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Main Edition

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## RELATIONSHIPS; In long unions, divorce rate rising

Gracie Bonds Staples

After decades, many leave unsatisfying marriages. 'You're taking an entire history apart.'

First there was John and Elizabeth Edwards, law school sweethearts who split after more than 30 married years because he had an affair. Then came Tipper and Al Gore, who after 40 years of marriage said they simply grew apart. And now Arnold Schwarzenegger and Maria Shriver, who last week announced they were severing their 25-year union because Arnold reportedly had a love child more than a decade ago with a family maid.

If you happened to find the news shocking, you shouldn't have. Although divorce rates have been going down for most segments of the population over the past 20 years, they have increased sharply for the over-50 crowd, said Stephanie Coontz, director of Research and Public Education at the Council on Contemporary Families and author of "A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s."

A good part of the reason, Coontz said, is that with longer, healthier lives, people are less willing to stay in an unsatisfying marriage, and they have more options outside of it. "That sense of growing apart is actually more common than a dramatic case of adultery like Arnold's. Although men tend to have someone waiting in the wings when they initiate a divorce, women, who initiate the majority of divorce both late life and early life, tend to just be fed up," she said.

Not everyone found the Shriver-Schwarzenegger split surprising. **Margot Swann** didn't and neither did **Linda Dudley** or **Almeda Hooper**. Although saddened by the news, they know from personal experience that the dissolution of marriage after decades of togetherness has become fairly common. "I think it's so sad when a couple has invested 25 years as [Shriver and Schwarzenegger] have in each other and their children because there will be repercussions," said **Swann**,

65, of Marietta. "When you take a family apart, you aren't just taking two individuals apart, you're taking an entire history apart and that's very sad."

Because most divorces happen within the first 10 years of marriage, statistics show, we often have the impression that long-term marriages are "divorce-proof." And even though divorce after 40 years of marriage is a rare occurrence statistically, recent trends suggest that the number of couples getting divorced after 20, 30 and even 40 years of marriage is on the rise.

Although she has since remarried, Swann's first marriage came to a screeching halt in 1993 after 20 years. "We grew apart," Swann said of her relationship with her ex-husband. "Our friends were different. Our interests were different. And our values were different." Two years after their divorce was final in 1996, Swann founded Visions Anew, a nonprofit that educates, supports and connects women in the divorce process. In addition to support groups, the organization holds divorce survival weekends.

Even though her husband initiated the split, Swann said it didn't take long for her to figure out her part in the divorce.

"I was not as respectful to him as a wife needs to be of a husband," she said.

"Men need accolades from their wives, to know their wives think they're the best. It wasn't I didn't think that he was. I never said it. He was a very charming, accomplished, intelligent man, and it never occurred to me that he needed my respect."

Since starting Visions eight years ago, Swann said she has seen an uptick in the number of women and men, for that matter, seeking help. She agrees with Coontz that baby boomers are less enthusiastic about staying in an unhappy union than their adult children. "We were the 'me' generation," Swann said. "It's all about us."

But it's also about children growing up and leaving the nest, about women being able to take care of themselves, and about people living longer, she said. "The first two decades of marriage you're busy doing what you think you're supposed to be doing and then the children go and you realize you didn't have much of a marriage to begin with," said Jerry Connor of Norcross, a divorce counselor with a practice in Norcross.

Even in her practice, Connor, who said she divorced in 1980 after 13 years of marriage, said that it isn't unusual to see people divorce after 40 and 50 years of marriage, and she works with as many men as she does women.

"It's that baby boomer generation," she said. "They are out there in abundance and they are needy."

Almeda Hooper of Atlanta said she divorced in 2005 after 20 years of marriage, the last eight hoping for reconciliation. "He wouldn't go to counseling," she said of her husband.

**Linda Dudley** of Marietta divorced the same man twice --- once after 20 years of marriage and again, she said, after 15 for lack of emotional and financial support. In both instances, **Dudley**, 57, said friends and family were surprised the marriage ended.

"We all have our public and our private persona," **Dudley** said. "Everything looks calm on the outside, but you just can't tell what's going on in somebody's house. "I was a human resource manager. Like any professional, you're not supposed to have issues."

**Connor** said it's not unusual for married couples to put their best foot forward in public, even though they may not even share the same bed or bedroom at home. For three years, her husband's law partners didn't know he was in the midst of a divorce, **Swann** said of her ex.

While early divorce might be less shocking to the public, whether a couple divorces after one year or 21 years, **Connor** said the effect is the same. "It's all a death, dying and grieving process," she said. "The longer the marriage, the more you have invested, the more intense things are, but nobody gets married thinking they are going to divorce."

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