

Family Matters

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queries ● money ● health ● life ● food ● fashion ● horoscope

Divorce needn't be the end of romance

IF Wham! were in the charts the last time you were a footloose singleton, the thought of dipping your toe back into the dating pool after divorce can be petrifying.

So how can you move from a divorce decree to a new happy ever after?

David Robertson, a Yorkshire vicar who divorced after 18 years of marriage, wrote his own guide, *Risking Romance Again* (friendsfirst Publishing; £7.99; ISBN 0-9552164-1-9) after failing to find the answers in self-help books.

"It seemed to me all the books out there for dating after divorce are about losing weight, buying new clothes, learning how to flirt and dealing with the externals — and nothing about the issues that arise when making new relationships.

"The common wisdom says you can shut the door on the past, but in my experience you have to move on to a certain extent before you're ready to make a new relationship.

"That's because any new relationship will open old doors into the past and a lot of people don't expect that. Your past keeps cropping up so you have to continue to deal with it."

The whole concept of dating was alien to David.

"A lot of advice about dating after divorce presumes you dated as a young person and it's all about brushing up those rusty skills.

"The truth is I never dated. Instead, I got to know people at school, college, a club or church, and over a period of time I decided I wanted to ask them out.

"I've never gone up to a complete stranger and said 'you're nice, can we have a drink?' and I suspect that there are an awful lot of people out there like me."

David found the whole divorce process really tough.

"I think it's the most painful thing I've ever experienced in my life, and it was devastating for my four kids, who were aged 9-14 at the time. In fact, it's very like a bereavement.

"When you marry you are surrounded by people who love you and are wishing you well, but when I received my notice of divorce I discovered I'd been divorced for a fortnight and didn't know about it.

By Nora Cleeve

"There you are with a pile of mail in your hand and it's just you and your letter, so it's a very odd ending to a marriage."

Learning to trust again is a big hurdle for many divorcees.

"Trust is an ongoing thing you work at.

"It's one of these doors into the past, and you have to be careful not to load what properly belongs to the past on to the present. That's not helpful to you or your partner."

Excited

Today's technology makes dating a lot easier, but it has its limitations.

"E-mail is so instant and it's so easy to put a fictional face on to the words that are being said, but because there is no body language you don't really know what's going on.

"I think a lot of people get very excited, then meet the person and think 'oh dear, this isn't what I thought it was'."

Take it slowly, is David's motto.

"Both men and women need to be aware of what they're doing, especially if you've come from a long-term relationship and are used to being intimate with your spouse. Suddenly you find yourself with someone who isn't your spouse but you're in an intimate situation.

"If you're not careful, you find yourself speaking to them as if you've known them for 20 years, and that in itself causes difficulties."

In the aftermath of his divorce David spent almost a year going to see a counsellor.

"It helped me review my past and present. I found it really useful, but these things are always personal and everyone is different.

"There are some things you can sort out by yourself and there are others where you need help. Sometimes that can be with a professional counsellor."

David found it easier to unburden his problems to a stranger.

"People who are close to you love you and they don't



■ David has found love second time around after marrying Gill (below) two years ago.

want to hurt you. And if you're not careful they try to shoulder pain which you have to work through yourself.

"Someone who is distant from you can insist you work through those issues and it's a kindness in the end to do that."

Being a vicar didn't make it any easier.

"The parish were supportive and wanted to help but they didn't know what to do.

"There was a lot of goodwill and everyone wanted to do things like cook me casseroles, but I'm a competent cook, and when it came down to it my marriage had broken up and that was a fact.

I thought that as a middle-aged vicar with four children I wasn't much of a catch.

"Little did I know there were lots of women out there longing to be a Mrs Vicar!"

Mrs Right didn't come along straight away, though.

"It's just like real life and if you meet a number of people, there are some who you get on with straight away, those you are never going to get on with, and some in the middle.

"It is hard and a lot of people starting again forget how difficult it was the first time. But forming new relationships is worthwhile."

When David and Gill first clapped eyes on each other, it certainly wasn't all hearts and flowers.

"We decided we'd never be more than friends but we continued to keep in touch."

So there was no blinding light, then?

"No," laughs David. "The eureka moment for me came six months later when Gill said how she felt.

Friends

"I realised I didn't want to lose this woman as a friend and I wanted this friendship to grow and deepen."

But David doesn't regret his go-slow approach.

"Being friends first is always a better foundation for a relationship because if you're friends first, you're friends last.

"It also means you get in touch with the real people involved rather than putting on a show or ticking off a mental list."

A year after becoming an 'item', David popped the question — then 11 weeks later they were tripping down the aisle.

"There was no point waiting then," laughs David, who celebrates his second wedding anniversary next month.

So how can you tell if you're ready to risk romance?

"Divorce is very much like bereavement, which is when I say to people 'don't make any big decisions until you have been around the annual calendar twice'.

"So have one birthday, one Christmas, do a holiday and trot around the calendar a couple of times.

"My experience shows that when people are bereaved and make sudden decisions, they often regret them, and I think it's the same kind of advice for relationships."

"It was very hard because where I work is also where I live and where I worship."

When David became a single parent to three daughters and a son overnight, the biggest problem was meeting new people.

"I wasn't interested in joining a dating agency. I didn't want someone looking me up and down and thinking 'oh yes, you'd suit so and so'. I was looking to extend my social circle so I joined Friends First, a Christian friendship agency."

There was much less pressure than with a dating agency.

"I wasn't nervous but I didn't expect much of a result."