

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

This study is based upon in-depth interviews with 10 individuals, 5 never-married and 5 once-married, midlife, single women without children. Through inquiring about the life experiences of these women, I explored in this study the uniquely personal perceptions held by women within a specific social context. The reality of singlehood is captured in a dynamic way by focusing on the biographical and historical aspects of these women's lives.

Participants shared their understanding of marriage as viewed from a normative midpoint in life. Following these descriptions, the 10 women interviewed reflected on both childhood memories and family messages that may have formed the foundation for their beliefs and shaped their current marital views. These recollections, whether overt or subliminal, illustrate the ways in which social cues regarding marriage are transmitted over time. Traveling along their individual life paths, marriage, whether realized or not, continued to be an ongoing issue in the lives of these single, midlife women.

In conversation, the women spoke of various ways in which beliefs regarding marriage have played out in their own lives, as active or hopeful participants, or as women for whom marriage was not desired. Yet the collective voices of the women interviewed echoed a similar theme: marriage as an ideal is pervasive in our society. Based on their experiences and within the context of middle age, the images these women shared provide a kaleidoscope of process in how marriage beliefs are formed and transformed over time. Whether never-married or once-married, these women occupy midlife status outside the parameters of marriage. How has this truth influenced their marriage beliefs? Living outside the scope of marriage often requires dealing with compromise, surviving stereotypes, and coping with loneliness and loss. Yet

despite these challenges, the lived experiences of these single women continue to be a testament that viable and meaningful lives can and do exist apart from a legal marital union.

The analysis is organized around eight major themes. The first section, “The Mystique of Marriage,” examines current marriage beliefs espoused by single midlife women, acknowledging the inherent tension that lies between the societal mandate to ever marry versus a personal desire to marry successfully. The section that follows, “Realities for Single Women at Midlife,” elucidates the numerous ways in which single women construct a meaningful life apart from a marital relationship. Circling back to the past, the next three sections, “Childhood Memories,” “Family Messages,” and “Perspectives from the Never-Married and Once-Married,” highlight the temporal and contextual aspects of process by showing how marriage beliefs formed in childhood are shaped and transformed across time, based on individual life experiences.

In the section entitled, “Growing Up but not Necessarily Growing Older,” single women locate themselves within the context of middle age, offering insights and understanding into the unique meaning midlife holds for each of them. “Surviving Stigmas, Living with Loss, Coping with Loneliness,” chronicles the process of coming to terms with societal as well as personal expectations surrounding marriage. The final section of this analysis, “Letting Go of the Fantasy of Marriage, but Hanging Onto the Dream,” describes the ways in which midlife single women have let go of the fantasy of the happily-ever-after marriage, but *not* of the dream of marrying, regardless of their past experiences.

### Mystique of Marriage

Although the meaning of marriage and the beliefs surrounding it varied from woman to woman, the allure of marriage remained strong. A common thread running throughout the

interviews was the assumption, whether personal, familial, or societal, that each woman would marry.

### The Expectation

While the origin of the message received was often unclear or implicitly understood, most women recognized, as young children, that marriage was an expectation. Despite their inability to pinpoint the source of the message, the belief that each would one day fulfill the expectation, demonstrates how messages regarding marriage become internalized and deeply embedded within the fabric of an individual's life. This expectation to marry was expressed by three once-married women, as well as by Ellen, who had never-married:

I guess the normal thing to do was to get married and have kids. (Lydia)

I guess, ya know, someday I'll get married. (Sophie)

I don't know, I guess I always thought I would [get married]. (Kim)

I just don't remember, it's so long ago, now. I'm sure I did think that I would be [married], eventually. (Ellen)

Florence, a never-married woman in her 40s, summed it up like this:

Let's put it this way, it was never really in my mind, okay, by this certain age I'm gonna be married and have x number of children or else I'm never getting married. It was just kinda like ... it wasn't something I planned for, it was like okay, I don't know if I can even put an age on anything. It was just like, I guess it'll happen. (Florence)

Even for Rose, who never pictured herself marrying, the expectation to marry was evidenced in the lives of those around her:

Although nobody ever made me think it was expected of me to get married, it's just, I saw that everybody else had those expectations of themselves and I thought, "Oh God." (Rose)

Helen stated that the expectation to marry or “The American Dream,” was a product of her time, the Baby Boomer era:

I grew up in the Baby Boomer era and the whole concept of life then was you grew up, you got married, and you had kids. That was the American Dream. And so, going through school, even though you were taking courses that were college-oriented, you were still thinking, “Well, I’ll probably get married and I’ll have a family and I’ll be a Mom.” It was just like it was a given thing, in conversation, it would be like, “Well, when you grow up and get married.” (Helen)

Continuing on, Helen reflected on the way in which singlehood was viewed as a problem, solved only by marriage:

That was part of the equation. There was no other solution to that problem. When you grow up, you get married. Most of the time, like I said, when I was growing up, in order to be validated, you had to get married and raise your own family. (Helen)

Betty acknowledged that people in society expect most individuals to marry, an expectation that most conform to:

I think it’s still expected in this society. If you’re with somebody and you’ve been with somebody for a few years, you get married. And I think most people do that. (Betty)

#### A Mixed Message -- Marriage Solves Everything versus Marriage is Hard Work

Descriptions of what marriage was and represents often included words and phrases like security, protection, completion, a covenant, settling down, having a family, control, and lack of freedom. For Lydia, a once-married woman in her 30s, marriage represented something else: fear and betrayal:

I guess it’s out of fear [that I’ve remained single] ... of getting into another relationship, getting hurt, not trustin’, ya know ? (Lydia)

From childhood through early adulthood, many of the women believed that marriage was wonderful and would solve all their problems. The realization that marriage was less than wonderful was often tempered by experience and informed by age.

Raised with a strict, religious upbringing, Betty described her experience of growing up thinking marriage was one way, and finding out later, that it was another:

I think my views have changed over the years. I thought once you got married everything was going to be wonderful, you weren't going to have problems, you were going to get along fine together and things like that. Ya know, your husband goes to work and comes home and you have dinner on the table and you spend the evening together and it's all wonderful ... it's not going to be like that. After I got out of there [home] and grew up a bit, I realized that isn't the way it is. (Betty)

Helen spoke of the ways marriage was romanticized in the media and her subsequent disillusionment in witnessing the breakdown of marriages around her:

I think a lot of that, again, was part of the time I grew up in, because the shows on TV like, "Father Knows Best," and all of those that had your typical nuclear [sic] family, I said nuclear like Jimmy Carter, nuclear family <laugh> like a father, and a mother, and the children. It was like when you grow up and get married, that solves everything. That solves all your problems. Then as you grow older and you see everybody's marriages falling apart, you realize that somebody told a lie somewhere. You know that it's not all roses the minute you walk out of the chapel. And that's the reason I say a lot of the knowledge comes with age, a lot of the wisdom. But, I just assumed that if I did get married, that it would just be like the storybook endings that you read and that you see in the movies. You fall wildly in love, you get married, and you live happily ever after. (Helen)

Despite the failed marriages she saw, Helen assumed that her parent's "good marriage" might somehow entitle her to a similar experience:

My Mom and Dad, now, they had a good marriage. And I guess I assumed that if I ever married, I would have that too. It would just be given to me on a silver platter the minute that the marriage vows had been spoken and you walked out the door as man and wife. I didn't realize how much work there was to it, I guess. (Helen)

For Avery, a once-married woman from a strict, religious background, the realization that marriage was hard work was a notion that was always present:

I thought it was a covenant, but I didn't see anybody having a whole lot of fun. Like my Mom had to do all of the work. She had all of the responsibilities of these four children. All the housework, all the cooking, all the cleaning. (Avery)

Whether initially glorified or villainized, most of the women conceded that a good marriage was the product of hard work. Betty articulated this sentiment:

I think it's kinda like a rollercoaster, ya know ? And if you want to do that, you have to go on the rollercoaster and you have to go up and down and up and down and you can't think that it's all going to be peaches and cream. That if the bottom goes out and if it means a lot to you, you have to be willing, hopefully, to stay in it, to ride it out and to make some changes in your life. 'Cuz you gotta work at it, it ain't no joyride. I mean, of course it's great, but nothing works unless you work at it. (Betty)

### Anybody Can Get Married but Good Marriages Are Rare

Throughout the course of interviewing, it became apparent to me that the women with whom I spoke made an important distinction between **getting** married and **having** a successful marriage. While many expressed the belief that anyone could get married if she or he wanted to, it was equally understood that the probability of having a successful marriage was rare, or as one woman noted, a matter of “serendipity.”

The certainty of this belief was evident by the confident manner in which the following women spoke:

Oh God. I think anybody can [be married] ... I know anybody can. (Rose)

God says that He'll give you the desires of your heart, and I believe that if somebody really wants to be married, yes, I believe they can be. (Elsie)

Oh, there's somebody out there for everybody, just depends on whether you find them or not. Some people do, some people don't. (Kim)

Florence and Rose concurred with this assessment, based on their accounts with friends and acquaintances:

I know personally of somebody, a lady who owned up to this with me. Who told me of her own life and said that when she was young she was actually in love with somebody else. I don't know what happened there, but she was getting on in her years and she wanted to have children, so she married a man who was interested in her, but she wasn't necessarily in love with, so that she could have children. But since then, after

the children grew up, the house is like, they live in the same house but they don't share anything. (Florence)

It may not be the person you want, but anybody can go out there and get married. I'm sure anybody can go out and get married if that is the goal, to be married and not to have a meaningful, enjoyable relationship. I mean ... it could be a person with a single digit IQ, who needs financial support, but you could pick somebody up and marry him or her. Yeah, I have no doubts about that, because I know some people who have done exactly that just because they think there's some prestige in being married. Which I don't think there's any prestige in any lifestyle, it's just one of those things you have. No status attached. (Rose)

Reiterating the belief that anyone can get married, Helen related a story from her own life:

If I was willing to settle for trash I could have gotten married. I mean, if I wanted to go hang around in the bar just to find a man, and somehow finagle him into a marriage, I could have done that. Lots of women do that, and you know where they end up. (Helen)

Sophie, a once-married African-American woman, made the observation that the prospect of marriage and control over marrying seemed to lessen as one got older:

Well there's still people getting married, but usually most of 'em are ... they grew up together from high school and went to college and they pretty much said, "Well, we're engaged and we're gonna get married after we get out of college." A lot of couples who have lived together for a long time are splitting up and they're in our age group. Maybe they've been together five years or longer and all of a sudden they find out he's involved with someone else and they're devastated, so that's why I say marriages aren't as likely. A lot of people have been living together and know they're eventually gonna get married or whatever and they come up with, "I've met someone else." That's why I say, no, you don't have the control of marrying anymore. (Sophie)

Feelings of sadness or resignation often accompanied statements made by women regarding the rarity of successful marriages:

I'm glad to see it when it works and when people are getting married and it lasts, but it rarely happens. And a lot of times I think it's a pity when they spend \$20,000 or \$30,000 for weddings and it's only going to last a year or two. (Sophie)  
I know a lot of people whose parents, or even just friends of mine who have been married for a long period of time. I know it does work ... for some people. But, in my

family's case, there were two strong, stubborn people and neither one of them seemed to want to give. (Ellen)

When asked to comment on her perception of the frequency of successful marriages, Rose laughed and said:

Probably a percentage of the time ... like 0.5. (Rose)

### Realities for Single Women at Midlife

Whether reached by way of marriage and divorce or through lifelong singlehood, working-class, midlife single women without children occupy a unique social position. In terms of marriage and motherhood, these women are off-time and out-of-step with others sharing their birth cohort. Regardless if singlehood was embodied as a temporary or permanent state, the desire to create a meaningful life apart from a marital relationship was evident in many of the stories shared. In the ways in which women defined themselves, valued and filled their time, and in their ability and willingness to alter their perceptions to fit a new understanding of the world.

### How I Define Myself

Women voiced strong views regarding the labels of never-married and divorced. Negative connotations associated with these terms and negative life experiences resulting from these marital statuses led many participants to refer to, as well as identify themselves, as single.

Helen and Avery expressed their exasperation and embarrassment in having to specify a marital status when filling out medical or business forms:

And one thing that really irritates me is if you go into a doctor's office, or some other business office and they're filling out a form while you're giving them the information and they say, "What's your maiden name?" And I go, "My maiden name is Jones, I have never been married." And sometimes you have to almost draw people a picture.



It's like they can't see that there's somebody out there that doesn't have a former name. That's the name I was born with, that's the name I've got, and it's the name I'm probably going to die with. Get a grip. (Helen)

Divorce, I think, and this is terrible, I think of some old, bitter old woman, blah. I don't know. And it's just a status, it's just a word, but it's a negative word to me. Because man, it was all under protest, "I do NOT want to be divorced!" Divorcee ... it's like Peyton Place or something. It just had a very embarrassing label that it placed on me. And so ... very, very early on, I would check off "single." When you say divorced, they go, "Awww." But if you say you're single, "Ohhh." You know what I mean? (Avery)

Elsie described the way in which marital labels seem to "categorize you," by revealing her personal experience during job interviews:

I just feel like people categorize you, because even a couple of job interviews I've gone on they said, "Are you single, divorced, or married?" and I say, "Well, I'm single," [and they say] "Well, haven't you been married before?" Yes, I have." Well, what difference should it make? I just don't like being categorized as a divorcee, you're either married, or you're single ... or you're engaged. (Elsie)

Although she admitted that never being married has not been a loss in her life, Florence continued to define herself and relate her sense of identity, in part, to her marital status:

I guess I would give my age, and that I'm single, and like you said, never been married, never had any children. I don't consider those ... what's the word? I can't think of the word ... I don't consider though never being married a loss in my life. My life is very full as you can tell by what I said in my daily ... what my schedule is. I'm very active in my church, I consider myself a Christian therefore I have a certain lifestyle that I try to live by. I think I'm interesting, yes I'm local, I don't know, I guess I base myself on my, as I describe myself, I find myself describing myself according to my age, my marital status and how I'm active in my community, ya know? <laugh> It's kinda like, I guess that's the what I relate my identity to. (Florence)

She added that the label "single" is preferable to the label "never-married":

Actually, I think of myself as single more than never-married. Never-married is, I don't know ... never-married sounds different, it's almost like never-married sounds like a taboo of some type, ya know what I'm saying? It's like I have this extra appendage sticking out on me or the lack thereof that makes me odd compared to other people on the face of the earth. (Florence)

When asked how she referred to herself, Sophie identified with the label “divorced,” expressing the sentiment that she felt she still carried with her the emotional remnants of a previous marriage:

I'd say divorced because I've definitely got all the war injuries <laugh>. Single is more, single and free, you just kinda go with the flow. (Sophie)

For Lydia, definition of self was tied less to marital association and more to sexual identity. For her, the challenge of being single or divorced in a married world was overshadowed by the struggle of being gay in a heterosexual world:

Yeah, it's hard ... because you almost have to pretend to be something you're not. (Lydia)

Other women defined themselves in terms of their degree independence and self-acceptance:

I think a lot of my wanting to get married was based on the fear of being alone. A lot of people just can't stand the idea of being by themselves. But I've reached a point where I'm comfortable inside my own skin, and I'm comfortable inside my own house. (Helen)

I love to be alone, I really do. I feel like I could make better use of my time sometimes, because I do sit around and plan a lot. But yeah, I do love to be alone. I've always been very, very much a loner. Very much. And I'm comfortable with that. And I'm not in a relationship now, and that's fine. (Avery)

### Work -- What I Do, Not My Identity

Two-thirds of the women I spoke with expressed dissatisfaction, not only with the type of work they performed, but also with their work situation in general. Rather than providing a sense of purpose or personal fulfillment, the jobs these women held often included routinized tasks and duties, offering few choices or decision-making opportunities. Although a third of

the women stated that they felt work was central to the meaning of their lives, most considered it a necessary means for ensuring financial survival.

Boredom and monotony characterized the work experiences of both Rose and Helen:

I'm bored shitless from 7 until 12 and then I go to lunch, and then I come back. And then I'm bored shitless from 1 until 4, and then I come home and I'm happy as a lark. My time is my own. Finally! After 8 hours of work. (Rose)

I audit vouchers all day long. And some days I come home in a good mood and some days I am ready to kill somebody. (Helen)

Ellen admitted that although work consumed a great deal of her time and energy, she remained uncertain about the degree of importance or role it plays in her life:

I don't know if it's really important to me. It's been a main focus. It's been my main focus. It takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of energy, and it zaps a lot of energy. (Ellen)

For Sophie, working more than one job enabled her to attain an income level comparable to what she experienced in her marriage as well as helping to occupy her time in the absence of a relationship:

I have a 12-hour day. I work full-time at one job and then I go straight on to the other job and I'm usually there until 10 PM. I'm usually there 8 or 8:30, and then go straight to the other job at 5:00 or either 6:00. (Sophie)

Unlike the majority of women who expressed dissatisfaction with their jobs, Betty and Elsie found work to be an important source of fun and self-fulfillment:

It's a wonderful job, a fun job. We get to work with animals all day long and students, that keeps us going. (Betty)

I like the older people, I love 'em ... I just have a heart for them that's why I'm here, it's not for the money 'cuz there's no money in this business. (Elsie)

### Creating Family Roles Beyond Wife and Mother

For almost half of the women in the study, not occupying the roles of wife or mother was viewed as an opportunity to create new family roles. For two of the women, taking over

the responsibilities of an absent parent following death was a role they assumed out of necessity. For the others, the roles they created were out of choice and a deep desire to connect with those around them in a meaningful way. Whether fashioned by need or desire, the family roles these women created continue to fill an important void, meeting the needs not only of the women who occupy the roles, but touching in a tangible way, the lives of those around them.

For Rose and Helen, two never-married women, taking on the roles and responsibilities of an absent parent was unexpected but accepted:

So with Brad [my brother], I was probably the father figure. See my mother was around, but there was no dad. So I was a bulwark at that point. And Brad needed security. I think I did provide security for Brad when he was growing up. (Rose)

In fact, he was lost after mom died. I had to become mom at that point because dad had never taken her checkbook and written checks to pay for bills. Mom had done that all their married life. (Helen)

For Kim and Elsie, the roles of godmother and aunt provide an opportunity to give nurturing as well as receive affection:

I got 2 godchildren and they'll take care of me when I get older ... they'd move in with me right now if they could. (Kim)

I'm a very family-oriented type person even though I'm still single at 38. I'm very close to my brother and he has a little girl, and I'm her aunt and her godmother. I find that when I'm around her or things like that, I don't wanna go out on a date, I want to have my little niece. (Elsie)

Because of their lack a marital relationship, the important family work that single women do is often overlooked or minimized. Creating new family roles and identifying with them provides single women with a sense of purpose and a feeling of belonging within their larger family structure:

I'm not the matriarch of the family, but I do feel myself sort of like a grandmother figure to my little niece who was just born. So, I sort of am the paternal, the paternal ...

I'm the paternal grandmother ! That's good, I'm the paternal grandmother, that's just what I am ! That's how I see my role. (Rose)

For Helen, the role of family historian was “thrust” upon her when her parents died.

Residing in the family homeplace carried with it a familial responsibility that she was not sure she wanted to take on. Despite her initial reluctance, she came to both accept, and relish, her new role:

I have now assumed the role of family historian. These old pictures that were in my granny's trunk, I'm the one that everybody looks to arrange the family reunions. I'm the one that keeps in touch with everybody. And even people of that generation, my cousins who are a lot older than I am, are now looking to me as the person who remembers family history, has the old pictures, has the old family Bible, all those kind of things. (Helen)

### Altering the Script to Fit the Story

Following a non-traditional life course carries with it a unique set of struggles as well as opportunities. Whether a life path leads to marriage or not, being a child-free, single woman in midlife challenges the norm of marriage and motherhood. Redefining the meaning of singlehood and locating themselves within that definition was an issue for almost all of the women interviewed. Through the use of colorful language, humor, and self-reflection, these women created for themselves an avenue of understanding. Rather than alter their lives to fit the traditional storyline of marriage and family, they have re-written their personal scripts to fit their **own** life stories, as midlife single women.

Avery uses humor to convey her contentment with not being in a relationship:

Unless I build a helicopter landing pad in my backyard, and somebody drops down, I don't make any effort to meet anybody or anything. (Avery)

Because marriage is the expectation, being single generally requires an explanation, if not a justification. Helen employed humor to deal with this reality:

What's a wonderful girl like you doing not married? Like it was a crime! Like if you weren't giving that wonderfulness of yours to a man, you hadn't achieved anything. Well, what was wrong with being wonderful and by yourself? And so, I'm totally convinced, I don't know about you <laugh> but I'm totally convinced that I'm wonderful. (Helen)

Through humor, colloquial language, and self-reflection, Florence placed her singlehood in perspective:

I think in the 20s I just kinda figured that I would sometime get married and have kids, but by the time I was in my 30s it was kinda, eh, no big deal. Now in my 40s, it's like, I still think I'll get married, I think I will, but like I say, if I don't it's not like I feel like there's this big void in my life. I don't know that even earlier, like in my 20s and 30s that I thought at any time that, "Oh gosh, I'm not married," like there's this piece of me missing that's not fulfilled. I don't feel that way, I don't think I've ever felt that way. I'm not like, biting at the bit trying to get down the aisle. (Florence)

I've learned things that I do and don't want in a relationship ... how I want to be treated, how I don't want to be treated. It's kinda narrowed down to what I will agree to and what I won't agree to. I'd say that probably this point in my life the scope is narrowed down pretty good <laugh>. (Florence)

Avery, who found herself taking on her mother's role, both in her marriage and in subsequent relationships, reflected on the difficulty of breaking old patterns and learning new "dance steps":

You dance to the steps that you learned, don't you? And boy, it's hard to learn the steps of a different dance. And even now, I couldn't tell you, I can't predict what it would be like for me if I fell in love with someone again. (Avery)

### Childhood Memories

When asked to recall childhood memories which may have influenced their current marriage beliefs, many of the women responded by saying, "I can't remember anything," or "That was such a long time ago." Yet during the course of the interview process, bits and pieces of childhood memories began to emerge, usually couched in the form of anecdotal stories or humorous recollections.

## Child's Play

Several of the participants made a childhood connection between playing with dolls and their desire for marriage and motherhood versus engaging in tomboy activities, e.g., playing with boxcars, climbing trees, and their lack of desire for a marriage and family:

I didn't play with dolls as a kid. I had enough siblings to take care of my maternal feelings. I was 18 when my youngest brother was born. No, I never saw the advantage unless you wanted to raise a family. To have to put up with somebody else in the house and compromise and make space, and give up some of your territorialism. No, there was no advantage. (Rose)

I was a tomboy. I saw the men getting to do things like driving and bicycling. I was more attracted to what the guys got to do than what the women did. (Avery)

When asked the question, "Did you ever think as a child you'd get married one day?"

Ellen and Lydia answered in the following ways:

My best friend in the world lived across the alley from us in the back and we played together everyday. We played with baby dolls and that kind of stuff, and I'm sure we played house and that kind of stuff. (Ellen)

No, because I played outside with boxcars and climbed trees. (Lydia)

An exception to this was Elsie, who dreamed of marrying and having a large family but also considered herself a tomboy:

I helped him [my dad] fix up the house, he could do anything from electrical work to carpentry work; take a car apart and put it back together. I was always sort of "Daddy's Little Boy" until my brother came along. (Elsie)

## Fairy Tales and Fantasies

Almost half of the women harbored childhood fantasies regarding marriage. Whether imagining themselves to be Cinderella, or hoping one day to meet their knights in shining armor, these women shared romanticized views of how marriage would be:

I was the type of girl that wanted to be Cinderella. I wanted to lose my slipper and somebody to find it and live happily ever after. (Elsie)

And I always had the sort of knight on the white horse shining armor type thing, that whole dream. Someone would come and take care of me and I would stay home and be a housewife. (Betty)

Ever since I was a little girl I had the little girl dreams, the Cinderella thing, your knight in shining armor and all that kinda stuff. The little fairy tale thing that you think about, "I'll get married someday and this will be like this and I'll be like that, and this is the way I want my wedding to be," and all that kinda stuff. (Florence)

Fantasies about marriage did not always take the form of fairy tales and folk myths.

Sewing her wedding dress ahead of time added a touch of reality to Sophie's dream of what her wedding day might be like:

Because I was into sewing I made my gown earlier, when we were engaged or maybe still dating. (Sophie)

### I Always Thought I'd Get Married versus I Never Wanted to Get Married

One-third of the women I interviewed had vivid memories of either always wanting or never wanting to get married. Although these childhood desires did not always play out the same way in adulthood, the fact that these women held such strong childhood views emphasized the intensely emotional connection women made with marriage.

For Rose, a never-married woman in her 40s, and Elsie, a once-married woman in her 30s, childhood proclamations of singlehood and marriage were fulfilled:

I never thought I'd get married, because it's nothing that appealed to me. It's just something that I didn't think would happen to me, it might have happened to me, but I really didn't make myself meet somebody. (Rose)

Both my Mother and my Dad have 9 brothers and sisters, so they come from large families. I always told them that I wanted to have a large family also, I mean from the time that I was 12 years old, I remember telling 'em "I'm gonna get married and I'm gonna have 10 kids." I always wanted to be married. I loved being married, like I said, I like the aspect of sharing. I don't like the idea of being alone. I don't like being alone. (Elsie)



Although she ended up marrying at age 18, Avery remembered that as a 12 year old she vehemently objected to the roles her mother and father assumed in their marital relationship:

I saw my Dad control my Mom her whole life, and actually, I was never going to get married. Never. (Avery)

### Family Messages

Family messages about marriage took many forms. The language and actions of parents, siblings, grandparents, and other extended family members often added depth and complexity to an individual's personal understanding of marriage. Although the transmission of messages was both direct and implied, those received from observing family patterns of behavior often had greater emotional impact.

#### Messages from Parents

Even though the parents' "good" or "bad" marriage did not grant or condemn their daughters to a similar experience, many women's beliefs about marriage were influenced by their perceptions of their parent's marital relationship:

My Mom and Dad, they had a good marriage. They never had disagreements on things as far as, "Well, I don't like doin' it this way, let's do it the other way." They never argued as far as yelling at one another. They never got mad and wouldn't speak to one another. They worked their problems out. They were each other's best friend. In fact, one of my cousins, after my Dad passed away, I said, "Can you believe that I lost Dad six months after Mom?" and she said, "Well honey, they were joined at the hip." And they were. (Helen)

Probably for the fact that my Mother and my Dad's not completely happy together, and I think I'd seen so much of that, ya know, not a "true love" aspect, that I wanted that, I wanted to be able to create that. (Elsie)

My Dad was a pilot and he was gone quite a bit. I can remember a lot of holidays when he wasn't there. So from my very early childhood I remember a lot of periods of time with my Dad gone. I guess my views on marriage are tainted because my parents had an unhappy marriage. Especially the older I got, the more they fought. (Ellen)

A combination of both religious and family beliefs influenced Betty's views on marriage:

My family is very strong Catholic ... when I was growing up it was still pretty normal for the mother to stay at home and not have a job, that was sort of the way we were brought up to think. You were the loving woman and should take care of your man and that's how it was. (Betty)

### Messages from Extended Family

The impact of messages received from extended family were as important as those received in a woman's birth family. Four of the women either grew up with or shared close relationships with their grandparents. Mention of aunts, uncles, and cousins in the stories of these women's lives was frequent:

I come from a real straight, traditional, Christian, Baptist family. And my mom's mother was a real stern woman, and my dad had eight brothers and sisters and none of have ever been divorced. (Avery)

The values and stuff were that everybody in my family mostly stayed together. My Dad's parents are dead so I didn't ever have any dealings with them, but like my Mom's parents stayed together and Mom and Dad stayed together, and Mom's brother Bill, he divorced, but after a long marriage. (Kim)

Kim, a once-married woman in her 30s, spoke affectionately of her grandmother's concern for her remarriage:

"Kim, are you ever gonna get married again? You'd better get you a man to take care of you," but ya know, she's from the old school. (Kim)

Growing up in the same household as her grandmother Florence recalled that the messages she received regarding marriage were tainted by her grandmother's negative life experiences:

Well, I really think what we saw growing up, maybe in different ways affected each one of us. And none of us saw really bad stuff, but a lot of the marriages didn't work out, and I think that made an impact on our lives as children and we saw the effect that

made on us being raised in a family that didn't have a Dad around all the time or other circumstances. Like the main influence on my life, in my early years was my Grandmother. She had a hard life, so her thoughts about marriage and this, that and the other weren't really that great. So basically, some of the things she said, and she taught me, I found out later as an adult weren't exactly the way life could be or should be. (Florence)

### Lessons I Learned within My Family

The meaning of marriage and the importance and value of intimate relationships was determined, in part, by observing the manner in which family members interacted. Granting permission or discouraging expression of certain acts and behaviors by parents, siblings, grandparents or other family members was the byproduct of many of these observations:

I grew up in a household where we teased so mercilessly any sibling who had a girlfriend or a boyfriend, that you hid it. You hid that information from each other. The ridicule would be endless. We were terrible. We were sadistic as hell. (Rose)

My Grandfather would lay on the sofa, and here's my Grandmother over here on the chair. My Grandfather would hold up one finger that meant, "Snap to it, I want a Pepsi." And if he held up two fingers, he wanted a Pepsi and a candy bar. (Avery)

Although my parents have been married since 1951, I have never seen my parents, and it's my Dad, it's not my Mom, my Mom is the most affectionate, all kissy-huggy, but I've never seen my parents kiss. I've never seen them really hug. I've seen my mom wrap her arms around Dad, but Dad's got his arms down around his side. I never saw any affection. No exchange. I'll give my opinion and you'll give your opinion. That's how it was, and it's that way right today. (Avery)

Witnessing close ties between her father's extended family spoke volumes to Elsie about the importance and value of marriage and family relationships:

On my Dad's side, you can't get a piece of paper between them. They might not all agree on things that happen, but at the same time they're always there for each other. You would never hear one disown the other one, they're just a very loving, close, wonderful family. (Elsie)

On the other side of the spectrum, the conflicted nature of Ellen's parent's marriage planted seeds of doubt in her mind, regarding the viability of marriage:

I know people who have been married for a long time, so I've seen that it does work, but because, I think, of what I grew up hearing and seeing and stuff, it was not happy. And I know it affected me quite a bit. My Dad, he was the man of the house, and his way was it, and you did what he wanted, and that kinda stuff. But my Mom was a very strong personality too, and she wanted it her way. (Ellen)

#### Perspectives From The Never-Married and The Once-Married Married

Sharing their personal stories of former marriages or current singleness revealed the diversity of life experience among the women interviewed. The way in which each woman received and internalized marital messages was apparent not only through their individual beliefs but also in the way in which these beliefs were carried forward and transformed throughout their adult lives.

#### Not Everyone's Meant to Be Married

For half the women, the decision to marry or not marry was, and remains, a matter of personal choice:

I think one of the reasons that I didn't get married, now that I think about it, was I never wanted to follow the crowd. If everybody was doing something I purposely avoided that. I shunned the popular stuff because it just seemed so trite, and "Oh God, can't you be a little more individual and imaginative?" And that's one reason, I think, I sort of shied away from that road somewhat, because it was what everybody did, and I wasn't everybody. I guess I wasn't. (Rose)

Despite this sentiment, there was a bittersweet quality to Rose's admission that marriage **does** have its allure:

Because it is a very nice lifestyle and I think it would be a fulfilling life if you were cut out for it. And I sometimes wish that I were cut out for it. (Rose)

Dealing with lifelong singlehood has been a struggle for Helen, but she has finally reached a place of quiet understanding about it:

Sometimes I think there are a lot of people in this world that just aren't meant to be married. That they're meant to be useful in some other form in this life than raising a family. (Helen)

For Betty, marriage is just one of many options that enable a person to have an intimate relationship, not necessarily the **best** one:

I think there's other possibilities too, and I don't think people should discount those, like living together or living apart and just being together whenever you can, too. (Betty)

Ellen espoused a philosophical view of marriage and singlehood, believing that too many people "rush in" to marriage without realizing the impact of their decision:

I think some people are destined to it, and some people are just not. And that's find. I think if you know that and are able to recognize it instead of having to go through marriage after marriage after marriage before you figure it out, I think you're probably better off for that. Unfortunately a lot of people don't. (Ellen)

### Marriage Was a Mistake

Three of the five once-married women revealed that their decision to marry was a mistake. Prior to the marriages, each woman acknowledged her belief that the relationship would not last, but the pull towards marriage remained strong:

Well, when I got married I was drinkin' a lot ... 'cuz I met him in a bar. (Lydia)

Elsie, who realized on her wedding day that getting married was a mistake, said that her poor choice in marital partners may have cost her her one and only chance at a "happily-ever-after" marriage:

I made a mistake, okay? I married when I shouldn't have, so I do feel like if I hadn't married when I shouldn't have, that I would have been married now, and I have a feeling, it's a good possibility that it would have been forever. (Elsie)

Kim believed marriage would make her husband settle down. Unfortunately, its effect on him was different than she expected:

For the first couple years we just dated and then we lived together and then we got married and then we got divorced. Yeah, we got married for all the wrong reasons and it'd be a long time before I ever ... it'd have to be exactly right before I'd go again 'cuz I

thought it was gonna change everything. I thought he'll get married and he'll straighten up and it'll be happy every after. He was kinda wild and he liked to run with his friends, do stuff like that, hang out with his buddies, plus he drank a lot, he was a wild child. 'Course, I thought I was gonna tame him and I got fooled. (Kim)

### I Never Would Have Left the Marriage

Despite marital relationships involving abuse and infidelity, strong religious convictions about the sanctity and permanence of marriage kept two women in destructive situations for years. Avery, a once-married woman from a 13-year union, expressed her anguish and disbelief in staying as long as she did in a unsatisfactory relationship:

There was a lot of bitterness when he left because I did not want to be divorced or separated. I thought we were going to be married until death us do part. And that's how I was raised, and that is my convictions today about marriage. I think people look at it as a contract, and to me, it's a covenant. And he didn't see it that way. There was another woman and he took off. He's the one that initiated the separation, and I'm kind of ashamed about that. I wonder now what would it have taken for me to ever end that marriage. (Avery)

Although Elsie believed her marriage was a mistake, her religious upbringing preached "sticking with it" and taking responsibility for her actions, despite the personal costs:

Yeah, it didn't matter how many times he went out, who knew how many females? I truly believe women have a sixth sense something's happenin', but you don't have the proof. Even when I **did** have the proof sittin' right there in front of me, I still forgave him and told him we could start all over if that's what he wanted. (Elsie)

### Growing Up but not Necessarily Growing Older

The issue of midlife was an interesting topic for the 10 women I interviewed. Ranging in ages from 35 to 48, the participants described their perceptions of midlife and where they located themselves on the aging continuum. Only 2 of the 10 women actually believed they were "in" midlife. Surprisingly enough, the majority of women voiced a belief that to them, midlife was a myth, created by the media. Although physical manifestations of aging were

mentioned by almost all of the women, many were quick to add, that regardless of their present ages, they “felt” no differently than when they were in their late 20s or early 30s.

### Physical Changes but Increasing Wisdom

Physical aspects of aging were the most obvious connections women made to midlife. Several women mentioned that the word “midlife” had negative connotations, indicating reduced activity levels and intimations of failing health. A positive association made with aging, but not necessarily midlife, was the feeling of increased wisdom or an greater understanding of life experiences.

Rose, one of the women who located herself towards the end of the midlife continuum, verbalized that a great segment of the population was sharing her aging experience:

Because all the baby boomers are in the same place, it doesn't really matter much. I mean, it makes me a little remorseful that I'm here already, and I have not much to show for it. I think you're more content now, I think that's part of us getting older. (Rose)

While many women used humor as a means to explain and understand the physical changes taking place in their bodies, the advent of increased wisdom appeared to be a welcome dividend of the aging process:

My age doesn't bother me one bit. Never had. People go, “Oh my God, I turned 30.” Well, I turned 30 myself, it's just like a day later. It's a number. I don't like the fact that I sneezed yesterday and wet my pants <laugh>. I used to think that with age you got more religious, more responsible, and that's not right. But I think with age, you do have all these experiences that you can go back on. People treat me like the old sage at work. That's kind of neat. And I guess that's been one of the things that bolstered my confidence even more, it's like I'd like to think that I've got wisdom now, ya know? <laugh> I heard about that. (Avery)

I feel older. I hit 35 and I actually **feel** older. I told myself that I'd never grow old, but I've got a few little pains, I've got the gray hair, and I'm getting the wrinkles and I can't lose my fat. <laugh> I'm learning all these things that I told myself I'd just never, never do. The biggest thing is the wisdom. Then I had some wisdom, now I have a lot of

wisdom, hopefully, I'll get to the point where I have it and use ... but there is a difference. (Elsie)

Sometimes when I see little wrinkles around my eyes or maybe a tinge of arthritis or something like that, and my eyes are going worse. But ya know, I work with a girl who's 25 and sometimes she'll do things or say things and I'll think, "I did that when I was 25 and I know better now." I see things like that, so hopefully I've opened up and can look back and I'm wiser now. (Betty)

The location of one's self in midlife was generally tied to physical rather than mental limitations:

Physically, the body is kinda feeling things it used to not. I don't always have the endurance I used to have, but as far as mentally, heavens no. It's like sometimes I feel like I'm 21 but I'm in a 40-some year old body that's wanting to make some changes that are keeping ... that would try to keep me from doing the things I want to continue doing or hope to do. I don't consider myself at midlife, of course, the media and everything try to tell you you're at midlife, ya know, buying up Depends so you won't leak all over yourself. (Florence)

In my head it just doesn't seem possible that I was born 40 years ago. But I guess, in my head, I feel kind of the same as I did when I was in my mid to late 20s. But physically, I've had some challenges in the last few years that make me feel older, I think. (Ellen)

### As Old As You Feel and Act or Not Ready for the Cemetery Yet

The consensus among women in the study was that midlife should "feel" a certain way. Feeling young or having others reinforce those feelings of youth led two-thirds of the women to assign age 50 as a starting point of midlife.

"Feeling old" was often a subjective phenomenon, based more on comparisons women made with those they knew or those around them:

I still feel very young. Everyone tells me that the reason I say that is because I haven't had any children to wear me out, wear me down type thing, and you don't have a husband, which sometimes can be another child. (Elsie)

People freak out when they find out I'm 35 years old, I guess 'cuz I don't act it. And people tell me I don't look 35, I don't know, I feel 35, sometimes I feel 100 years old. But I just think if you keep on going and doing what you want to do, keep the blood rolling. I look at my Mom and she's 55 and she's still rolling wide open. I don't know



what midlife is, used to be you'd think midlife was 40 'cuz hardly anybody lived to be 80, but now people are livin' to be 100. (Kim)

I don't think I act old, but like some people can act old at 25. Let's put it this way, when I think of myself as being almost 47 I don't think of myself as being in midlife. Because, what is midlife? Is it 40? Is it 50? Is it 80? 90? No, it just doesn't compute. (Florence)

Helen illustrated how her perceptions of age and aging has changed over time:

When I was younger, I thought at middle age that you were ready for the cemetery. You were ready for the bone yard if you were in your 40s. I thought, "God, they're old." And the older I get, the younger the 40s and 50s seem to be to me. It's like, I'm in the prime of my life. It's all a matter of perspective. Like I said, when I was in my teens and 20s, somebody my age, I would have thought they might as well just cart that one off to the home. But, now I realize that those people weren't any more ready to be carted off than I am. But you know, it's a good age. I wouldn't want to do all that part over again, unless I knew what I know now, because there was a lot of angst. Your growing up years are hard enough anyways. Puberty is terrible to deal with and just getting through all that garbage to get to this point, that's a lot of work. (Helen)

#### Surviving Stigmas, Living With Loss, Coping With Loneliness

Although 9 of the 10 women expressed positive feelings regarding their singlehood, experiencing life satisfaction was a process. For some women, the challenge was overcoming a marriage that never happened, for others it was making sense of a marriage that did not work, and for almost all of the women, it was finding authenticity in a status that society often devalues and dismisses. Contentment with singlehood was generally counterbalanced by feelings of discontent at not having fulfilled a societal expectation to marry or not having fulfilled that expectation successfully. The way in which these women addressed these issues throughout the course of their lives illustrates both the positive and negatives aspects of singlehood experienced.

## Assumptions about Singlehood

Buying into the belief that all singles are out having a good time created a certain degree of anguish and self-doubt for Helen:

I used to think, if I'm not doing that every week, going out and having fun or something, I'm just gonna die. I'm gonna shrivel up and die. [That's what] a single person should do. Hey, I'm not married, I'm not tied down here, why am I not out having a big time every weekend? Why don't I have friends to go out and party with? I'm not a party person, I'm a homebody. Took me a while to realize that. (Helen)

Avery and Betty described how their own perceptions of singlehood were flavored by strong societal stereotypes:

It's sort of like, if someone's been divorced you go, "Well, okay, she's at least kind of capable of some kind of a relationship. Somebody wanted her at one time. She's not a lonely old spinster type anyway." Well, she might be now, but she's not like an Old Maid. <laugh> (Avery)

I kept thinking if I didn't get married I was going to be a spinster or people were going to look at me and think, "What's wrong with her? Why couldn't she get married?" (Betty)

Having been treated in a manner different from her single male friends, Elsie believed that most married women consider single females a threat:

I've noticed how a single female is more of a ... threat rather than embraced. And even with coworkers, I see males come in here under training programs, and I'll watch the married coworkers take them home for dinner or things like that. I'm one of the only single people here, and I never get invited, even though we're friends. I guess I've known that, but the realization of that hasn't really hit me until about 2 or 3 years ago, and it's a little disheartening to see that, to feel that ... like you have no reason, I'm no threat. I just truly believe that single women, I don't care who they are, are a threat to most females. (Elsie)

The assumption that single people are "stupid" was evident in Florence's relationship with her cousins:

I don't know if they would necessarily trade what they have, their children and all that kind of stuff, the security they feel, especially my 2 cousins who have been married all

these years ... but yet, they look at me at the same time as still being single and think, "Maybe she wasn't so stupid afterall." (Florence)

When relating her experiences of being single, Ellen used work to describe an example of how those in the married world "assume" singles have no life:

If you're single, or if you would live locally, some people would just automatically say "Well, so-and-so lives here and isn't going anywhere. They can do it." We spend enough extra time at work. It does seem like they expect you to give more when what you really want is to give less so you can go out and have a life. (Ellen)

### Not Wanting to Have Children versus Not Wanting to be Married

For some women, opposition to motherhood was considered more taboo than not being in a marital relationship. These women noted that their expressions of not liking children or not desiring motherhood were often met by cold stares and looks of disbelief. So embedded within our societal fabric is the notion of marriage and motherhood, that those who voice dissenting opinions are regarded strangely or misunderstood.

The question of motherhood was never an issue for Avery:

I can't stand babies. I mean, I never liked children. I never did. And I knew when I was 12 years old I would never have a child. But that's something that's never been an issue with me. It's like there's not discussion. I don't want any children. (Avery)

Ellen interpreted having her coworkers proclaim the merits of motherhood while dismissing her decision not to have children as condescending:

And a lot of women who have had kids go, "Oh, you don't know what you're missing." And "It's wonderful. You would change your mind if you had one." And it's like, "No." And they, I feel they kind of look down on those of us who have stated, "I'm not interested." They look at you in a little bit different light. Look at you differently more because of what I think about having my own kids versus not being hooked up with someone. Because people look at the kids part in a different way. Everybody wants to have kids. It's just not true. And again, that's something else I'm glad I recognized it and didn't go ahead and have kids and then find out I really don't want to have kids. (Ellen)

When asked, “Do you think you’ll ever marry again ?” Elsie replied, not only to question of marriage, but also to the subject of motherhood:

If it happens again, it does, if it doesn’t, it doesn’t. I’m not even gonna worry about it anymore. But if anybody asks me about having babies, I’ll get another dog. (Elsie)

Florence voiced the need to justify the decision to have or not have children:

I was never a person who ... I know some women are, and this is not a put-down, but I never had a burning desire to have children. And it was another one of those things where, if I get married and we decide to, I can deal with it, but as the years went by, the window of time we can have children and not be retirement age when they get out of college just kinda slipped away. But it was never a goal of mine, I want to get married, I want to have babies, or else, I want to get babies and not be married, or else I have to have children or else I won’t be fulfilled or yes, I want to have children because I really like children and this is what I want as part of my life. But that is not to say that I don’t like children, because I enjoy children, it’s just that I never really chose, made a quality decision, “I want to have children, I want to be a Momma.” (Florence)

### Imaginary Lives or “What If”

It was not uncommon for women to speculate about the ways in which their lives “could have been different” had they married and had a family. For three of the women, these journeys into “what if” were bittersweet recollections:

I love kids. And if I had gotten married when I was young, I would have probably had a houseful. (Helen)

I had another fairly serious relationship with one of the guys that asked me to marry him and sometimes looking back, I think, I probably should have because he was a nice, nice guy. (Betty)

The few relationships, brief relationships I’ve had, with the exception of one which I probably screwed up because I was really young at the time and probably subconsciously not really wanting to go that way at that time considering everything that’s happened since, that was probably the best opportunity. (Ellen)

Sophie, a once-married woman, believed she could have saved her marriage had she been told of her husband’s affair earlier. For her, imaging life as a married woman again brought back feelings of anger:

I still have some resentment that the [family] didn't tell me what was happening, because my life would be so much different now. I would probably still be married, I would have a family. My life would just be totally different, where now I struggle from day to day, and I have to decide on all the decisions and everything. I still resent my husband because I wouldn't have to do all this even if we didn't have children, I just wouldn't have had to work, and it's affected my health because I've had to work so much. (Sophie)

### Dealing with Affection Needs

Finding an outlet to both give and receive affection was important to the lives of these women. Eight women mentioned owning a pet or pets and four of these women held jobs that revolved around animal care:

I'll go home to feed my livestock. I have five pygmy goats and a pot-bellied pig. And cats and a parakeet. (Avery)

I have a dog and a cat. (Betty)

And the fact that I was by myself, just me and my little dog, we just cruised on up and drove there and made some friends up there. (Ellen)

In addition to pets, family and friends were mentioned as sources of love and affection, outside the realm of a romantic relationship:

My cousins have become my family now. And I'm kind of comfortable in this world. I was even like this before I lost my parents. (Helen)

For Ellen, her friend's move to Texas a year ago continued to leave a big void in her life:

But they moved to Arizona last May, so that's left a big void because I liked them. I liked to hang out with them. I miss them and the kids. Because I would take the girls and do stuff. Or send Mom and Dad on dates and stay with them for a night or whatever, just to give them a break from their routine. So that really has left a big void. (Ellen)

### Coping with Singlehood or "Getting to Okay"

For both never-married and once-married women, self-esteem and mental health issues were present in their lives. In conversation, it was sometimes difficult to determine whether

marriage or singlehood contributed to these realities or lessened their effects. For three of the never-married women, remaining single created feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and alienation. Questions such as, “What’s wrong with me?” or “Why aren’t I like everyone else,” were frequently asked. For four of the once-married women, an experience of marriage, although desired, may have brought forth or reinforced feelings of low self-esteem, whereas the process of leaving the relationship sometimes offered an opportunity for rebuilding an injured or damaged sense of self.

Accepting the fact that marriage and motherhood may never happen prompted Helen to seek counseling. She related her process of coming to terms with singlehood in the following way:

In my 20s I thought, there’s still time maybe I’ll meet somebody, maybe I’ll get married. I even thought that in my 30s. Got to the late 30s, early 40s and it was panic time. It was like the biological clock was ticking. I was still hoping for a miracle to occur, but it never did. (Helen)

When I reached the year of my 20th high school reunion, I had my midlife crisis. Because I went to that and everybody was married and had kids, or they had been married and had kids. And I had never done that. And I couldn’t deal with myself. So, I went into counseling. It took counseling, it took age, and it took a lot of things to get me to the point where I like myself enough to say I’m a beautiful human being whether I’m married or not. (Helen)

I don’t feel that panic that I’m not going to get married and that I’m not going to have kids and that I’m not going to be like everyone else. I’m an individual. I realize that I’m different, my situation is different from most people, but I like it now. I don’t feel like I’m missing anything ... I had to start being positively affirmative about myself instead of living in the negative. What have you done that’s right instead of what have you not accomplished. (Helen)

For Kim, feelings of dependence and insecurity were reinforced by an unhappy marital experience. Developing a sense of independence became a priority following her divorce:

When I got with Kevin I was not an independent person, and I was very insecure about a lot of things and he kept me insecure ‘cuz he didn’t want me to be secure with myself

and taking off and leaving him, so he kept me in the secure zone, he told me, “Oh, don’t you ever leave me, you’ll never have anybody else.” All this bunch of bull, course it went straight in my brain and that’s what I thought for a long time. So, after I split with him, one of the main things that was important to me was to make sure that I could be independent and take care of myself, so that’s what I did. (Kim)

Coming out of a physically and emotionally abusive marriage, Avery dealt with depression and the feeling of being out of control:

That’s one of the reasons I went into counseling was because I just thought, I’m out of control of my own life. I let other people control my actions and my reactions to what they do or say or whatever. I’m very sensitive about things. I take lots of things so personally like, “Oh, he doesn’t like me because he was fussing with that other person over there.” You know what I’m saying? Because I’ve been too willing to bear all the burden. Took me a while and some counseling to be able to talk about anything positive. But I have a problem with depression. I am depressed, sometimes I do take medication for that. (Avery)

Sophie admitted that while she would like to marry again, the process of finding a new relationship is devastating for her:

For a year and a half to two years I just totally ignored any kind of dating or anything. It’s stressful for me and I really think I’m gonna stop dating, I get like anxiety attacks. So it just devastates me ... I can’t handle it. I had more confidence in myself that things just worked out and now I don’t. I don’t think I’ve changed that much, I think it’s the changes in people. But I still have the confidence in myself that I’m not gonna take a whole lot of bull from people and I still have that kind of confidence, but as far as relationships, I think it seems the male has more control of the relationship. (Sophie)

Florence put her singlehood into perspective by acknowledging that years of low self-esteem may have resulted in a negative marital experience:

Actually, I feel waiting until this late in life for me to be married has been a plus. I really do. I think I said it earlier, I grew up with a lousy self image, absolutely lousy, and just over the last say 15+ years I’ve been on a journey getting out of that mess. (Florence)

#### Letting Go of the Fantasy of Marriage but Hanging onto the Dream

Despite childhood fantasies that marriage is the panacea to all of life’s problems, most women arrived at midlife with more mature and realistic expectations regarding marriage.

Whether these expectations were transformed through individual life experiences or informed by the process of aging, many women found themselves releasing their grip on the fantasy of a happily-ever-after marriage but still reaching out for the dream of ever marrying or marrying again.

### Single by Default but Still Hoping for a Miracle

Although they expressed feelings of comfort and satisfaction regarding their current single status, they continued to for the possibility of having a marital relationship:

I haven't met the person yet, but I'm hopeful it could happen. But if it doesn't happen, I do believe I could make a happy life for myself. I'm not looking out there, "When I meet the man I'm going to spend the rest of my life with ...". I do not live my life like that. But yes, I'm hoping. I'm open to the possibility that if someone ever came along that I met and would make me happy, then I'm definitely open to it. I'm not opposed to a relationship at all. It excites me not to know. I still believe in divine intervention. I believe in miracles. (Avery)

Elsie believes that time and experience have given her the ability to recognize the "right" relationship next time it comes along:

I think I've gotten to a point where I'm comfortable with. I know that if the right person comes along I'll know it, because I'll have a comfort and a peace. Of course, really beforehand I knew, I just didn't listen. Like I said, I feel now I have a little better way to listen to it. (Elsie)

Florence's belief that marriage is still possible was interspersed with feelings of contentment and self-fulfillment:

It's there, but it's not. At this point in my life it can happen, it may happen and it may not happen. I think it still can even though I think statistics are against me <laugh> because of my age and because of this location, this geographical location. But I think it's possible. I'm not saying "no" to the idea, but at the same time I'm not pining away going, "When is it going to happen?" If it happens that's okay, and if it doesn't happen that's okay too, 'cuz I'm happy. My life is fulfilled. (Florence)



## Between Marriage and Singlehood

Through the process of speaking with women and listening to their stories, I discovered that marriage and singlehood are but two extremes on a relationship continuum. In between those points are varying degrees of singleness or connectedness based on an individual's personal perceptions.

Betty, a never-married woman who identified herself as single, acknowledged that she was currently involved in a long-term, on-going relationship with a man living in another town. Despite her level of commitment to the relationship, her desire **not** to marry validated her single status:

At this point in time I don't think I'll ever get married, but I haven't discounted that fact at all. I'm pretty much happy with the way things are. I like living by myself and I like having a relationship the other part of the time too. But yeah, I'm really okay with the fact that if you don't get married that's okay ... in fact in some ways, that might be better ... I guess I could say I'm involved with somebody, you could describe it another way, but I'd say I'm single by choice because I want to be and because I like it this way. (Betty)

Sophie's desire for an enjoyable, romantic relationship outweighed her need for another legal commitment:

I don't necessarily want to be married because marriages are not working, or very few marriages are working, so it would just be nice to find a person who I enjoyed being with and we have our own separate living arrangements but get together 3 or 4 times a week. (Sophie)

Lydia noted that being legally married does not necessarily entitle a woman to an experience of marriage:

He wanted his green card, and at the time I didn't know it. It wasn't until after it was too late and over with. But that's why he married me ... to get his green card. It was like we never lived together, actually. (Lydia)

Becoming comfortable in her single life, but still hoping to marry, Elsie described the tension between her need for independence and her desire to remarry:

After I got my divorce it was like, we'll see. It's always been there though, there's been that want. It's more, maybe not so to be alone, because in another sense I am a loner. I don't like having somebody around all the time. (Elsie)

Ellen, a never-married woman in her late 30s, articulated the thoughts of many single, midlife women:

I would like to go out with someone again. I keep hoping the opportunities will come up, but some way they haven't. But who knows? It can still happen. I'm totally open to it. I'm just doubtful at this point. Sometimes I get really sad about it because it seems like everybody else has someone but me at times, but I know that's not true either. (Ellen)

Although never-married women face social pressure to *ever* marry, those who have married once and divorced may experience a similar, yet different pressure to marry again or "do it right this time." Living within this tension between marriage and singlehood may contribute to feelings of ambivalence, encouraging women to live their lives in anticipation of marriage while reinforcing singlehood as a temporary state.