’, but are more likely to have cohabited with a number of ‘ones’. However, while our research is predicated on studying older LGBT people, and people aged 50 are frequently included in studies of ageing (for example in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing), they do not represent ‘older people’ in themselves. We could expect the patterns of relationship stability by LGBT status to be even starker for a population that is older. Nonetheless, our evidence also suggests that LGBT people are less likely to be entering later years with a cohabiting partner. This may place older LGBT people at greater likelihood of ageing outside a couple relationship, which may have implications in the future around caring patterns, financial circumstances, and wellbeing.

Overall, the minority stress model provides a useful framework for explaining the differences, in that hostile societies place additional pressures on LGBT people and their romantic relationships. These results are of significance as they are based on a unique, albeit small, sample of older LGBT people that were not drawn from a convenience sample. Further research is needed to discover the extent to which greater levels of relationship instability among LGBT people can be directly attributed to minority stress. What these results do independently of this is to highlight that, whatever the cause may be, cohabiting relationships of LGBT people are much more prone to dissolution. These findings therefore illuminate a challenge to providers of relationship support to ensure that services are available and adapted to meet the needs of older LGBT people, whose previous contacts with service providers may have been substantially less than positive, and whose need for relationship support may be greater. The results also suggest that if LGBT people are less likely to enter older age with a partner, service planners need to be mindful of the importance of services to help older LGBT people to develop and maintain social networks and relationships in later life; services which are often viewed as superfluous in times of austerity, but which are necessary for mental and physical wellbeing.
I don’t believe that all widows go through the same things – it must be different, for example, if your spouse dies at the end of a long illness and you have gradually had to come to terms with it, from suddenly being told your mate has been killed in an accident. But I guess one thing we all have in common is hating people to say, ‘Oh I know just how you feel – when my aunt died...’ ‘When my brother died...’ No: losing your life’s partner is uniquely awful.

You struggle, of course, through the first few weeks, when there is so much to be done; when you still find yourself thinking, ‘Oh he’ll know – I’ll ask him’ – when you have not totally taken in the finality of it all. Joan Dideon in The Year of Magical Thinking wrote that she couldn’t throw away her husband’s shoes – because surely he’d need them... I suppose it took me a long time to realise I could never have my husband Gavin Lyall’s opinion on anything again; but I did have the consolation of re-reading his books – which I still do ten years on.

For weeks and months after your husband dies you soldier on as best you can, what a friend of mine once labelled “just putting one foot in front of the other”; but for a long time you haven’t fully taken it in; deep down you think you only somehow to get through this bit and then things will return to normal. I remember saying to a widowed friend of mine that someone we knew seemed to be grieving rather a lot considering her husband had died a whole year ago: “Oh no,” she said, “that’s when you realise it’s forever.”

You go over and over the life you once had, looking at photographs, talking about your husband if the people around will listen; some friends will foolishly try to keep off the subject, fearing it will remind you of your loss – as if you were likely to forget! One thing I’m certain of: Dante was wrong when he said (or so I’m told by those who have read Inferno) that nothing is worse than remembering happy times when you are miserable. On the contrary: remembering the good times remains a comfort, a pleasure even; just the way, I suppose, that the parting couple in Casablanca were comforted by the thought that “we’ll always have Paris” – you feel, ‘At least I did have it.’

What does give you waves of extra unhappiness is all the things, big or little, that went wrong, that didn’t turn out as you’d hoped, that you can never now explain or say sorry for or discuss or put right. I think this may also explain a phenomenon which is otherwise puzzling: the real sorrow of someone of the...
For a lot of us the most obvious challenge is learning, after decades of marriage, to live alone. Maybe we did it before we got married, but that was different.

The death of an ex-partner they had left. I know three people who left their husbands for quite understandable reasons, and astonished all their friends by how upset they were when the man they’d abandoned died. I don’t think either of them had any intention of going back into the relationship; but the death made it totally final: nothing now could be changed or explained, forgiven or put right: the past was set in stone.

The person you married has gone, and that’s bad enough; but for most of us the world has changed around us as well. No longer part of a couple, we find we behave differently – and other people behave differently towards us. As agony aunt for Saga I’ve heard so often from women who always went about with other couples, and now find themselves left out and lonely. Maybe the other couples feel awkward about including a lone woman; or they may just be thoughtless. It’s hard for a widow not to feel bitter about being, apparently, abandoned just when she needs her friends most (when I get such a letter as agony aunt for Saga, I manage not to reply by asking how often she included lonely women in her precious social life). Those who have always had some friends who were not in pairs – cousins, workmates, other theatre-goers, people in the same parish – are the lucky ones, but the scene changes all the time. Mrs Torrie, who founded Cruse (which was originally just for widows) would always say, “You have to re-people your life” – but it isn’t always easy. And though the newly single man may be asked out to dinner more often, widowers can feel totally lost with no one to look after them – and, having probably spent more time working or away from home, often knowing fewer neighbours and people locally. In my experience, widowers – many if not most – tend either to find someone else or die; women live longer, there are fewer men in the older age group – and a consolable widower often prefers someone younger; too often women have to carry on alone. Small wonder that nowadays major charities concerned with the elderly are focussed much more on loneliness than on practical needs.

For a lot of us the most obvious challenge is learning, after decades of marriage, to live alone. Maybe we did it before we got married, but that was different: then we were embarking excitedly on a new life; now we’re learning to cope with half an old one. There’s no one to consult, no one to try ideas out on or, for that matter, fix the alarm or Do Something about that noise in the bathroom. I used to do the mending of hems and socks while Gavin watched TV programmes I didn’t like; now I don’t do it at all. In the words of Felicity Green, doyenne of the Mirror group, “I have plenty of people to do things with; but I don’t have anyone to do nothing with.”

What about families? There’s a general perception that the lone father, the widowed mother, will rely heavily on sons and daughters – particularly daughters – to fill the gap left by the spouse who is gone. And to some extent this is so: many widows are devoted grandmothers, not just seeing the pretty toddlers from time to time but taking a serious role in childcare, especially if their daughters or daughters-in-law have jobs. Unfortunately if the son’s marriage breaks up, the estranged daughter-in-law may want to leave his mother out of the new arrangements; there are constant demands for grandparents to have rights, but they come to nothing for fairly obvious reasons.

We may think of Granny as an entirely benign figure cuddling the little ones, but in the eyes of the estranged daughter-in-law she may well have been part of the problem, and, even if everyone’s on reasonably good terms, there are the problems of distance and practicality. It’s often hard enough to make smooth and kindly arrangements for the two parents’ access to the children; if they were obliged to take in the rights of possibly four grandparents as well, the whole thing could be impossibly difficult.

Should a widow move in with a son’s or daughter’s family? Sometimes it can work well, though a good deal depends, I think, on how the arrangement is organised. A capable woman who has run her own life for decades is not going to take kindly to someone else’s household rules; having her own territory where things are exactly as she wants them helps, as do arrangements on just how much time everyone needs to spend together. A marriage, Anthony Burgess said, is a civilisation, a culture with “a shared language of grunt and touch”; a widow is in another country in which she is an unwilling refugee, and living with another family is joining another culture. To stay on your own may be better, and even when “the family” live abroad or some distance away, it’s not the total separation it once was, what with Skype, email and cheap telephones. I know several widows who arrange their year round extensive visits to far-flung relations – it gives them something which can be in short supply in their own territory.

Families scatter; we’re all living longer; grown children may not feel as responsible for their elders as they would have done a hundred years ago. Too many of us have to face old age without necessarily having the props and close kin of yore. So we all depend far more on friendship, perhaps, than used to be the case; which

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may very well be friends of our own sex. I belong to two clubs which are mixed, but most of my friends these days come from other members of all-women groups. Virginia Ironside wrote a highly entertaining book called No I don’t want to join a book group – but book groups and pressure groups and theatre groups may make the difference, for some of us, between an empty loneliness and cheerful lives.

Some of the people who cope best with bereavement and old age are those who still, for example, have connections with a school they taught at, who maybe go on knowing professional colleagues and going to events connected with what was once the workplace; the retired men who run the admin side of a sports club, the churchgoers, or volunteers for a charity that probably help them as much as it does the recipients of their bounty. Life goes on; we make of it what we can.

We ultimately learn to live different lives, to cope, to keep going and treasure our memories. And years after Gavin died something that seemed almost miraculous happened – I was sent a letter that he had written years before about us and our marriage. There had been a controversy in the pages of the Observer, started by John Newsome who had argued that it was wrong to educate girls the same way as boys since their lives would be so different. Naturally there was fierce opposition from those who knew in practice that would mean cooking and sewing for girls and proper education only for the chaps. Gavin had joined in on the side of good education for females, and had somehow fallen into correspondence with Miss Higginson, an outstanding girls school Headmistress in Bolton; and when she went into a care home, someone organising her papers found and sent to me a letter that Gavin had written to her describing how our marriage worked and saying if he’d married anyone “who wouldn’t know good writing if it rose up and bit her” he couldn’t have written his books, it would have been too lonely. And he cited an occasion when he’d been in Australia and I’d managed to find out where he was and calculated the time so that I could ring him up. The letter ended, “All I can say is that while I can’t help, life being what it is, finding myself in the middle of the Australian desert from time to time, I did have a choice about whether or not I married a woman with the intelligence or forethought to be able to ring me up there just to say she loved me. Thank God I chose right.” It was like getting a love letter from beyond the grave.

A n awful lot of literature (a certain kind of literature, but there’s a lot of it) ends with marriage. The heroine is rewarded for her sterling (if, to her fellow characters, largely invisible) qualities; the hero realises where happiness and moral worth lies. They live happily ever after, completed by each other.

In life, on the other hand, marriage is no guarantee of completion. At best, it is the beginning of a story of a relationship that will go on maturing, developing, shifting. By the time a couple reaches middle age, things will look different. They may have hurt each other or be relieved mostly to have made a success of things; they may have separated and be starting again; they may have given up on coupledom and be casting more widely for different kinds of interactions.

The human need for relationships doesn’t go away as we age. But it is a truism that older people become more diverse and individual as they get older (making hard work of attempts to generalise about the ageing population, let alone to legislate for it). In relationships as in everything else, what people want as they mature is not a question that yields easy answers.

Our experience on Gransnet, the social networking site which I edit, is that sex remains a powerful force for many. For others, it is less viscerally demanding than it used to be; for some it remains important mostly as a gesture, a means of communicating love. For some it has gone and is not missed; others mourn it, and mourn the wanting it as much as the sex itself. Meanwhile, other considerations – a lifetime of family, friends, identity – come into play that make starting and continuing relationships a less hormone-driven, more considered business.

On the whole, it’s probably fair to say, there’s less of the desperate, lustful urgency that propelled people in and out of relationships when they were younger. Yet we still need relationships: one thing we know for sure is that social connections and close relationships are extremely important to resilience in old age.

Gransnetters cover the spectrum of relationship-types. We have members who are divorced (sometimes with relief, sometimes disappointedly); bereaved; who have been single all their lives; who have been married more than once
As the population ages, these diverse and complex older people are becoming of increasing cultural interest. Novelist are writing stories about characters in the second half of their lives; film-makers are discovering that the old can have rich and dramatic emotional experiences too. But on the whole, our ideas about relationships haven’t caught up with the reality. As so often with ageing, attitudes lag behind reality. Given that half the people who have ever lived to the age of 65 are alive today, it’s probably not surprising that we’re carrying the wrong cultural baggage. Say ‘relationships’ to most people and their first image is probably of a young courting couple; their second might be thirtysomethings struggling with baggage. Say ‘relationships’ to most people and their first image is probably of a young courting couple; their second might be thirtysomethings struggling with parenthood and jobs and trying to fit in sex.

Older people have at least as much need of relationships as the young, but there has been scant discussion of what constitutes good relationships in later life or how to foster better ones. Relate’s Retirement Ready campaign being an honourable and impressive exception. On Gransnet, the question has been aired repeatedly in one form or another since we launched a couple of years ago. What makes a husband worth having? Are you better off looking elsewhere for emotional sustenance? How does the wider family bolster you emotionally? What do you do when your daughter-in-law appears to dislike you?

The ageing population is one hugely disruptive force in contemporary life. The other revolutionary change of our times is, of course, technological. The web has the potential to revolutionise the business of getting older. It is not uncommon on Gransnet for someone who has been posting for a while and established an identity that is funny and feisty, independent and interesting, to admit that she feels isolated or is sometimes lonely, that she is disabled or a carer and unable to get out much. On Gransnet, posters are anonymous (they have usernames) and invisible. They can forge relationships that cut through prejudice and ageism.

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The internet has tremendous potential to enlarge social circles and create new ways of interacting. Research by Digital Unite among over-55s using the internet found that 86 per cent said it had improved their lives while 72 per cent said that being online had helped to reduce feelings of isolation. 81 per cent said it had made them feel part of modern society.

The internet potentially opens up a world of people who might share your interests and concerns (and who might not – but that can be interesting too). Gransnetters are often surprised by but doubly so as you get older) and mostly have been too busy with work/partners/family to look after number one. Is this why Gransnet is such a success? gracesmum

The Campaign to End Loneliness estimates that ten per cent of over-65s are lonely most of all of the time with the numbers at risk of loneliness much higher. Seventeen per cent of older people are in contact with family, friends and neighbours less often than once a week; 12 per cent say they feel trapped in their own homes; nine per cent feel cut off from society. Evidence from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing 2002-10 suggests that one in 20 adults over 50 are ‘detached’ from social networks. While a person living alone is not necessarily lonely, research shows that it’s often a factor; 60 per cent of women aged 75 and over live alone.

Loneliness is personally wretched; it is also expensive for the country. There is evidence that socially engaged older people experience less cognitive decline and are less prone to dementia than their isolated peers. The risk of Alzheimer’s disease more than doubles when older people are lonely. A meta-analysis of 148 studies of social relationships and mortality found a 50 per cent increased likelihood of survival among those with strong social connections after seven years, regardless of initial health status and other factors (gender, country of origin etc.) The same study showed that having weak social connections carries a serious health risk, equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day or being an alcoholic. Less measurably, but as importantly, relationships are vital to quality of life; most people view them as the key constituent of a good life.

Geraldine Bedell

(sometimes successfully, sometimes not), who are gay and were always out; who couldn’t be out; who are resolutely and delightedly single; who are no longer interested in couple relationships and want a different kind of connection with the world and the different identity that comes with it; who still wouldn’t say no to the kind of romantic love that promises a sense of destiny fulfilled.

I think it is quite normal to think everybody else is enjoying a full social life with non-stop invitations and ‘very dear friends’ round every corner; when the reality is that most of us are shy, reluctant to risk rejection (hard enough when you are young,
the strength of the bonds they develop online with people who were and, in some ways, remain strangers.

"Since I found Gransnet earlier this year I have felt supported through what has been a very difficult time. It has become part of my day to log on and see what is happening in everyone's lives. I've laughed out loud and been moved by some of the problems and difficulties some of you have faced with great fortitude. I'm proud to be part of such a strong, feisty, funny group of (mainly) women... it has been a great comfort to me in difficult times."

Some of our members have met up offline in groups for lunch or drinks; some have visited each other in hospital. A number have taken holidays together. Those who use the site confessionally, to talk about unhappy relationships or sex or difficulties with their children, can equally choose to remain anonymous.

"Gransnet is a wonderful place to come when you have worries. You can say things you mightn't want to say to friends/family, in anonymity. It can be such a relief to express your worries and find others in a similar situation. I've been helped and comforted here by some lovely people." sunflowersuffolk

In May this year, 90-year-old Harry Leslie Smith wrote a piece for the Guardian describing how the internet had sustained him through the double bereavement of his wife and son. 'The internet has become our agora,' he said, 'the meeting place where diverse opinions can be debated alongside comments on last night's football match. For those able to participate, it is a wonderful place to learn, speak one's mind or relax by playing an online game. For me, being able to navigate through the internet has made my life a less lonely place.'

In the two and a half years since we launched Gransnet, a number of our members have suffered bereavement and, like Harry Smith, have found talking to people online surprisingly helpful.

"Most of my friends still have their partners and though they have been supportive, they really don't understand how lonely it can still be at times. Being able to read about so many subjects and post on Gransnet is a godsend. It makes you realise you are never the only one and that is a great help." trendygran

"Regrettably I lost my wife just over two years ago, from which I am still trying to recover, and I find from the short time I have been with you it has been a distinct comfort. Generally the people I have conversed with have been super." Terry

Not all older people are online, of course. I get asked less often nowadays whether it's a problem finding enough grans on the internet, but I do still get asked. I tend to reply that 50 per cent of grans are under 65 and ten per cent are under 50 and that our members who are tweeting in their 80s would be deeply offended by the ageist assumption that they can't 'do' the internet.

But of course the sceptics have a point. Seven million people in the UK remain unconnected and, although digital exclusion is more closely related to social exclusion than to age, only 27.3 per cent of women over the age of 75 are online. Even among the over 50s, coverage is only 70 per cent.

It's difficult to know what lies behind the refusal to forge new relationships online. My mother, now 83, was a refusenik for a long time on the grounds that she spent quite enough time alone already. She said she didn't want to be isolated with a keyboard and a screen. When she was eventually persuaded, she was surprised to discover that the internet deepened her offline relationships and gave her a new way to communicate with friends, children and grandchildren and to share in their preoccupations and activities.

The government's digital by default agenda, which seeks to realise 1.8bn in savings and boost the economy by transferring government and local authority services online, aims to persuade reluctant users that being on the net can save time, money, and make us feel better connected, less lonely and better informed. Being digitally excluded, we are reminded, means having diminishing access to public and commercial services, to information and advice.

The trouble with this is that it's all about push. It implies the internet is good for you. It also requires people to acknowledge that they are lonely, that they do need to be better-connected or informed - none of which is likely to make you feel great about yourself. For older people who have managed without the internet their whole lives and rather resent the removal of person-to-person services, it feels like rather a punishing message. Young people don't go online because it's good for them; they do it for music, video, gossip, jokes, images, to talk to their friends, to make connections. It's only when the internet offers an equivalent 'pull' to older adults that resistance will be overcome. It's striking, for example, how many of our members mention that they bought their first computer to Skype their grandchildren. In an increasingly mobile world, one in three UK grandparents sees their grandchildren less than once a month; technology can help to overcome the distance. Skype's marketing department evidently know this: there are various references to grandparents on their website. ('Why not give grandma a quick demo... get that secret recipe off grandma.')

The web is largely designed by 25 year-olds for 25 year-olds. Despite an occasional nod in the direction of so-called co-creation, older people rarely get asked...
what innovations they want to see. Not long after we launched, a number of gransnetters spent a hack day with young Google developers. The gransnetters were thrilled to be listened to by the young hotshot techies and the young people claimed to benefit from the scope of the gransnetters’ experience. Perhaps, as the population ages, there will be more attention paid to the kind of internet that older people want.

According to a YouGov survey last year, one in five relationships now starts online. Today a Shakespearean heroine would most likely be sparring with her hero on twitter; a Jane Austen character would rely less on assemblies and balls, more on dating sites. Older people are caught up in this too: there is a growing number of specialist sites and plenty of older people are on the non-specialist dating sites.

Our experience at Gransnet, though, is that people need a variety of different kinds of relationships and connections to give shape and meaning and variety to their lives as they age. For some this is because intimate relationships recede following bereavement or divorce or become less intense. But it is also true of those for whom marriage or partnership remains absolutely central. There is no need for social circles to contract as we age any more; there’s a whole world of people quite like us out there in the ether keen to communicate.

The internet cannot substitute entirely for relationships in the real world, of course. But it can improve and help us to explore the relationships we already have, to find new ways to communicate with friends, family and lovers. It can also introduce us to a host of new people whom we may only ever know online, but who can amuse, support, advise and entertain us, enhancing our sense of ourselves and of our place in the world.

Geraldine Bedell

Geraldine frequently writes and broadcasts on issues to do with ageing. Until recently the founding editor of Gransnet, with one million page views a month, she is the co-founder of Family Innovation Zone, a social enterprise researching and promoting innovations to help families. A former journalist for the Observer and the Independent on Sunday, she edited The New Old Age for Nesta and is the author of several books.
We sat over the dinner table, eating our meal in desultory silence, just as it had been at breakfast and would probably be the meal after, and the next... My husband Olly and I could think of nothing to say to each other that seemed significant, let alone interesting. When we did talk it was likely to be a snappy comment, a sour criticism.

What had happened? Why this emotional drought after 20-odd years of spirited, if volatile, time as a couple? So that we now resembled one of those New Yorker cartoons of couples drawn large as caricatures, at opposite ends of a sofa watching TV, or across from each other in a restaurant looking doggedly down at their plates, so easy to sneer at during happy times.

Looking back I am sure it was classic empty-nest stuff but we didn’t see that then. We simply thought the life had drained from our relationship. Our two teenage sons had left home recently, off into busy, engaging lives of their own, and although we heard from them and saw them from time to time, we were forced to see that the shape of our home life had morphed forever. We had entered that stage people anticipate so enthusiastically, when they will have time for themselves. Until it happens that is, when suddenly the echoing emptiness replaces any imaginable pleasure in togetherness a deux.

That is how it was for us. I am sure Olly and I were both grieving the loss of a way of being that had been knitted around the lives of our young. A life centred around the home, a hub for family relationships. So much had gone with our young: animation, and demands; the time of guinea pigs, rabbits, cats, a dog bought in response to children’s begging; the riotous kids’ birthday parties and the struggles and battles as they hit puberty. To bohemian family holidays, the agonies of exams and getting into university, the informal family meals, the spontaneous evening when we decided in unison to flop in a family bundle on the sofa in front of a dvd we had been caught up in it all.

Nor could we offer each other any solace; neither of us could replace what was gone, nor envisage how we might pick our future up, dust it down and start all over again. So it was that we drew ever further apart, seemingly irritated almost beyond measure by each other.

**A home for the heart**

Angela Neustatter

Angela is a journalist of more than 30 years writing for all the broadsheet newspapers. She is author of nine non-fiction books. The latest is “The Year I Turn...A Quirky A to Z of Ageing” and two series of books talking to young people about their mental health issues, and a book about how home impacts on our lives and relationships.

She shares a home in North London with her husband, eldest son, his wife and Angela’s granddaughter.
It was the tension and lack of communication between us that led to the watershed moment: an explosive row when Olly, my husband, exclaimed that I should live on my own. But also a kind of epiphany which forced us to realise how vital home was as a root, a place of reassuring familiarity, a place which could be turned from the toxic impact of our gone bad relationship to a base for living a rich and rewarding life where our family history remains part of what makes our house a home. The place that had been so much the heart of our family life and love.

But to return to that defining moment and Olly's outburst. To his suggesting I should live alone came as a shock is understatement. There was my life partner saying he would prefer the empty nest without me. Yet when I got to thinking I realised that the idea of being freed from the strain of the impasse we had reached felt like a relief to me too. Were we to become one of the rising percentage of people (8.9 per cent) in the 60-plus age group choosing divorce over the long haul together? We needed to talk.

That talk took us to the brink forcing us to recognise that if we really couldn't find a better way to relate and wanted to be apart from each other with equal homes of our own, we had to sell. I think we did a bit of growing up in that moment. Both of us realised how important our home was in our lives and how little either of us wanted to be without it. The place was invested with so much of our family history; Olly's labours in helping convert what had been a wreck of a pub into a family home full of recycled wood and wonderful light; the Japanese soak tub he put on the roof patio, the little studio he constructed where I have made stained glass windows for our home, and so much else. We have argued then compromised over colour schemes and decor learning – a valuable tool for other kinds of disagreement – that compromise can feel good, rather than being a dirty word.

Our grim-faced discussion about selling up morphed into a talk about how we could give each other breathing space, while staying in our home. A time to see what a momentous role home represents in our lives if we can hold on to it. Home has has huge symbolic as well as physical importance. The philosopher Alain de Botton talks of home as “a refuge from the encroaching chaos” in the outside world. Yet in today's world it seems that the outside world positively batters at our doors to invade privacy and quiet time, to demand that we work and play in the world outside, and have the scrag end of our animated hours for what goes on within our private abode.

Yet disposing of home as a way of sorting relationships that no longer feel good has become one more way that we, in today's culture, cast aside once cherished aspects of life, as if they were polystyrene cups.

Of course a home where the atmosphere has shifted from loving to something that feels dismaly like loathing, has deteriorated into a caudron bubbling with emotions where couples hurt and harm each other what the psychotherapist Michael Vincent Miller calls “emotional terrorism”, is hard to value let alone cherish. But then, all too often, when we decide that separating and disposing of home is the answer, this erstwhile sanctuary becomes a piece of real estate fought
over savagely in the courts and how often you hear people saying they wish they
had found a better way.

This thinking led me to wonder how far focusing on home, prioritising it as a
place where there is time for relaxation, sociability, time to be our authentic
selves, could help to strengthen and enhance relationships. Yet too easily we
are seduced into seeing socialising out, having a meal at a restaurant for a treat,
going to a show, a movie and so on represent relaxation and fun. That on top of
the working hours so many of us put in leaves no more than the scrag end of our
animated hours for home life. Scant time to shape a companionable and loving
mutual existence, in unspoken-for time, that is such a vital part of a relationship.
Gaston Bachelard in his wonderful book *The Poetics of Space* saw the risk of
home without enough emotional life lived in it, becoming “an inert box”.

I found myself considering the role of home in its different ways, a great deal,
and finding what grand claims some make for its importance. Take Confucius
who had it that the strength of a nation depends on the integrity of the home.
Barbara Bonner, who edited *Sacred Space* believes it imperative that we find a
way to give home a central importance in life again. “The writers’ stories showed
overwhelmingly the social, spiritual and emotional dislocations we have suffered.
It is clear that the issue of home strikes troubling chords in our society.”

Let’s look from a different perspective: we know that that moving house is
considered one of the three most traumatic life events, that losing a home or
being homeless is a major predictor of mental health problems, that the children
of separated parents who dispose of the family home may feel, as one put it “as
though I had suddenly become homeless”, that people sharing a home happily
have a layer of pleasure in their existence that fosters well-being.

The grace of novelist Annie Proulx’s prose in no way disguises the upset it caused
her to live in 20 different homes during her childhood; to be subject to her father’s
single-minded use of moving to serve his purpose, regardless of how it felt for his
children:

“My father... was always moving up the various ladders of his ambition... A large
part of the reason for constantly moving was my father’s obsessive desire to
reinvent himself.”

All of which led me to feel that the often unacknowledged significance of home
and the fact that if we allow it the time and opportunities, the bricks and mortar
that embrace the primary relationships we create with others, needed flagging up
and examining. That was the starting point for my book *A Home For The Heart*
*(Gibson Square)*. My idea was to bring home centre stage and look at the different
ways in which it impacts on how we relate as couples, as parents, as a family along
with stories and anecdotes of how and why home has enriched lives.

Unfaithfulness, the sense of betrayal that illicit infidelity inflicts, more often than
not act, in the words of couples therapist and Professor of Psychology at Exeter
University Dr Janet Reibstein as: “like an exocet exploding into a relationship
that has been built on the understanding that both partners are committed
to monogamy.” And in the fall-out of pain, recriminations and outrage home
becomes part of what is wrong, filled with toxic emotion and unable any longer
to hold and support its inhabitants. As Reibstein puts it: “A large part of many
relationships is putting together a home as a way of cementing the idea that this
is a special relationship, and home can express vividly the time when you are
comfortable. But home can seem as though it is letting you down when it no
longer feels that way.”

So in my chapter Not Forsaking All Others I question whether we can find a way
to tolerate greater sexual freedom without it wrecking home and our security.
Can maintaining a stable and loving home, albeit with an unorthodox number
of people involved in the relationship paradigm, be a way of having enduring
relationships, and particularly when there are children involved?

I talk, too, a good deal about the role of home for children who are likely to spend
much of their seminal growing time in the home. How it is the place where, says
psychologist Daniel Goleman, they learn emotional intelligence. But for this to
be so they need a home life where there is time and enthusiasm for relating,
enjoyment, conversation and debate. Where love can be given at more relaxed
times than when we are rushing out the door or saying goodnight, and there
is time to work through troublesome stuff. In doing this, parents are not only
creating a sense of home as a secure sanctuary for their young, but investing in
their own relationship as loving parents.

I was interested, too, to explore whether having a home costing millions
of pounds and often large enough to accommodate a small African village,
as celebrities and the very rich tend to, actually improves the chances of a
relationship doing well? Certainly we know, as I discuss in the chapter A Hell of A
Home, living in the most degraded and degrading housing can severely damage
the health of relationships and family life.

It seems that, for example, Ashley and Cheryl Cole, spending £6 million on
their Surrey home, or Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt were suggesting – albeit
subconsciously – that by buying a show-off pile in Beverley Hills they could buy
an elevated degree of joyful contentment. An idea reinforced, of course, by the
spreads in glossy magazines showing “personalities” at home, in their luxury
pads, beatific smiles on their faces and anodyne quotes uttered about how much
pleasure having the very best of everything brings. And yet it is oh-so-familiar
to see these relationships end in tears and then the divorce courts where the
market value of the home becomes its sole meaning. No amount of gold plated
bathrooms, penthouse extensions, turrets, ranch-style sprawl, manicured acres is the point when we do not use home to put time, energy and emotional sense into our partnerships.

It is salutary for those of us who have been touched by the way lives of pampered unreality have been marketed to draw an almost surreal amount of awe and envy, to pause and hear the thoughts of Raymond Tallis, philosopher, neuroscientist and cultural critic. He talks of a “cognitive malaise” in which “the heart of celebrity culture is an individual emptiness gawped at by a collective emptiness... Preoccupation with celebrities is an appalling squandering of human consciousness.”

At which point let’s return to the role home plays in supporting and enhancing relationships at a time when we hear so much about the difficulties relationships have, the fact that an average marriage lasts eleven years, and those cohabiting fare worse. It adds up to a huge amount of distress and despair as Relate and organisations helping people manage their emotional lives know well.

Perhaps we need to build thinking about the role of home into our relationship equation from the beginning. So much energy goes into planning a wedding and the business of buying, or renting, a home. But do we come together to consider what we want our home to feel like, how we envisage using it, what represents relaxation and pleasure in the domestic base?

Even if we can afford to call in architects and interior designers to give of their best, shouldn’t we stop to consider whether it would be enjoyable to be involved in creating the home we will live in – discussing building design, the colour of walls, the type of furnishings.

Homes are organic places which respond to how you live, how your tastes evolve around the way you use them. As one interviewee said to me: “We put just the basics and some cheap bits and pieces into our home to begin with, and I found the house telling me what it needed when we could afford something new. My husband and I also got a lot of pleasure going to auction halls, second hand shops and quirky little shops and finding something that really thrilled us.”

Finding ways to make home fit your value system – for example having as many green features as possible, or building furniture from re-cycled materials – we slept for years on a raised bed Olly made from wooden sleepers he found in a skip – can cement you as a couple. As can planning and planting a garden together, creating a play area for children. In other words letting creating a personal home where you have thought of how you want to be in it, be a dynamic part of what you do together.

When a home has lost its pleasure for a couple, it is also possible to use the place and its contents to re-create intimacy. Dr Reibstein tells of a couple Georgina and Julio, who went to her for help, with little conviction that anything could be done for them.

“They had no sex life, no affection – all they had was fighting and kids. I asked to go to their home and see them and although they lived in a smart building there was nowhere that offered the chance to enjoy being together. No sofa or comfortable chairs in the sitting room. I suggested they go and buy a sofa, a place they could sit close. I knew that they had stopped having sex some time ago. The bedroom had become threatening as a place where intimacy had been pleasurable and was now a site of rejection.”

The couple bought a sofa and once that was installed in the sitting room, I got them to sit beside each other. “Later I suggested to Georgina and Julio that they cuddle a bit”, says Dr Reibstein, “they did this and I thought it time to suggest a little sex play, but not full sex. Slowly they began to enjoy this closeness and it led to full sex which both found a loving experience. In due course they told me their sex life was great and they stopped coming to me.”

There may not be a ground-plan, a panacea, for how we can make home strengthen and animate our life-chosen relationships, but researching my book convinced me that if we let the importance of home get lost, we may lose more than we imagine.

It is certainly true in my case. Olly and I gave up our separate togetherness when our eldest son and his Japanese wife asked if they could rent one of the floors in our house when their baby was born. They wanted to live close to family. We agreed delightedly. We had had time enough to realise that our relationship still had life in it and Olly constructed his own “den” under the eaves of our home as a private retreat. I have an office nearby.

So it is that their now two-year-old daughter comes visiting regularly, we take her out and share bath-time. The pleasure of extended family is great, and being grandparents together has brought a new, rich dimension to our lives.

We credit our home with saving our relationship by reminding us how much we value it, and helping us to stand back and find a way other than splitting up when the going was so dismal. If that had not happened none of the pleasure we and our young take in this family home would have been possible.

Angela Neustatter
Notes
2 Section 28 of the Local Government Act banned the promotion of homosexuality by Local Authorities, including within schools.
3 This is not to say that LGBT were not previously found in these setting but more that previous generations may have felt disempowered from revealing their identities.
4 This means that we overlook the minority of cohort members who had no record of having lived with a partner, who accounted for less than 5 per cent of the whole cohort and who may or may not identify as LGBT. Our measure also lends itself vulnerable to the misclassification of a number of those who exclusively enter into opposite sex cohabiting partnerships, but may have same sex non-cohabiting relationships, as being non-LGBT.
5 We also tested models using current socioeconomic and health characteristics, finding similar results.

References
Stonewall (2010) Average coming out age has fallen by over 20 years http://www.stonewall.org.uk/media/current_releases/4867.asp
About Relate

Relate is the UK’s leading relationship support organisation, serving more than one million people through information, support and counselling every year. Our vision is a world where strong and healthy relationships are actively promoted as the basis for a thriving society, and our mission is to develop and support healthy relationships by:

- helping couples, families and individuals to make relationships work better
- delivering inclusive, high-quality services that are relevant at every stage of life
- helping both the public and policy makers improve their understanding of relationships and what makes them flourish.

Everyone can access Relate services through a growing range of channels: face to face, online, on the phone and via email.

Visit [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk) for more information.

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