

# SALLY

## I AM SEPARATING FROM MY HUSBAND, BUT CAN'T TELL HIM I HAVE A LOVER

My husband and I have been each other's best (and only) friend since we met 15 years ago. Our relationship started to decline after five years, but separation was inconceivable. As the years have passed, it has got so bad that we never make love and argue constantly. Last year, I fell in love with a man who is also unhappily married. I told my husband I wanted to separate, but not that I had met someone else. We don't want to sell our home as it would disturb our two cats. My husband has agreed to move out, but I don't want to tell him somebody else will move into his home. He says there will never be anyone else and talks about us spending time together. He has no friends or support from his family, so I feel I'm deserting him emotionally and am sick with guilt. I've told my new partner I'll need a period of mourning before he moves in, but he says that if I feel like that, perhaps I should consider a reconciliation with my husband. Is it normal to grieve so much for a previous relationship and still be committed to a new one?

**Y**es, it is normal to grieve for an old relationship and still be committed to a new one, but not to the point of paralysis.

I believe very strongly that we should allow ourselves time to heal emotionally before we wholly commit to a new relationship. Many relationships founder, particularly those that begin as clandestine affairs, because we are still attached to the old, whether that's through regret, guilt or even hate. They are strong emotions and, if unresolved, turn up as excess baggage in the new relationship. Then we wonder why it collapses under the weight.

When you say that you and your husband have been each other's best (and only) friend, it rings alarm bells, because it sounds like a relationship of enmeshed overattachment rather than healthy interdependence. It also seems odd to describe yourselves as best friends when you have done nothing but argue for 10 years.

You've met and fallen in love with this new man, but my worry is that you've simply transferred your attention from one person to another. What about friends – or love in all its other various forms? I'm not surprised your relationship with your husband declined and you argue constantly if you both expect each other to fulfil all your emotional needs. Relationships need space and air to flourish or they become suffocating. Your marriage must have been like living in a hothouse.

The other alarm bell concerns your cats. Cats are creatures of attachment and move with people, not houses (mine have managed four moves in 12 years and are perfectly content). Not selling your home because you might disturb your pets seems an extraordinarily flimsy pretext, and, again, signals some form of emotional claustrophobia and childlike dependence.

Separation means exactly that – to separate, to part, to rend asunder – but, judging from your letter, I don't believe you've even begun the process. You may have said the words out loud, but it is action rather than intention that tells a story. No wonder your new partner feels you should consider reconciliation with your husband.

I think you're right and you do need a period of mourning, but if you really want to start a new life, you should do so by making a clean break. That begins with honesty. Telling your husband might be hurtful, but it will be infinitely less harmful than moving a man into his family home after a few months. He's bound to suspect there's been somebody all along, and while infidelity might be wounding, for most people being lied to is the more devastating injury, and one from which it is significantly more difficult to recover.

Selling the marital home and moving to a new house is an important step in moving on, emotionally as well as physically. By hanging onto the house, you're hanging onto the past. In your longer letter, you say you have no children, so there are no young lives to disrupt. I assume your new partner also needs time to disentangle himself from his marriage and the difficult emotions that will inevitably arise. If your relationship has been secret and conducted in snatched moments, neither of you can truly know the other, so my feeling is that you should allow the relationship to develop before fully committing. Living on your own in a new home, clear of the memories of your marriage, would give you time to develop emotional independence and establish other important relationships, such as friendship. It would also help you to avoid repeating the claustrophobic and, ultimately, destructive pattern of your marriage.

I suspect that much of your guilt is based in emotional dishonesty. You are keeping an enormous secret, which is bound to eat away at you. You haven't been clear with your husband. You might have rationalised your approach as a loving desire not to hurt him, but, in reality, it will mean death by a thousand cuts. The real question is whether you are leaving the marriage because it is truly at an end, or are jumping ship to a passing lifeboat. I feel the answer lies in honesty and clear thinking, rather than this tangled mess of secrets and lies. ●

*If you have a relationship question for Sally, email [sally.brampton@sunday-times.co.uk](mailto:sally.brampton@sunday-times.co.uk). In case of publication, names will be withheld. We're sorry, but Sally cannot answer letters personally*

