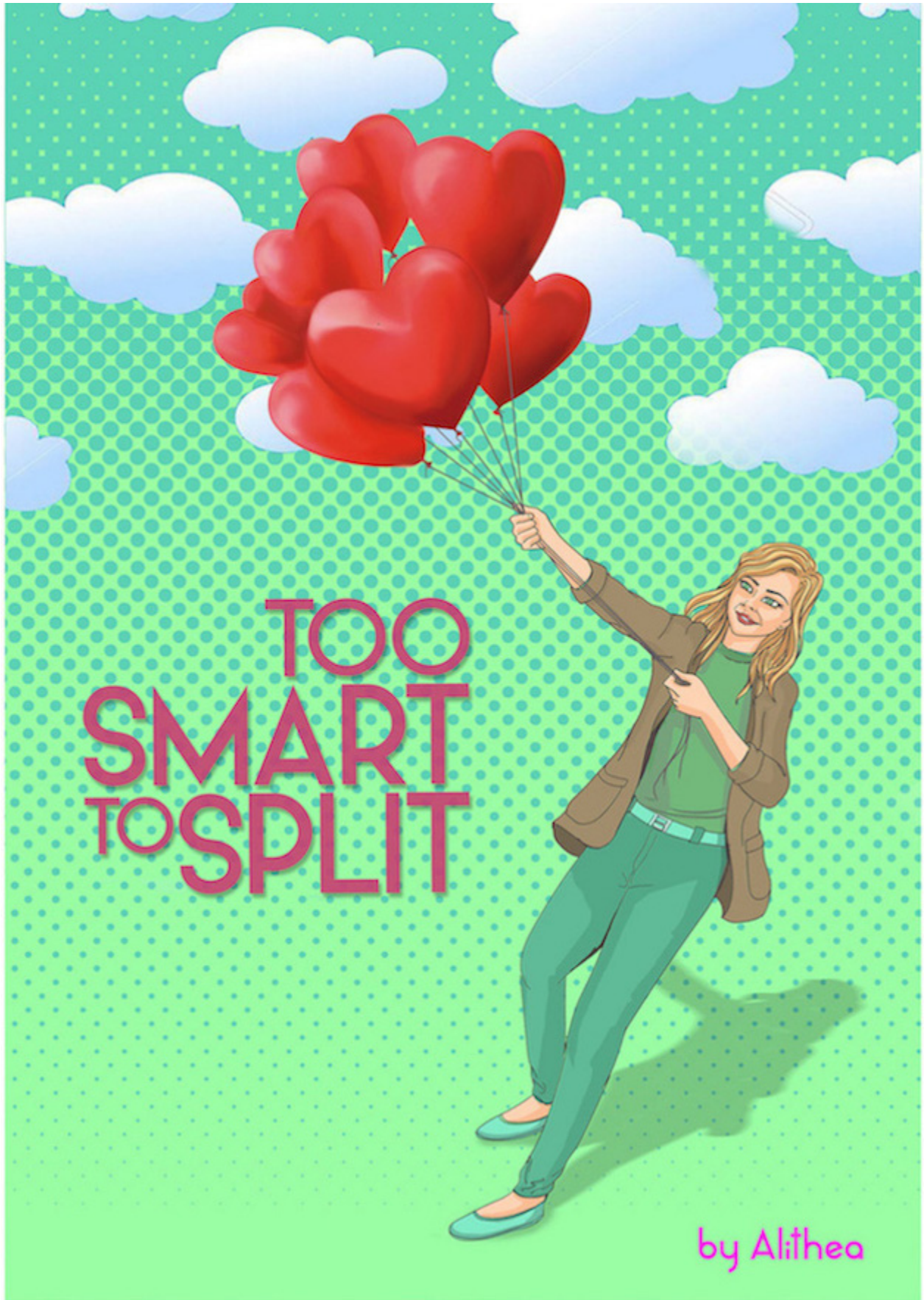


Too Smart to Split



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An open-minded approach to maintaining unique relationships.

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*KBP
Amsterdam*

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Why Get Married?

For some it may still be an unwavering rite of passage to get married, and only a question of 'Who?'. However for the ever growing non-religious populace, deciding whether to marry or not is cause for pause. Given the widely reported increasing divorce rates and the fact that divorce is the second highest form of stress (on the [Homes Rahe scale](#) - the first being the death of a spouse and the third, marital separation), it seems that the average heterosexual is becoming increasingly wary of the concept of marriage. Conversely, gay rights activists are still actively campaigning in parts of the world for access to this rather antique tradition.

Yet there are definite benefits for the average married couple. Married people generally live longer, are financially better off, happier, and have higher emotional satisfaction from sex (Ref: [The Case for Marriage](#) (Doubleday, 2000, Dr Linda Waite & Dr. Maggie Gallagher). Emotional support, care when we are sick (or someone to encourage you to go to the doctor if something is bothering you), two minds being better than one in decision-making, and tax breaks can all contribute to make life with a long-term partner better than if you remain single. If these conclusions conflict with popular myths you have heard about marriage, you can see several debunked here at [strongermarriage.org](#). Some of those benefits require that 'little bit of paper' and some don't.

If you have an inherent disquiet regarding the notion of marriage (perhaps due to a painful divorce), or if you know that you are naive on the whole subject of marriage, then you really need to pick up a copy of '[Committed](#)' by Elizabeth Gilbert, 2011 (the author of 'Eat, Pray, Love'). Her real-life account of researching the whole concept, when faced with a 'sentence to wed' for US visa immigration reasons, is infinitely readable. She informs us about the Marriage Benefit Imbalance, which unfortunately shows that the vast majority of the benefits mentioned above actually accrue for the married man, at the direct cost of the woman. It is diminishing slowly as women become more autonomous, but it still persists. Married women in America do not live longer, do not accumulate as much wealth, do not thrive in their careers, are significantly less healthy, are more likely to suffer from depression, and are more likely to die a violent death, than single women

If you don't want to unfairly shoulder the burden in such a way, you are going to have to stand up and define what you DO want in a marriage, to ensure that it happens on fairer terms! Statistically, your best bet to obtain such a thing, is to get a good education, support yourself financially, wait until your 30s before marrying, and find a partner who will share domestic tasks (and has an interest in locating your sweet spots!).

If you know you are naive about the whole topic... I mean let's face it
'They lived happily ever after. The End" isn't much to go on!
Stand up and define what you DO want in a marriage.

Another fabulous book, outlining the role of marriage and long-term relationships in the modern age is '[The Art of Marriage](#)' (published by John Murray, 2010) by Catherine Blyth. It covers the history of this medieval institution and the role of women in marriage through the ages - beginning in an era where men could still take their wives to market and sell them! It has great sections on dealing with in-laws, step-parents, and housework. She also points out that finding someone who is willing to put in the time and effort to understand the sexual response of their partner, could prove to be the long-unknown purpose of the female orgasm...

Even if you don't want to get married - you should consider the following strategies to prevent any perceived 'lack of commitment' from affecting your long-term relationship:



Credit: iStock.com/dra_schwartz

A ring - because of its symbolism, and because a woman might feel a bit naked without one. It gives a sign of your commitment to other people.

An anniversary - celebrating, recognizing and discussing your union is very important.

A ceremony - the ritual of marriage has an important function in bringing the spouses relations together to officially welcome a new family member. Without this bonding event you might forever feel on the sidelines. So perhaps a 'non-marriage' commitment ceremony type get-together is also an idea.

Legal protection (property ownership etc.) - marriage has its benefits (as do civil partnerships), in that the legal process is documented for both parties. However, if you aren't married, and for example buy a home together, dividing assets later on could be complicated and costly. So if you have rejected 'marriage on paper' on some grounds, make sure you are retaining your right to a share of any joint assets. If your name is on the deeds of a property, the divide is strictly 50/50. If you need a different split ratio this must be agreed in advance of purchase. The best way to do this could be a fixed price cohabitation ('No-Nup') agreement drawn up by a family law specialist (you will need separate independent legal advice from your partner). Check relevant country/state legislature, since mainland Europe has a very different approach to the UK for example. Australia has the 'de-facto' declaration on a relationship, which gives the majority of rights in the same way as married couples (and gay couples can also now marry), but properties should be dealt with via the 'Tenants in Common' type of deed if you don't want your assets split without taking your will into account.

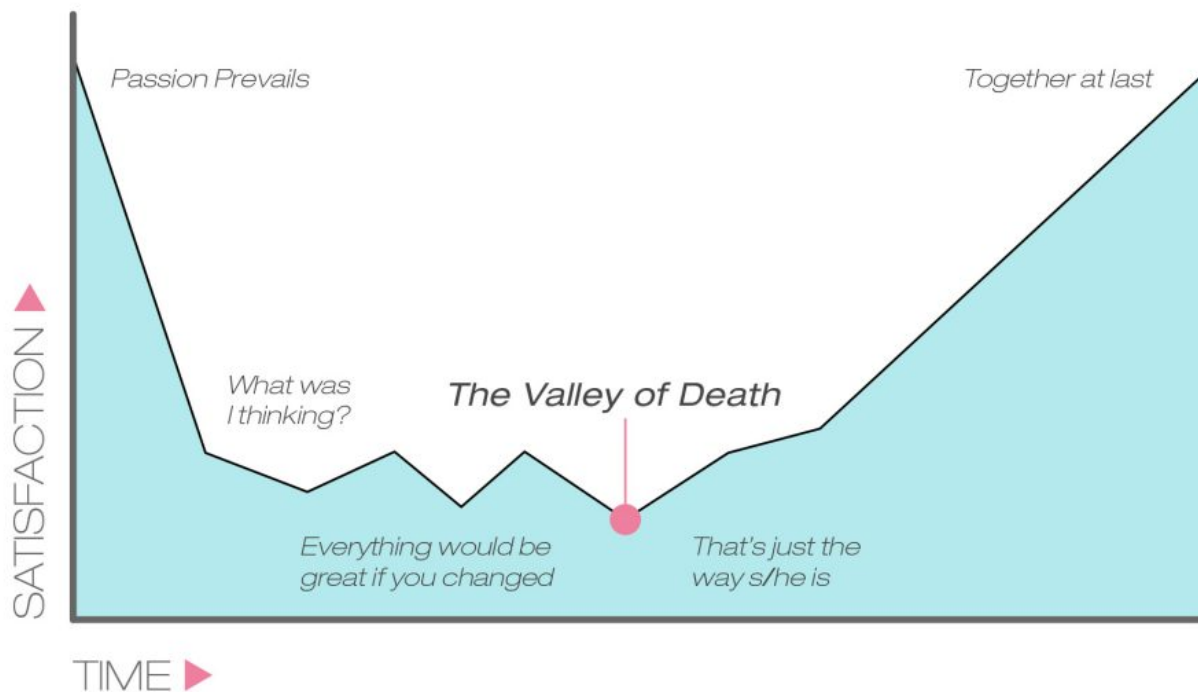
Areas that you will need to discuss and pull information together on before seeing a lawyer are:

- Joint purchases (e.g. car)
- Property (rent/mortgage)
- Contents
- Personal belongings
- Savings
- Pensions (superannuation)
- Bank accounts
- Debts
- Life insurance
- Wills

I think that the commitment of marriage is a wonderful thing, but to make it more realistic, there should be customisable 'options'. One such is a '10-year marriage', which accepts the fact that you don't know who you or your partner will be in 10 years' time - your interests could have diverged greatly; or an '18-year marriage' in the case of children. Within those time periods a regular re-negotiation of marriage terms should be possible (e.g. every five years), and would assist people in remembering that marriage is a two-way on-going commitment.

A marriage map

The following basic trajectory outlines the phases that **all relationships need to progress through** in order to get to the level of real commitment that most aspire to. This is something that **everyone** going into a long-term relationship needs to know!



The Marriage Map

This is adapted from the marriage positive site of [Michele Weiner-Davis](#), US author of 'Divorce Remedy' and 'The Sex-Starved Marriage' (the first chapters of her books are available on her website), and she also offers telephone coaching with practical advice.

The five phases are:

Stage 1 - **Passion prevails**

You have so much in common and the rush of sensual and sexual chemicals in your body enables you to overlook small differences.

Stage 2 - **What was I thinking?**

You hit disillusionment, hard. It's confusing and hard to make big life decisions, and differences in opinion are revealing cracks in the relationship.

Stage 3 - **Everything would be great if you changed**

Attempts to define the marriage involve arguments and an insistence that your way is the right way. Convinced they've tried everything, some people give up. They tell themselves they've fallen out of love, or married the wrong person, and they divorce. Other people resign themselves to the status quo and decide to lead separate lives. But there are others who decide that it's time to investigate healthier and more satisfying ways of interacting.

Stage 4 - **That's just the way he or she is**

We accept that we are not going to see eye-to-eye about everything, and seek help (religious counsel, self-help books, therapy, or looking within). Fights happen less frequently and we make more effort to put ourselves in our partners' shoes.

Stage 5 - **Together at last**

This is where the hard work pays off - the pot of gold you were waiting for. Your shared history gives you security, and you begin to appreciate the differences between you, and like each other again.

It's unfortunate that most marriages happen around stage 1, and the planning of a wedding could bring on stage 2(!), rather than at stage 4 or 5 where it might be more valid. This is the reason it is good to have some real life experiences with your future spouse, such as travelling together or facing big challenges before settling down. I think schools should provide basic relationship education, since partnerships in life are often so pivotal to your future wellbeing. Even just the above map would give people more realistic expectations than the 'happily ever after' fairytale we are led to believe is possible.

During the review stage of this book I was asked about the absence of a reference to passion and how to bring that back to a relationship. Sorry to say, but in a long term relationship, once the passion (or romance) stage is over, it isn't coming back. Nature drugged you during this phase, long enough to procreate! Instead you can hope to move into a commitment/affection stage - but not before you tread the treacherous waters of the 'power struggle' phase.

Focusing on intimacy rather than passion is a more realistic and (very) rewarding goal for the later stages of a relationship.

Passion is always reserved for the novel experiences in life, so unless you are willing to play dress-ups, it's unlikely to be found in the long-term marital bed!

Power struggles

In stage 3, when you think of power within a relationship, you may think of money, status or physical beauty that the individuals earn/hold. However, there are other ways that individuals can skew the power balance. Symptoms of the power struggle phase often reflect the following (often sub-conscious) influences.

- The person with the lowest desire for sex holds more power.
- The greatest power lies with the person who cares the least about the relationship.
- The legacy of men supplying the greater amount of finances and the women doing the majority of home and child care, means that many men expect more thanks for doing a lot less, because their bare minimum is more than the majority of husbands.
- Working women who also do the majority of chores, expect to dictate more of the family operations.



Credit:iStockphoto.com/SquaredPixels

Can you reflect on your behaviours and see these underlying power struggles? These are the fundamental causes of people retreating and lowering their efforts when in fact, the opposite is required. They are a way to regain some power and control when they feel that they do not have any. This is a cycle you need to break if you are to nurture the 'good bits' of your long-term relationship.

Perhaps, due to a total breakdown in communication, you are at the stage of **withholding sex**? This may give you time and energy to think, but it won't make your partner any more communicative or likely to put in effort to resolve underlying issues. Instead it will tend to leave you both feeling more sexually frustrated. Such 'withdrawal' methods of coping don't help in the longer term. *From a male perspective you can read: ['I haven't had sex with my wife for six years after she ignored my advice on weight loss'](#) The Guardian, Sept 2016.*

Key things that a relationship needs to survive are:

- An acceptance that the relationship will not stay the same as it was when you met - it has to adapt in order to survive, like anything.
- An acceptance that as humans, we are not perfect and you must accept your partner's flaws in order to stay together.
- Learning to fight nicely, and regroup afterwards.
- Regular connection - such as a 10-minute conversation each day - make a habit of it (e.g. every night while clearing up in the kitchen, or pouring a drink and sitting down together). Whether this results in hum-drum conversation, simply holding hands, or more, it will give both of you the opportunity to connect, and prevent small issues growing into big ones.

Sometimes you need to get out of your own comfort zone to please your partner. Having sex when you don't initially desire it, for example, or engaging in an activity that doesn't particularly interest you much, but you know they love it. For many people this boils down to 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' - or as Dan Savage termed it, being a 'GGG' partner (Good, Game and Giving).

Here's a suggestion for integrating this in a fun way with an element of competition - make bets - on anything, this could be on the outcome of a movie ("I reckon she's gonna cop it"). If your partner disagrees, place a bet on it. Set the bid as something fun, sexy, and desirable - for example a full 30-min massage, or a 'head-job' as my Aussie friend puts it!

Are we meant to be in long-term relationships?

Marriage was penned as a 'medieval code of faithfulness' in 1931 (by Amelia Earhart, in her letter to her groom on the morning of the wedding). She requested a promise of him 'that he would let her go in a year if they find no happiness together' - because she could not guarantee to endure at all times the confinements of even an attractive cage. She went on to have not a marriage, but what she called a 'partnership' with 'dual control'. Shouldn't we all be defining marriage in these terms? More modern day terms are 'peer marriage' or 'shared earning/shared parenting' marriage. I want to call it Marriage 2.0 in that it is a new era for marriage.

I feel like I have defined a new marriage in my relationship - albeit to the same person.

As a species, history illustrates that we are by no means biologically determined to have one partner for life. Marriage in several cultures traditionally allows a husband to take more than one wife, and [polyandry](#) (more than one husband) existed in India, Tibet and parts of Nepal. The ancient Greeks had an established form of [pederasty](#), a form of education in the erotic arts (as well as philosophy and general knowledge) for adolescent males with an older male. Brothels were heralded during the birth of democracy for the fair priced access to sexual pleasure for all men (I 'm now awaiting this for all women!!). Concubines have long been tolerated in China, and in Japan extra-marital sex is not considered an infidelity if you pay for it.

Open relationships with man-servants were tolerated for 18th Century noblewomen, who had married for hereditary reasons and had produced the required heirs (Ref: Wikipedia: [Cicisbeo](#)). In nature, **women are understood to be as promiscuous as men**, and it is only through cultural construct that men are believed to 'need' to 'sow their seeds' more than women (Ref: Guardian Article "[Women are promiscuous, naturally](#)").

"The 1960s and 1970s showed a lot of sexual liberation, but rather than extending to women the same latitude that men always enjoyed, **we extended to men the confines women have always endured**. And it's been a disaster for marriage." (Dan Savage, US relationships columnist).

Are you ready for a little latitude ..? Well read on!