

Single Women over Forty Create the Good Life

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In the early 1990s, when I started interviewing middle-aged, middle-class, long-term single women (both ever-single and divorced, with and without children), I was a single mother in my early fifties. I justified this as a good project for a sociologist,¹ but I was also looking for direction for my own life. Even though I had never married, cohabited for only two years, and adopted a baby as a single woman, I always thought I would couple a little later. Both popular culture and second wave feminism held out no other options for a satisfying life. Facing a cultural void - I certainly wasn't a spinster - I hoped I'd find some role models in other single women's lives. I didn't discover an ideal, but I found a lot of other women like me. Through discussion among twenty-seven women over eight to ten years, we came to appreciate the lives we had crafted and altered our consciousness to more fully embrace our singleness. In writing *The New Single Woman* (link to my web site www.kaytrimberger.com), I hoped to replicate this process on a larger social scale. This is now happening, not because of my book, but due to a huge demographic shift (link to <http://issc.berkeley.edu/singlesstudies/demographic.html>) that has sharply increased the number of singles and the percentage of one's life span spent single.

Six Pillars of a Satisfying Single Life

By their forties or certainly their early fifties, single women who have a good life have taken a number of steps. The first three of these pillars I see as essential, and the latter as more optional, but please remember that the steps I lay out here are based on empirical findings. Certainly, no one - single or coupled - is ever completely satisfied with their life and no one will perfectly achieve all these six goals, certainly not without conflict and compromises.

1) Make a home. Whether they own their own house or rent, live solo or with others, satisfied single women create a living space that is comforting to them and inviting to others. Many single women are excellent homemakers, cooks and gardeners, but those with no such interests or skills, still need a place where they can be at home.

2) Find work that is economically sustaining and personally fulfilling, without being workaholic. Single, childless women in their thirties have a reputation for being workaholics. Whether true or not, many employers undoubtedly take advantage of them. But by their forties, single women realize that they need a life, and creating one is often more demanding of time and energy than that of a couple.

3) Create a network of friends and extended family. No matter how much a single woman likes solitude (some do and many do not), creating this network is essential for intimacy, support and fun. One best friend is not enough, unless you have a large and close extended family. The

¹ It's nice to be writing for MySingleSpace since one of your regular contributors, psychologist Karen Gail Lewis, influenced my early thinking about the ambiguity of single life.

skills of reaching out, reciprocation, care taking, and planning ahead are important. Women, more than men, in our culture are encouraged to develop these skills as they grow up, and it is easier for extroverts than for introverts to build networks. But anyone can learn them. With such a network, a single woman is rarely lonely, has intimacy, help when she needs it, companionship for recreation and travel, and usually has more support in a crisis than those living in a nuclear family.

4) Develop a Community. Despite the decline of local connections in our increasingly busy and mobile society, linking a network of friends and extended family together with looser ties formed through work, volunteering, politics, church, or your neighborhood creates a larger basis of identity and support. Recent research documents that singles are especially active and effective in this realm. (Link to the research of Naomi Gerstel and Natalia Sarkisian at <http://caliber.ucpress.net/doi/pdf/10.1525/ctx.2006.5.4.16>) On-line connections may facilitate face-to-face ones, but they are not substitutes.

5) Find a Connection to the Next Generation. Single mothers fulfill this task, but single women with no children of their own can form close relationships with nieces and nephews, with god children, and with children of close friends. Many single women working in the helping professions influence the next generation, and often form parental-like bonds with a few students or clients. Others find innovative means - often through volunteer work - to form close ties with young people.

6) Acceptance of One's Sexuality. For all women, sexual expression is individual, affected by a specific biology and cultural socialization. While marital and extramarital sex, masturbation and celibacy are usually hidden in coupled privacy, single women find their sex lives more exposed and open to condemnation. They are labeled as *sluts* if they have multiple, or serial, sexual partners, and as *uptight*, *repressed* or *unhealthy* if they are celibate. Deciding what kinds (if any) sex one enjoys, finding and feeling positive about it, and acknowledging that one's sexual desires may change over time is a difficult task.

Working on these six goals does not preclude a single woman from simultaneously looking for a partner. But she is less likely to settle for someone unsuitable out of desperation. On-the-other-hand, putting most of one's time and energy into seeking a partner - or trying to hold onto an elusive one - while failing to address these tasks, or letting some of the pillars crumble, results in unhappiness.

When I started talking about these empirical findings before my book was published, married women in the audience responded that they too needed to achieve these pillars. Married readers of *The New Single Woman*, found it helpful for the same reason. Although, I started out viewing long-term single women at mid-life as very different from those who were in stable couples, I discovered that they have much in common. I now believe that the six pillars of a satisfying single life are developmental tasks of mid-life with which all women and men must struggle. Rather than seeing the single person living alone and the married, cohabiting couple as polar opposites, I view them as ends of a continuum of multiple ways to structure a fulfilling adult life.

Changing Our Consciousness to Accept Single Life

Living in a culture that values only one adult living arrangement - a cohabiting couple, preferably in an egalitarian relationship with a soul mate - means that those single women who complete the six mid-life tasks still have to confront the opinions of their families, co-workers and some friends that they cannot possibly be happy, single. Often we too have internalized this view. Some single women truly know that they prefer the daily interaction of living with others, but cannot envision how to achieve this outside a romantic couple. Many of us find it even more difficult to admit that we prefer the autonomy of solo living, combined with close ties to family and/or friends and/or lovers. It is easier to say that we are still looking for *the one* than to assert that for us this is a richer, more complex and interesting way to live.

For me and those women participating in my study, our ongoing dialogue changed not our lives, but how many of us thought about them. Telling our stories, admitting what was difficult, but also rewarding about our lives, made singleness ours. Blogs like this one, and others where singles can discuss their lives, aid this consciousness-raising process. The public nature of our discussion eventually will change the culture to one that recognizes a wider variety of ways to lead the *good life*.