

retirement. 'These are phases when people often start to look at one another and reassess,' says Relate counsellor Joan Healy, 'because couples are either suddenly seeing less of each other – in the case of a new job – or more, if the children are growing up, or one or other partner retires.'

Julia\*, a 59-year-old deputy head teacher from the Midlands, is a case in point. She'd been married to Paul for 20 years when their relationship went through a crisis and Julia moved out for nearly a year. 'The children were 17, 16 and 14 at the time and had turned into these angry teenagers,' says Julia. 'Paul couldn't cope with the fighting and rude behaviour. He started getting home from work later and later. I felt completely abandoned and our relationship deteriorated to a point where we were hardly speaking, let alone sleeping together.'



The crunch came when Julia discovered Paul was having an affair with a colleague. 'I felt totally betrayed and told him I wanted a divorce. He said the affair wasn't important and wouldn't move out of our London home, so I bought a little house in Cambridge, gave up my job and took the children with me. Deep down, I still loved Paul and couldn't quite believe this was happening to us.'

They spent a miserable 11 months in Cambridge before Julia finally rang Paul and asked to come back. 'He said yes immediately,' she remembers. 'He assured me the affair was over and that he missed me and the children terribly. Moving back home was the happiest day of my life.'

'I do still think about the affair sometimes, but it was 14 years ago so I've largely put it to the back of my mind,' says Julia. 'I think he was having a bit of a mid-life crisis and he felt that I'd been putting the children first, too, which was probably true. Neither of us was entirely blameless.'

For Gill, who has been married to Peter for 18 years, the problems also began when their three daughters started growing up. Gill felt her marriage had gone so stale that she seriously considered walking away.

'We didn't have huge rows – we just seemed to be living parallel lives. We both work in the health service in Bristol and he'd get home in the evenings and go straight on the internet while I'd watch TV with the children or read.'

'We stopped doing things as a family at weekends. We'd drive the girls wherever they wanted, then do our own thing. We hardly ever went out on our own and our sex life had ground to a halt. I looked around and thought – is this all there is?'

The family had always gone on holiday to Cornwall in the summer. It seemed easier than flying with small kids. But last summer Gill booked a two-week holiday in America.

'It sounds odd but I really think this got us back on track,' she says. 'America felt like an adventure and reminded me of some of the reasons why I fell

## HOW TO DIVORCE-PROOF YOUR MARRIAGE

Dr Gayle Brewer shares her five golden rules for a harmonious future:

- 1 Compromise – and remember your partner also makes compromises.
- 2 Life's short. Is it really worth arguing about? If you're going to row, make sure you row about what's really wound you up.
- 3 Make time for your partner. Switch the television off, go for a walk and watch the sunset.
- 4 Keep the romance alive. If you're too tired for sex at night, find other times and places. Plan for it.
- 5 We all need some TLC. Look after each other. Small things like a hug can speak volumes.

in love with Peter. Now, we make time for each other and go out to the cinema and restaurants. It feels a bit like a second honeymoon.'

For 49-year-old Lisa, the flashpoint came when her husband, Simon, started taking Fridays off. The 25-year marriage had proved remarkably resilient throughout the long period when their two children were small and Simon, a bank executive, was commuting between his flat in London and the family house in Devon.

Then, two years ago, Simon was finally in a position at work where he could go down to four days a week and Lisa was very excited. 'I thought we'd do nice things together,' she says. Instead, he became friendly with a neighbour and they started playing golf every week.

'For months I pretended I didn't care, but in the end I flew at him and accused him of everything under the sun. Simon doesn't talk much and he tends to run away from conflict, which is exactly what happened this time: he moved into the spare room.'

'After a few days I couldn't stand the silence any longer. I needed to know if we had a future. I looked him in the eye and asked him outright if he loved me. He looked right back and said he did and I decided that was enough.'

'He's never apologised, but he doesn't play every Friday any more, more like one in three. On the other days we go for long walks or out for lunch, which is wonderful. I guess the message did sink in.'

So what's the secret, the magic ingredient? Why do some marriages weather the storms while others crumble?

'I think it all boils down to looking after each other,' says Dr Brewer. 'It's about giving each other enough support, time and respect, being aware if the other person's under stress and making each other feel a little bit special.'

As far as I can see, it's also about how highly you rate your relationship. Problems at work, issues with the kids, the broken shower and differences of opinion won't go away. But if you truly value your marriage and view yourselves as a team, somehow, although sometimes with great difficulty, you'll find a way through. **GH**

'You can be deeply unhappy with your partner's choices, but if you both see the relationship as your priority, there's hope'

\*Names have been changed.