

# Al and Tipper Gore: later-life divorces no longer uncommon

Al and Tipper Gore have announced that they are separating after 40 years of marriage. With Americans living longer, the number of divorces after decades of marriage is increasing.



In this July 26, 2004, file photo, former Vice President Al Gore kisses his wife Tipper Gore after addressing the delegates during the Democratic National Convention at the FleetCenter in Boston.

(Kevork Djansezian/AP/File)

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After lasting four decades through a deployment to Vietnam, four children, the near-death of one child, a vice presidency, a presidential election, and a Nobel Peace Prize, Al and Tipper Gore's separation after 40 years of marriage came as a shock to Americans.

Theirs was the faithful, steady counterpoint to Bill Clinton's philandering. In the world of politics where new dalliances are reported every week, theirs was a rare, successful marriage. And then there was that kiss. The long, uncomfortable smooch in front of millions of people at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Their marriage seemed invincible.

In fact, the Gores are not that unusual in splitting up after 40 years of marriage. Divorce after decades of marriage is common, says author Stephanie Coontz, and will become more common as people live longer.

"People are living healthier lives, longer lives," says Ms. Coontz, a marriage and family studies expert and author of "Marriage, A History." "It is now possible for someone to hit 65 and expect to live another 20 years.... You get to a point where if a marriage is unsatisfying, you're not talking about sticking it out for a couple more years."

In fact, says Coontz, "gray divorces" – divorces among those 55-and-older – are up. "Divorce rates have been falling for most groups, but they've been rising for those 55-and-older," she says.

## Divorce rate misleading?

It's difficult to find statistics to support that – the US Census Bureau only recently began tracking divorces, and the statistics rarely take into account how long a couple has been married.

Still, evidence suggests divorce rates are falling. The divorce rate is currently 3.5 divorces per 1,000 people (married and unmarried). That's down from 4.2 in 2000, 4.7 in 1990, and 5.3 in 1981. In fact, it's the lowest rate the US has seen since 1970.

According to the 2008 US Census, one quarter of all divorces that took place in the previous year were among those married 20 years or more.

But divorce statistics provide an incomplete – and sometimes misleading – picture of marriage and divorce trends, says Betsey Stevenson, a professor of business and public policy at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business.

"I would be extraordinarily hesitant to present this as a divorce crisis among older people," says Ms. Stevenson.

The divorce rate may be declining overall because fewer people are marrying, and it may be increasing among older people simply because people are living longer, she says. "More people are living, so more are divorcing."

## Marriage: 'We expect more ... and need them less'

Nonetheless, marriage has changed dramatically over the past several decades, says Coontz, making divorce a more feasible option than it was in the 1950s or '60s.

"Marriage has changed more in last 40 years than it has in thousands of years," she says. "For the first time, we have equally successful options outside marriage, so each party is free to leave. And we have a completely new attitude to what marriage should be."

"We expect more from our marriages than we used to and we need them less," she adds. "When it works, marriage today is fairer, more intimate, more fulfilling, more passionate than couples of the past could have imagined. But because it is, a marriage that isn't these things seems less bearable."

Many couples stick it out through years of dissatisfaction for the sake of their children, before splitting up, according to an AARP study of gray divorces.

"The issue is what happens when shared projects are over and you find out that you have grown apart or affection has faded, that things that were once tolerable are no longer tolerable," says Coontz.

## Spouses of the '70s

But the Gores had one big factor working against them, says Stevenson: They were married in the 1970s. "[The Gores married] at the beginning of the greatest divorcing generation in history," she says.

Some 27 percent of those married in the '70s divorced by their 10th wedding anniversary, 43 percent divorced by their 20th anniversary, and close to 50 percent by their 30th anniversary, she says.

The Gores married at a time where expectation for married life was very different for what life actually ended up looking like, mostly due to the surge in women in the labor force. And they married young – Tipper was 22 when she married – so they probably didn't expect to be having a vibrant, active life later in life, Stevenson says.

"The combined factors of early age of first marriage and improvements in health and longevity means their marriage really has to go the distance to make it into death," she says.

The lesson is not taking your marriage for granted, after 10 years or 40.

"People mistakenly believe if you make through the first 10 years of marriage, you're home free," says Stevenson. "That's absolutely not the case. Divorces continue to happen many, many years after marriage. Never take your marriage or spouse for granted."

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