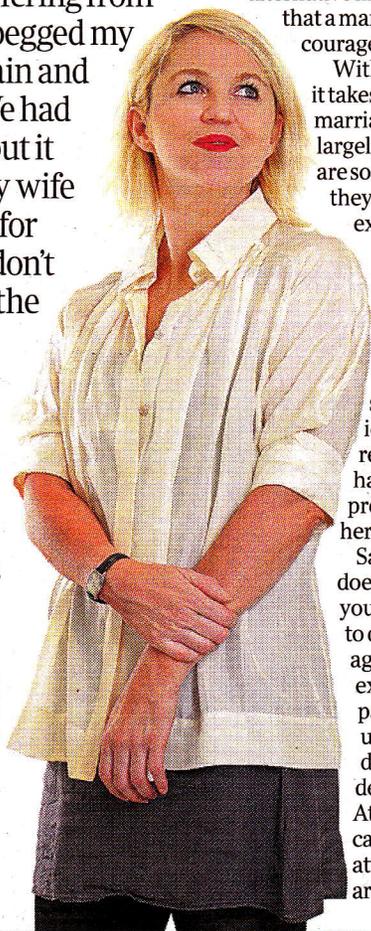


# She wants a divorce...

**Suzi Godson**  
Sex counsel

**Q** My wife and I have been married for 15 years and our sex life was reasonably consistent, even though our relationship has been antagonistic for at least half that time. About a year ago I moved out for six months, but it was awful. I missed my three children and I ended up suffering from depression. I begged my wife to try again and she agreed. We had counselling, but it didn't help. My wife has now filed for divorce, but I don't want to leave the house. I feel furious with her, yet we still sleep in the same bed and on a few occasions she has even had sex with me. Does that mean she still loves me?



**A** My heart goes out to you. Both. Ending a marriage is never easy and there is an awful lot of bumping along at rock bottom before self-preservation determines that the risk of staying outweighs the risk of going. In nearly 70 per cent of divorces it is the wife who reaches that point first.

This may be because women are more sensitive to the impact that parental hostility has on children but, to some extent, they also have less to lose. Though research shows that women do worse financially after a divorce, they generally get to hang on to the kids. In contrast, men emerge from a marriage facing an empty flat, ready meals for one and access to the kids every other weekend. It is such a miserable prospect that many fathers would prefer to cling indefinitely to the wreckage of a sinking marriage rather than strike out alone into unknown waters. Indeed, it is usually only when an alternative lifeboat appears on the horizon that a man will summon up the courage to jump ship.

Without the impetus of infidelity, it takes about five years for a marriage to completely unravel, largely because warring couples are so inconsistent in the way that they think and behave. For

example, the rational part of your wife's brain probably tells her that it is unwise to engage in sex with a man who she intends to divorce, but a couple of glasses of wine and the sight of her sleeping children melts her icy heart. You reach out. She responds. And in the space of half an hour she undoes all her previous efforts to disentangle herself from the relationship.

Sadly, that she agrees to sex does not mean that she loves you. Love is virtually impossible to define, but there is universal agreement that it is a positive experience. Love isn't bitter or painful, unless it is thwarted or unrequited, and it certainly doesn't make you clinically depressed or angry.

Attachment, on the other hand, can hurt like hell. The romantic attachments we create as adults are modelled on the primal

parent/child bond. Children are totally reliant on that bond and in most cases it provides unconditional love and affection. As adults, we know that the attachments we form are not unconditional, yet we experience irrational and often disproportionate feelings of anguish if the bond we have formed turns out to be damaging or is withdrawn.

Last year, the psychologist Uri Wernik carried out a study on three men who were tormented by feelings of loss, jealousy, rejection and sadness after their marriages failed. All three interpreted their feelings of pain as evidence of how much they had loved their former partner. Wernik got the three men to write the six most recurrent thoughts that they had about their partners on small cards that they carried around in their pockets.

Each negative rumination was countered with a rational alternative, such as: "Our separation is final, she will do as she pleases with her life; my job is to take care of my life" or "26-50 per cent of men and 21-38 per cent of women have extramarital sex. No one can guarantee that it will not happen. The only rational option is to trust one's own feelings."

Every hour on the hour, for up to a week, the men were asked to throw a die and read the intrusive thought that corresponded to the number thrown. When they began to feel the pain they associated with that statement, they were instructed to read the opposing rational statement until they felt the pain subside. After only two days all three felt substantially better and towards the end of the week two out of three felt free of their obsessive thoughts.

By creating a paradoxical intervention, Wernik's experiment empowered the men to change the way they thought. They realised that they could make themselves feel better and that a lot of their thinking was related to irrational feelings of attachment rather than "love" in the true sense of the word. With a throw of the die, the men were able to counter their painful ruminations and move on. And that is what you need to do, but make sure you have enough support. You can find a good therapist online at [www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists](http://www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists). There is good information on child contact at [separateddads.co.uk](http://separateddads.co.uk). And when you are ready, you can probably find your lifeboat at [match.com](http://match.com). Best of luck.

**If you have a question for Suzi, e-mail [weekendsex@thetimes.co.uk](mailto:weekendsex@thetimes.co.uk)**