

Is it *really* **OVER**

HOW TO TELL WHETHER TO
CHUCK IT IN – OR STICK IT OUT.

OR IS IT JUST A BAD PATCH?

ADELE AND HOWARD BULKIN

*Married for 15 years; divorced
for one year after an affair, back
together for one.*

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ADELE

Leaving Howard after 15 years of marriage was something that I had to do. I was on a path of self-discovery that necessitated me being on my own. I think that leaving a husband and kids after all that time is often too difficult to contemplate and that one needs a catalyst. Mine was meeting another man who seemed to fill the emotional gaps, but he was not the real reason. I'd known for a long time that I needed to work out my truth in life and I couldn't do it in my existing marriage.

I met Howard in 1988 and it was his smouldering good looks (and his Land Rover!) that attracted me. He is much older than me and possesses a quiet, gentle strength that I still find amazing. Our marriage was, by most accounts, really good. But, towards the end, I became frustrated and stifled and I became the pusher, constantly nagging Howard to join me on my "journey". In addition, we had lost a baby very early on in our marriage and although we thought we had worked through that, we hadn't, and it had a profound long term effect on us as a couple.

We got divorced within six weeks and Howard took custody of our two children (then aged 12 and nine) and apart from my children, who I missed very much, I felt liberated and free. There was nothing I yearned for and, in my mind, our marriage was completely over. My new relationship lasted five months and after that I lived alone – happily. I loved living without the mundaneness of being a wife and the domesticity that surrounds that, and I didn't regret leaving it at all.

And then one day, after a year of being divorced, I had lunch with a good friend.

I had just finished a Brandon Bays Journey and was a bit tearful and unsettled. She made a casual reference to Howard and I, and it was at that moment that I realised that I needed to come home, that he was always going to be my soul mate and that he was very much part of my life. Although our divorce was amicable, our relationship was not, and so planning to reconcile was going to be challenging. I decided that I would write a letter to him. I told him that I had made a mistake, that I missed him and the kids and that the freedom that I'd left for would always be inside of me. The truth is, I had never stopped loving him. It was the most honest I'd ever been with him and I bared my soul with humility in my heart. He took three days to answer; it nearly killed me!

It took us a further six months of dating, counselling and communication before I actually moved back in with my family.

And now? Leaving Howard was the right thing to do. It wasn't just a bad patch. It was an old, tired marriage. We now have far more respect love and honesty in our relationship. I am not easy to be with, I know, but Howard's unflinching love and strength is something that will never go away. We sort out conflict immediately and are so much more mature about it all. We're more comfortable with each other and we've learnt how to carry and organise our baggage!

I am really grateful for our second chance – to rebuild our family and to appreciate, every day, what we have and who we are together.

HOWARD

We got divorced because I didn't think it was appropriate to have a third party in our marriage. It was a bad example to our children and not acceptable to me at all.

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I had suspected there was someone else for a while, so it didn't come as a surprise that she wanted to leave. For me, the experience was one huge emotional turmoil. I felt gutted and rejected, and felt a sense of great loss. I kept our children, but I lost my wife.

Divorce doesn't just happen overnight. It's a long process to separate, but the defining moment came for me when Adele's boyfriend moved into town. I let go, signed the divorce papers and began to move forward and make a new life without her. I was angry, sure, but it was important for me to create an environment for our children that was not filled with bitterness and regret. It was also important to me that financially, Adele had a fair start. I continued to work through this very difficult time, day by day. The routine of looking after two children kept me sane.

Her letter came as a complete shock. I had moved on. And I didn't jump up and rush back to her. I had to consider her request seriously. Being single has its advantages. It is easier not to consider a partner. I loved finding new friendships and socialising more. It's not difficult being single.

But after 15 years there is a history, growth and feelings that one can't just erase. But we had severed ties and I knew it would take an enormous amount of trust and courage for us to reconcile.

If we were going to get back together, it had to be unconditional. I would have to forgive and forget, and we couldn't risk bringing in old wounds. Truth is, Adele's my soul mate; I've never stopped loving her.

Living as a single dad with two kids is a huge thing. Ethel, our home help, was amazing. I learnt that running a home is momentous. I had to reduce my full-time job to a half-day.

Today, we are more of a team, more connected and we have a mutual interdependence that never existed in our marriage. We have matured and rounded. Our communication is far more open and courageous and I know what is going on in her head because she now tells me. She is more intuitive towards me and far more attentive. We have a far richer relationship. I have completely forgiven her. She came back, didn't she? Emotions are what make us – you gotta have them. Adele makes me feel alive.

most people who've been through a divorce or a nasty break-up have regrets: they met too young and it was just a case of bad timing; they chose badly; they put up with too much. But Erica*, a 37-year-old teacher, has different regrets. She wishes she'd fought harder to save her marriage.

'I've been divorced for five years now,' she says, 'and in retrospect, I wish I hadn't been so quick to leave. Life wasn't as bad as I thought it was. And I'm sure we could have made a go of things if we'd put in the effort and got some professional help.'

But it's too late now. Her ex-husband has remarried and Erica – like many divorced women – faces a daily struggle as a single mother of two young children.

'We hit a really bad patch after our second child was born,' says Erica. 'I think it was just the stress of a new baby, added to work stress – Pete* had to retrench many of his colleagues, as his department at work

was undergoing restructuring. It was really hard on him, and he brought all of that stress home with him. I wasn't in a position to be as supportive as I should have been, and so our relationship started to break down.

'We didn't talk to each other at all. We sometimes had stand-up rows about tiny, tiny things. And it all kind of spiralled downwards. Eventually, one day, when our youngest was eight months old, I packed my things and moved in with my folks.'

Annie*, 35, had the opposite experience. She recently divorced her husband, Matthew* after just three years, ostensibly because they constantly clashed on how to raise his four children from a previous marriage, although she admits their relationship was 'challenged' from the start.

'We weren't communicating at all,' she says. 'He was always coming

home late, he stopped being actively involved in our home life, and in the last six months of our marriage, he constantly attacked me or questioned my decisions in front of his kids. It was humiliating. And I put up with it for far too long.'

In addition, Matthew lost his job, which added financial pressure to an already fraught situation. Annie continued to support him while he tried to start his own business, but after over a year of constant tension and acrimony, they were divorced.

'Being a stepmother to four children is quite daunting,' says Annie. 'There was also an 11-year age gap between us, which didn't help. We'd talked about possibly having a child of our own, and my biological clock was ticking very loudly, but when I brought the subject up, the door was shut firmly in my face. And that was a huge issue for me.' Unlike Erica, Anna has few regrets about her decision.

* Names have been changed.

'I wish I hadn't been so quick to pack my bags and leave. Life wasn't as bad as I thought it was'

THE EXPERT SAID

Liz Dooley, director of FAMSA's Family Life Centre in Parkwood, Johannesburg, says bad patches can be dangerous: 'Often it is just a bad patch, but a bad patch can lead to a cycle of negativity which then becomes a permanent bad patch. If it lasts a week, it's something you can work through and get over, as long as your relationship is 95% okay. Anything that goes on for longer needs to be addressed.'

Often, she says, marital or relationship strain happens as a result of an individual issue. 'Couples are very quick to blame their partners for their woes, but one of the first questions I ask them in therapy is, "What are *you* doing that is damaging this relationship?"

In other words, what baggage are they carrying into the marriage? Is this "my problem" or "our problem"?' she says. 'If it's an individual problem, then that has to be sorted out first.'

Still, it can be very difficult to distinguish between a bad patch and what many would term 'falling out of love'. 'Part of the problem is that people's expectations going into marriage are unrealistic,' says Dooley. 'People think their relationship of romance and passion will continue unchanged, but the reality of day-to-day life often intrudes on that. And the initiation of a relationship is different to its daily maintenance.'

'Love changes over time,' she points out, 'as do our needs.

And as your relationship progresses you move onto a different, deeper level of intimacy, which is more than just sexual intimacy.'

Many people, however, embark on marriage with a number of false assumptions. 'The most common, despite our feminist inclinations and determination to be our own person, is that our partner is a knight in shining armour come to rescue us. 'Very soon, however, the knight falls off the horse,' says Dooley wryly. 'And marriage is difficult, because there is this kind of disillusionment. People have idealised perceptions of what it will be like, and how they deal with that disappointment is very important. We have to be adaptable.'

Dooley says a sign that your relationship is in trouble is when it feels as if it's just more of the same negativity every day. 'When you're going up and down the same railroad, you need an outside perspective to give you a road map,' she says.

'Whether you're fighting about money, kids, sex or anything else, you need help to look at things differently and to develop new skills – because often people don't have the skills they need to sort the problem out.'

'And it's the end of the road when you have tried different ways of relating to each other and you simply don't like each other any more,' says Dooley. 'Then it's time to part ways.'

SIMONE

Our bad patch lasted for four years. It started when I was pregnant with our daughter in 2002 and we'd been married for a year and a half. When you're pregnant, you tend to start nesting and you mature immediately. But Andy wasn't ready to do that: he was in the restaurant business and he'd work until 2am and then party with friends.

I used to lock him out at night. I was miserable and nagging him all the time, and after Hannah was born we were still mad at each other a lot.

When Jonah was born in 2005, Andy started to get more responsible. He changed jobs and started working 9-5, which meant he was home for weekends and evenings and public holidays. But then, when he was with us, we had to adjust to having him around all the time.

Many women think, 'I need to change him; he's the one who's wrong'. But I found that when I focused on myself, he noticed the change in me and then *he* changed. So I stopped shouting when he came home late. I told the children to "leave daddy alone, he's sleeping" and then I'd take them out. Then when we got back, we'd all get along.

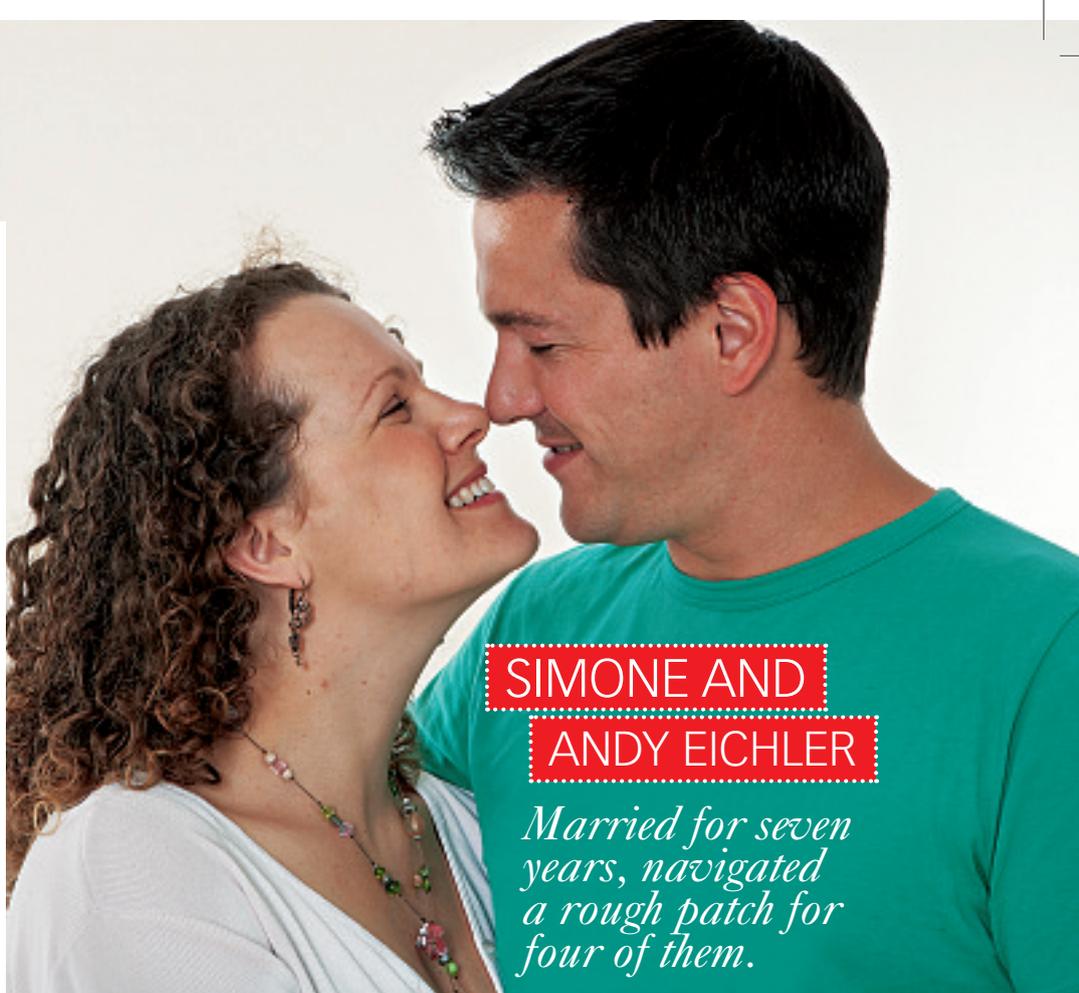
Many single women say they're not willing to compromise for a man; they think it's about becoming submissive. We met in-between; we had to become new people together. I think if he's worth it to you, you should be willing to do it.

There were times I thought: 'If I could go back, I'd never marry him.' But I never thought it was the end: Once you make that decision, your heart goes cold. It's hard to change your mind back again then.

My parents have been married for 32 years. They've shown us it is hard work. As a child, I remember my parents having huge fights. I remember my mother packing her bags one day and telling us that she loved us, but that she couldn't live there. They never fought behind closed doors, so we saw that fighting was normal. My mom used to tell me to stick it out, that it's worth it.

We went to a marriage counsellor, but she didn't really help us. Andy charmed her so much she thought I was a lunatic and too demanding.

A rocky patch is never about the same thing; you can't prepare yourself for it. But you can fight through it; I'm so glad I did. If your heart has pounded for the person before, it can pound for him again.



SIMONE AND ANDY EICHLER

Married for seven years, navigated a rough patch for four of them.

ANDY

Our rough patch started because of me. I wanted everything to fit into my lifestyle. But I've learnt to live in a relationship. I've matured. I realise that the only important thing in life is my wife and family.

No one goes into a marriage and it works perfectly. There's no guideline, it has to develop. It was very stressful, making excuses all the time, trying to appease Simone all the time....

I know now that everything works in phases, and the phase isn't always short – a bad patch can be one week or a couple of years. If there was a good time once, there'll be a good time again.

Once I knew that my partying wasn't working, I procrastinated in making the sacrifice. But I knew that once I did it I'd be fine. So I just decided to step out of that to make us happy.

Soon it became exciting. It was like starting a new life. I had more time because I wasn't working nights, and that creates a more normal life. I didn't even miss the partying; I had my children to enjoy – I've realised there's nothing better.

I could've handled the rough patch better, been a lot more understanding. At that point, the way I dealt with it was to switch off and not communicate at all.

Simone does things that bring us together. She'll take me by the hand and say, 'Let's take a walk'. And even if it's just a walk, it gives you time to spend together and just chat, and it brings you closer.

I regret making it so hard for her. I can't go back and undo it, but I can make sure that everything I do from now on is to make her happy.

I think you need someone to tell you when you're being distant. You need someone to say: "I love you, but you're being an asshole. What's wrong?" If you think too much without asking the person what's going on, that's when you start messing it up – because you create your own reality. You make assumptions, and if you leave it too long, it's too late.

The harder the patch, the stronger the relationship when it's over. It's like boot camp! If you still think you're in this on your own, you're in for a hell of a hard time. That's why people get together, so they have someone to rely on.

Simone was incredible. She just hung in there. It took a lot to deal with me. Now, I'm going for 60 years plus – I want record-breaking marriage years. There's nothing better or more important than your family. ❖

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