

P S Y C H O

B A B B L E

TRI-CITY PSYCHOLOGY SERVICES INC. NEWSLETTER

All Change

Most divorces after the age of 50 are initiated by women. Why? In a new book, Dr Louann Brizendine explains how changes caused by the menopause weaken women's instinct to hold a family together and liberate them from the need to put up with the failings of second-rate husbands.

Sylvia woke up one day and decided, this is it. I'm done. I want a divorce. It had become clear to her that her husband, Robert, was unavailable and ungiving. She was tired of listening to his tirades and fed up with his demands. But what really pushed her over the edge was when she found herself in the hospital for a week for an intestinal blockage and he visited her only twice. Both times he came to ask questions about running the house.

At least this is how Sylvia, an attractive woman with brown hair, bright blue eyes and a spring in her step, explained it to me during a therapy session. Since her early twenties, she felt she had spent most of her time taking care of needy, self-absorbed people. She had fixed their problems, pulling them out of alcoholism or abusive situations, and in return they had sucked her emotionally dry.

At 54, she was still very attractive and felt full of energy. What astounded her more than anything was that she felt as though a haze had lifted recently, and she could see in a way she hadn't been able to before. For 28 years she had chauffeured, nurtured and loved her three children, made sure home-work was done, dinner was eaten and the house didn't fall apart. Now, out of nowhere, she found herself asking, why?

If we took our MRI scanner into Sylvia's brain, we'd see a landscape quite different from that of a few years before. A constancy in the flow of impulses through her brain circuits has replaced the surges and plunges of oestrogen and progesterone caused by the menstrual cycle. Her brain is now a more certain and steady machine. We do not see



the hair-trigger circuits in the amygdala that rapidly altered her reality right before her period, sometimes pushing her to see bleakness that wasn't there or to hear an insult that wasn't intended. We would see that the brain circuits between the amygdala (the emotional processor), and the prefrontal cortex (the emotion assessment and judgment area) are fully functional and consistent. They are no longer easily overamped at certain times of the month. The amygdala still lights up more than a man's when Sylvia sees a threatening face or hears about a tragedy, but tears don't flood her so quickly any more.

Fifty-one and a half years is the average age of menopause, the moment 12 months after a woman's last period; 12 months after the ovaries have stopped producing the hormones that have boosted her communication circuits, emotion circuits, the drive to tend and care and the urge to avoid conflict at all costs. The circuits are still there but the fuel for running the highly responsive Maserati engine for tracking the emotions of others has begun to run dry, and this scarcity causes a major shift in how a woman perceives her reality.

With her oestrogen down, her oxytocin is down, too. She's less interested in the nuances of emotions; she's less concerned about keeping the peace; and she's getting less of a dopamine rush from the things she did before, even talking with her friends. She's not getting the calming oxytocin reward of tending and caring for little children, so she's less inclined to be as attentive to others' personal needs.

This can happen precipitously and the problem is that Sylvia's family can't see from the outside how her internal rules are being rewritten. One day she turned to Robert and said: "You're a grown-up and I'm finished raising the kids. Now it's my turn to have a life." Robert couldn't believe what he was hearing. For instance: "Make your own damn dinner or go out by yourself. For the last time, I'm not hungry. I'm happy painting right now and I don't feel like stopping."

He said she had snapped at him at a party two nights before, when she offered a suggestion about investing in a group of stocks and he told her to stay out of the discussion because she didn't know what she was talking about. After all, he was the one who read Barron's, the investors' guide. "Yeah, you keep reading it and you keep losing money. Have you seen my portfolio lately? I've made three times the amount you've made, so stop belittling me," she'd replied. Everything he said seemed to annoy her. She announced that she was moving out.

When Sylvia was younger, she would do everything she could to avoid fights with her husband, even if she was really mad. There's a tape that gets rolling during the teen years, when oestrogen dials up the emotions and communication circuits and makes a woman panic about any conflict as a threat to a relationship. That tape doesn't stop rolling until a woman either consciously overrides it or the supply of hormones that fuels it is cut off, or both. A time like now.

All her life Sylvia had prided herself on being accommodating and willing to let her husband win — especially when he came home exhausted and on-edge from the office. Her empathy for him was real.

She kept the peace, as her Stone Age brain was compelling her to do, to keep the family together. Having a husband is good. We're better protected this way. These were the messages keeping her from engaging in conflict. If Robert forgot their anniversary, she would bite her tongue. If he was verbally abusive after a long day at work, she stared straight into the stew she was stirring and didn't respond.

But as Sylvia hit menopause, the filters came off, her irritability increased and her anger wasn't headed for that extra "stomach" any more, to be chewed over before it came out. Her ratio of testosterone to oestrogen was shifting, and her anger pathways were becoming more like a man's. The calming effects of progesterone and oxytocin weren't there to cool off the anger either. The couple had never learnt to process and resolve their disagreements. Now Sylvia confronted Robert with regularity, venting decades of pent-up rage. The children were also affected. Sylvia had reported that her daughter had said: "Mom, you're

acting weird and dad is getting scared. He's afraid you'll do something crazy — like take all the money and run away." Sylvia wasn't crazy but she wasn't the same woman. She told me that her husband had once screamed at her: "What have you done with my wife?" Sylvia had changed the rules of the relationship and no one had told Robert.

It is commonly believed that men leave their ageing, chubby, postmenopausal wives for fertile, younger, thin women. This couldn't be further from the truth. Statistics indicate that more than 65 per cent of divorces after the age of 50 are initiated by women. My suspicion is that much of this female-initiated divorce is rooted in the drastically altered reality of postmenopausal women. (But as I have seen in my practice, it could also be because they are tired of putting up with difficult or cheating husbands and have just been waiting for the day when the children leave home.) What had been important to women — connection, approval, children and making sure the family stayed together — is no longer the first thing on their minds.

When Sylvia found out that she was accepted into a master's programme in social work, it was one of the happiest days of her life. She hadn't had such a feeling of accomplishment since she graduated from college, got married or had children. As a matter of fact, many women's lives are just hitting their peak. This can be an exciting intellectual time now that the burden of rearing children has decreased and the preoccupation of the mummy brain is lessened. The contribution of work to a woman's personality, identity and fulfillment once again becomes as important as it may have been before the mummy brain took over. Women with high career momentum in their fifties and sixties scored better on measures of self-acceptance, independence and effective functioning, and rated physical health higher than did other women.

There's a lot of life left after menopause, and embracing work passionately allows a woman to feel regenerated. Two years after their separation, Sylvia realized that she missed Robert. He was the only one she could talk to about certain things, including their children. One day he invited her to dinner and she decided to accept. They met, talked calmly about what had gone wrong and ended up apologizing for the unhappiness they had caused each other. They also had new experiences to share and over time they rediscovered their friendship and respect for each other and realized that they had already found their soul mates. They just needed to rewrite the contract.

The mature female brain is still relatively unknown territory, but it's a wide open place for women to discover, create, contribute and lead in positive ways for future generations. And maybe even have the most fun years of their lives. © Dr.Louann Brizendine 2007.

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