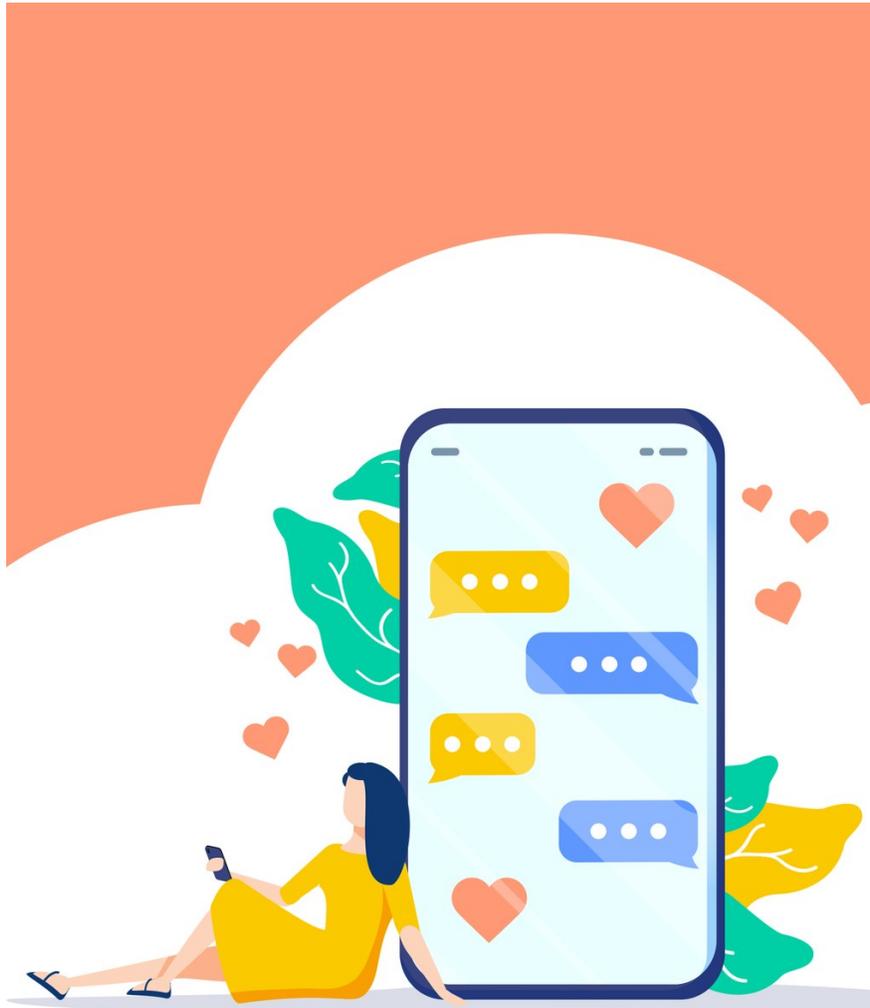


Baking, Tinder, self-acceptance: My road to finding love after divorce

[vogue.in/culture-and-living/content/dating-after-divorce-tinder-self-acceptance-finding-love](https://www.vogue.in/culture-and-living/content/dating-after-divorce-tinder-self-acceptance-finding-love)

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1 June 2019



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I'm now in my late thirties, and the rules of the dating game have changed drastically, but I've finally learnt to love myself

Marriage is an invisibility cloak. I spent the better part of a decade dating and then being married to one person. I'm not quite sure how it happened, but at some point, I became convinced that I couldn't possibly be attractive to anyone except the man who was obliged by law. I had made myself perfectly comfortable with this idea when the unimaginable happened. We decided to split.

My ex-husband and I met in our 20s. In less than four months of knowing each other, we decided to get engaged and two years after, took the plunge. We were dreamily happy together, until we were not. We couldn't quite place our finger on what was wrong. We didn't fight, we were still immensely in love, but it had begun to feel as if we led separate lives. We were determined to try all we could to make it work. After a year and a half of therapy and exhausting every possible effort—including moving to a city with a less hectic pace and even living apart for a while—we finally made peace with the fact that we had drifted apart.

Divorce isn't easy, though counselling did ensure ours was amicable. I still count him among my closest friends; a quick glance around reminds me how fortunate I am for this. I have no bitterness or resentment towards him, only respect for what we shared.

Finding my feet again at 35 was hardly my life plan

I had gone from living with my parents to living with my in-laws. Post-divorce, I knew I needed to emerge from those shadows. I moved to Pune where I had a handful of personal and professional contacts. Building a new life from scratch at 35 is about as easy as it sounds. Where does one begin? I met friends of friends, went to parties to meet new people and networked to find work. I've found that the expats in the city are the friendliest, most supportive lot. Some of my closest friends today are not from the country, but have helped me settle in to the city both socially and work-wise.

In the years after my wedding, I had switched from being a full-time journalist to a full-time baker. In Pune, I chose to keep an open mind, and I didn't realise why until recently. Setting up a business demands the same commitment as a relationship, and I was emotionally unprepared to invest myself in one pursuit. So I did all the things I love and turned my home into the haven I always wanted it to be, where I bake, write, and tend to the animals I rescue and rehabilitate.

But that wasn't the hardest part

After functioning as a unit with one person for so long, it felt violating to let someone else think of me in that same way. I knew I was nowhere close to being ready for a relationship,

but even dating seemed preposterous.

A lot of it boiled down to thinking there's no way anyone could be attracted to me. Once I got married, I felt I needed to craft my sexuality in a way that no one else could possibly find me attractive. And I see this among many married women. Attraction should be objective, but it is somehow entangled with the burden of guilt. Our engagement rings and mangalsutras aren't enough; loyalty means also ensuring we're perceived as non-sexual entities by every other man. Successfully reversing this conditioning has been the most liberating part of divorce.

New technology meant I had to relearn how to date

A decade earlier, when I was last single, the only people I met were through friends. But now, everyone was suddenly meeting strangers using mobile apps.

A married friend first installed Tinder on my phone. She was part-excited for me, mostly curious herself. I had palpitations every time she swiped, and I deleted the app as soon as I went home before any of the men she'd 'set me up with' could message.

I asked friends who used the app about their experiences. Some sounded horrifying, but many offered hope. The consensus was that, at the very least, dating apps are an opportunity to meet people with whom you would otherwise never cross paths. This was promising, so I decided to give it a go.

At first, I extended my full trust even to strangers on the internet. My profile had all my real information. Rookie mistake! It wasn't long before creeps I had never matched with started finding me on social media, even messaging my work page asking for me. One man casually WhatsApped me, elaborating the trail he followed to get my number: "I saw where you work, Googled your page, followed it back to your Facebook, and started reading your posts until I found one where you'd mentioned your number." I was meant to be flattered. I was not. When I expressed outrage, he told me calm down, saying he was a married man from a respectable family. That he was only doing this to show me that "what you're doing is not good" and I was only asking for trouble. "See how easy it is to find you?"

After a failed attempt at explaining that what he did amounts to cyber-stalking, I realised he was right about that last bit. I removed my personal details and any possible identifiers from my profile. I had never felt so completely in charge of my own personal safety, and as horrible as it was to have the occasional bitter encounter, it was empowering to have this control.

Our real-life interactions are heavily influenced by our socioeconomic standing, our interests, the company we keep; online dating sheds all these barriers. There are men out there looking for paid sex, for instance, and they'll casually ask you if you solicit. Others

more eloquently call themselves sugar daddies, but the overwhelming presumption is that they will spend on you and you will sleep with them. So my first rule: I'm happy to pay for you, but you won't ever pay for me or buy me presents.

What often bothers me is the condescension and entitlement. There's a sea of bios ranging from "pic is not mine but I am very good looking" and "don't swipe if you think you're beautiful, I don't need your pride in my life" to "I'm married and happy but don't judge, you're here too" (because a single woman looking to date is the equivalent of a man cheating on his wife, of course).

That said, I have met some truly amazing people, many of whom continue to be good friends. We cycle together and cat-sit for each other and share meals—it is the sort of companionship that ending a marriage leaves you craving for, and it means far more than sex.

Rediscovering your own appeal is magical

I remember one man I met. We had been chatting for a while; he was an expat in town on a long-ish assignment. He was smart, funny, witty, and intelligent in our chats. I was certain I only wanted to meet mature men who showed me respect and understood consent. This one checked all the boxes. In his photos he had an infectious smile, and I was charmed by the conviction with which he spoke of doing good for the causes he believed in. We decided to meet for a meal.

I was carrying so much emotional burden in the last few years of my marriage, I had gained a considerable amount of weight. Post-separation, I shed over 15 kilos, but I still felt fat and that made me feel unattractive.

When this man arrived, he seemed shifty and was stammering—nothing like the confident person I had been chatting with. I asked him if something was bothering him, and he said, "I am really nervous. I'm not used to meeting women as beautiful and sexy as you."

It took me a while to believe he was talking to me, but this was my turning point. I realised that people didn't obsess over that half centimetre of flab I could not look past; they didn't care that my arms were not more muscular; they didn't know the emotional baggage I carried. I started to feel comfortable in my own skin again, and that was a beautiful milestone.

Eventually I found that [dating apps](#) were a great way to meet people. It's a stress-free, convenient ego boost that doesn't even have the pressure of ever having to meet.

Some of my most honest conversations have been with men I never ended up meeting. While on a solo trip to Vietnam last year, I matched with an Australian traveller. We didn't get the chance to catch up, but we exchanged travel tips and stayed in touch once both of us returned to our respective homes. Over the next few months, we told each other about our lives, our fears, our struggles—and there was zero expectation. Just the knowledge that we will never meet and therefore have no reason to put on any pretences, was enough.

Let's stop with the "men will be men" excuse

The one thing that continues to astound me is the way men begin to treat you. Men on dating apps, former colleagues, friends—mostly all married. As progressive as they may have seemed when I 'belonged to a man', the divorcee tag somehow means a free pass to offer you the privilege of their company. No strings attached, of course.

I'm not here to pass judgment on women who choose to be with any of these men, strings or no strings. There is a world of difference between seeking consent and enforcing the entitlement to talk down to you. I was, and continue to be, appalled by men who think you don't deserve more if you're a divorced woman, that you should take what you can get.

Two men, one who I matched with on Tinder and another I've known for close to two decades, had nearly identical stories: they couldn't leave their wives for the sake of their children, but wanted a meaningful happy relationship that their wives could know nothing about. They were in no way apologetic or reserved in putting forth their proposals; they were seasoned cheaters, and both spoke without remorse about their numerous past affairs. Both wanted sympathy for being 'stuck' in marriages even though neither had any intention of disengaging with their spouse. "You're divorced and in your late 30s, be realistic in your expectations," one of them said.

This has been echoed by several men. There's elaborate code language in dating app bios for all sorts of sexual preferences. 'Non-judgmental' usually simply means married. I sometimes match with these men to ask if their wives enjoy the same privileges to see other people. "There's no need to be so rude," one said, "she's my wife." Another thought it was hilarious and dismissively said: "Lol that's crazy, so when can we meet?"

We ALL deserve better. The wives, the divorcees, the never-married, we all deserve more respect. So many friends say they are unfulfilled in their marriages, but are too afraid to leave. The overwhelming fear is, what if I don't find better? In my opinion, the reason we stay in unhappy marriages is the reason marriages are unhappy: we let our partners treat us poorly believing that all men are the same, and men continue to operate in the comfort of knowing our fears are not unfounded. We need to break the cycle.

We need to stop equating wholeness with having a partner

Many of us have been taught to be financial independent unlike our mothers and grandmothers, yet it is still ingrained in us that we are not equipped to be emotionally self-reliant. I feel more comfortable being myself now than I ever have before, and it has taken away my need to be with another person in order to feel complete. Now, if I choose to be with someone, it will only be because we want to share each other's already complete lives.