

7

*SHOCKING TRUTHS*

about

**Being Single**

in a

**Married World**

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# 7 Shocking Truths about Being Single in a Married World

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**NOTE:** The *Workbook for With or Without A Man* goes into more depth about each of these chapters. Contact me if you are interested in obtaining a copy.

## INTRODUCTION

Society has always had a complicated relationship with single women. In past centuries, they were called Spinsters. As recently as the 1950s, one research showed Americans assumed women were single because they were immoral, neurotic, or ugly. Certainly the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s helped a bit. But what took its place is a tendency to glamorize singles – they are smart to have stayed single, pursuing their career. Yet, the old stigma (although subtle) still exists, like the dirty underbelly of a brand new shiny car. Women are affected by the underbelly, even if they don't see it.

Mostly, I have seen how these subtle biases against always single (AS) and single again (SA) women have eaten into women's self-esteem, often causing them to blame themselves, seeing themselves as flawed.

I have gathered these seven truths from my forty-plus years as a therapist.

You may not agree with everything I say in these pages, but I hope I provoke you to new thoughts, to question yourself – and others – about ways of thinking that you now take for granted. I hope you come away with another perspective on what it means to be single in a world that more highly values marriage.

## SHOCKING TRUTH #1

### STOP: You May Not Need To Blame Yourself

In 1950, there was a remarkable study about society's understanding of single women. One surprising aspect is that someone even thought to study single women back then. Another is the findings: (Are you ready for this? Sit down and hold on tight.) The majority of Americans in the study thought women were single because they were neurotic, immoral or ugly.

Times have changed, at least somewhat. One thing, though, that has remained the same is the need to have explanations for why women are single. The explanations from back then are certainly different from those of today. Today we live in a post-Freudian era, which means everything has a psychological explanation. This leads to a woman automatically assuming blame for being single and then having an explanation for why it is her fault.

Here are few examples of the explanations society might offer for women who are Always Single (AS):

If an AS woman says, "I grew up with two brothers and a father I adored" society can say, "You're single because no man can live up to them.

Yet, if an AS woman says, "I was sexually abused as a child," society can say, "You're single because you are afraid of men or you hate them."

Here are a few examples for the explanations society might offer for women who are divorced or widowed (SA):

If a divorced woman says, "After Paul left me, I never wanted to be that vulnerable again," people could say, "That's why you're single, you can't trust men."

Yet, if a widowed woman says, "We were so happy; my husband's death just about killed me. People can say, "That's why you're single; you won't let yourself love again."

You see the pattern? No matter what an always single or single again woman says about her relationships with the important men in her life, people twist her comments into an explanation for why she is single – even if they are contradictory explanations. It must be her fault.

The truth is you can't win if you let society define why you are single or single again. You can't win if you buy other people's explanations for why you are single -- because they blame you. So accepting their explanation means you blame yourself.

Here's what's even more unfortunate: You get help in blaming yourself from *people who love and care about you*.

Maria, an AS woman told me about an exchange she had with her mother. Maria said, "I'm thinking of breaking up with Bill." Her mother's first response was, "Why would you do that? He's such a nice man."

"What's wrong with that?" you ask.

Here's what's wrong with it. Maria's mother did not ask why Maria was thinking of breaking up. Bill could have been cheating on her; he could have been mean, crude, even a drunkard. Her mother didn't ask how Maria felt about her decision. Maria could be heartbroken about breaking up or scared or proud of making this difficult decision.

Even assuming Maria's mother was a loving parent her comment was a criticism of Maria. Her mother presumed to know what was best for her daughter by her response. But, it's not just mothers. It's best friends, casual acquaintances, even therapists. Lots of people blame you for decisions you make about a man, sometimes without any information as a foundation for their comments.

Even some self-help books and relationship coaches do it. Bookstores and the internet offer dozens of books on how to meet a man, how to flirt, how to change yourself so you can meet and keep a man. The implicit or explicit message is you could find a man...*if only you fix yourself!*

Well, let me tell you something:

**I am MAD.**

I am mad that smart, professionally successful, delightful women beat up on themselves because they aren't married or haven't stayed married or haven't remarried.

I'm mad women blame themselves for not meeting a man, rather than blaming a specific man – or men in general – for not doing their part in learning how their emotional baggage from childhood or prior relationships prevent them from being ready for a healthy one now.

Self-blame leads to the Fix-It Solution. With the Fix-It-Solution, you say (consciously or unconsciously): If I can identify a problem within me, I can fix it. And, once fixed, I'll be able to find a man.

Here's how this thinking works. Betty identifies her problem as "Men don't like me because I'm too heavy." Regardless what the scale says, she now has a problem that she can fix. Her solution: "I need to lose weight." She may or may not need to lose weight but that has nothing to do with not finding a man. She obviously hasn't noticed that lots of fat women are married or have a partner, and lots of skinny women don't.

Josephina demonstrates another way the Fix-It Solution works. "My father beat me when I was little; therefore, I'm a lousy picker when it comes to men." She decides, then, that she needs therapy. Actually, this had been a good decision 10 years ago because she was choosing men who were mean like her father. In her therapy, she worked out her childhood issues, and since then, she has not once been in a relationship with a mean man. But even though her therapy was successful, since she still has not found a man, she blames herself and resorts to the Fix-It-Solution – go back to therapy. As if more therapy is going to make that appropriate man appear in her life.

Josephina does not acknowledge that the years she spent in therapy paid off, and she is a much better picker. Because she is a better picker she

has not gotten into a bad relationship. But, her personal growth does not mean she will find a man who has worked on *his* personal growth and is ready for a healthy relationship.

The shocking truth is that society, and single women themselves, blame women for relationship problems – without assessing how much blame they should take for themselves and how much belongs to the man.

***Women, take care of your emotional  
relationship baggage and then stop blaming  
yourself.***

## **ACTION PLAN #1**

**Goal: To assess how much self-blame you really deserve**

1. Make a list of what you think are the issues that interfere with your being in a healthy relationship. (Everyone has issues.)
2. Next to each issue, make a note of what you have done to work on the issues.
3. If you have worked on an issue, circle the issue with a bright color, indicating you are removing it from the reasons you blame yourself for not being single.
4. Now look over your entire list again. Note the bright colored circles and feel the pride at the emotional growth you have made. Does seeing the colored circles make you re-assess how much you automatically blame yourself – without any real basis?
5. See if you can identify any issues that fall into the Fix-It Solution category.
6. For the other issues that still need attention make a conscious plan for how you will address them.

NOTE: If you have included on your Issue List "I'm afraid of intimacy," consider that to some degree, everyone is – even people who have been married a long time. Working on this fear of intimacy is a life-long process; you don't get over it and then find a man. You work on it *in context of* a relationship.

(This action plan is described in more depth as an exercise in the  
*Workbook for With or Without a Man:*  
<http://www.drkarengaillewis.com/Books>)

## **SHOCKING TRUTH #2**

### **The Real Reason So Many Women Today are Single**

According to the American Census Bureau, as of 2012 there were 112 million unmarried Americans, representing over 47% of the adult population. And just 54.4% of them are women.

It's understandable that many people say this explains why there are so many single women. The reality, though, is that statistics about the number of single men and women are not accurate -- because there is no universally accepted definition of who is single. Priests and nuns, as well as gays, lesbians and heterosexuals in a committed relationship but without a marriage certificate are all included in the single statistics.

Let me show you how meaningless the statistics:

Marsha, who has been living with Lenny for 25 years is identified as single, while Louise, who has been separated but never legally divorced from Martin, for those same 15 years is identified as married.

In the absence of a more accurate definition of who is single, people of all ages without a marriage certificate are clumped together – priests and 16 year olds, the Marshas and Lennys, and the 89 years old widows, partnered gay men, single again mothers of teenagers, homeless mentally ill veterans. Of course they are not the same.

So, here's my definition of a single: a heterosexual and homosexual man and woman, over the age of 21 (census Bureau uses 18), who are available for a committed relationship or marriage.

Women who meet my definition blame themselves for not meeting a man, but from my clinical experience, a more common explanation is they are not meeting an "emotionally available" man. Based on input from book

stores and therapist, it appears far more women than men have done personal growth work through self-help books and therapy. Thus, they may have grappled with the baggage from their childhood and prior relationships. This suggests that with fewer men cleaning up their past, there are fewer emotionally available men ready for a healthy relationship.

Unfortunately, despite all the self-help books, no where do you hear the reality that regardless how well you flirt or where you go to meet men, or how you dress or act – none of that matters if you are not meeting a man who is paying attention to his part of what makes a relationship work. An emotionally available man is willing to put in the effort *you* have to make yourself as emotionally healthy as possible. It takes two people to make a relationship work well, and the man has to do his part.

Here's a uncorroborated "fact": even if you do headstands naked in Times Square, there is no guarantee of your meeting an emotionally (or even a potentially emotionally) available man.

Here is the Shocking Truth that no one wants to acknowledge about why there are more single women today:

**More women than men are pursuing their personal growth, so more woman then men are ready for a healthy relationship.**

## **ACTION PLAN #2**

**Goal: To make yourself into an emotionally healthy woman so you will be more selective in the men you choose to date**

1. Building on Action Plan #1, catch yourself each time you fall back into an unwarranted self-blame.
2. Become “appropriately choosey.” Don’t be with a man just because you want to avoid your mother’s and your best friend’s comments – or just because he wants to be with you.
3. Be clear about the emotional baggage you bring from childhood (everyone has some) and from prior relationships. If you have trouble with this, get professional help.
4. Clarify what you need to do for yourself so you can become more the woman you want to be. If you are having trouble figuring out what you want for yourself or how to get there consider talking with a therapist or attending a women’s group or women’s retreat to help clarify the issues for you.\*
5. Regardless what your mother, best friend, and all those self-help books say, keep reminding yourself: A major part of finding an emotionally available man is timing, luck, or happenstance. You do, though, have to do your personal work to clear up your emotional baggage. Otherwise, you will choose inappropriate men.
6. Be aware the more emotionally healthy you become, fewer men will feel right for you. That may be upsetting, yet it also means you will have fewer bad relationships because you will be a better picker.

- For information on a women’s retreat, go to <http://www.UniqueRetreatsforSingleWomen.com>

## **SHOCKING TRUTH #3**

### **Explaining Why Are You Single Actually Makes You Feel Worse**

Women have told me they often feel compelled to respond when someone makes a comment about their being single. Comments and questions come from both people in general and from mothers. The intent, though (as you'll see below) is very different; therefore, your responses should be different.

#### **Comments from People in General:**

Have you heard any of these comments?

- Why aren't you married?
- You're so smart (assertive, successful), you scare men away
- You're too choosy (or fussy)
- You never give a guy a chance
- You're too set in your ways; you'll never find a man

Of course you have. You probably have heard these comments, too:

- You're smart to have stayed single
- You've chosen the professional route

Do they seem any better? If you say yes, that explains the subtlety of society's bias; if the words are phrased correctly, you *think* you are hearing something positive.

But, read the sentences again and listen carefully. What are they really saying? Although sounding more positive, do you notice all of them are still explaining why you are single? Whether the explanation sounds positive or negative, someone else is giving you the reason you are single.

If you think about it, these uninvited comments are really *intrusive*. People may mean well, they may only be making social conversation, but the comments are intrusive. You may not have noticed this since questions and comments about your being single are such a common occurrence.

Let me explain the subtle intrusiveness by using what may sound like a crude example. Bear with me because I want to make the point. Would you want anyone asking, "Have you had a bowel movement today?" (I warned you it would be crude.)

There are some aspects to your life that shouldn't be open to others' comments – *unless asked*. People might wonder, but no one asks their married friends "Are you happily married?" or "Why did you marry *him*?" or "You're so smart to have stayed married."

Too often, people just accept what happens in society without giving serious consideration to what it means to them personally. This is especially true for single women – you accept, "This is just the way it is," whether it's what people say to you about being single, or how you are seated in the back of the restaurant when eating alone; there may be thousands of small examples of subtle bias you haven't noticed.

So when someone makes one of these comments about your being single, you probably feel compelled to respond. Chances are you have some flip answer already prepared, maybe a funny or sarcastic one, or even a well thought-out serious response. Right?

But, think about this: You shouldn't *have* to respond to *any* of these comments.

Now, it's different if *you* ask people why they think you are still single; you are inviting them in. But for people to offer, "You're too choosy," or even the modern version, "You're smart to have stayed single," without an invitation, they are stepping into your personal life, your personal feelings. It's just plain rude and intrusive.

So, however you respond, you give credence to the comment. You are giving permission, saying it's ok to be rude and intrusive.

Since there is a conversational rhythm – a back and forth between two people – it makes sense you'd feel compelled to uphold your end of the balance. (See the Action Plan #3 for examples on how to do this without feeling rude and without replying about your singleness.)

The Shocking Truth is by giving any response, you contribute to your self-blame. You are saying, "I'm single so I *have* to have some explanation." And, by doing that, you only make yourself feel worse.

**No matter how you respond to these comments, you contribute to blaming yourself which only makes you feel worse about yourself**

### **Comments from Your Mother**

A mother's persistent questions, comments, and criticisms about her daughter not being married probably come from a different place. She may harp on you out of *her own issues*. She may feel your singleness is a reflection on her mothering. Or, if you were to be married and have children, she could repair your relationship as you two bond over your children. Or, she could be a wonderful grandmother to make amends for not having been a wonderful mother.

Or, she may wish for you to have a healthy sexual relationship with a loving man. She may be eager for you to have a better marriage than she had. But, rather than telling you any of this directly (she may not consciously know this), she does it indirectly by continually commenting about your being single.

Another significant possible explanation for her pressure on you to marry may be related to her developmental life stage. If you do not have children, she cannot be a grandmother and that leaves her unclear about her role as an older woman. She is unable to take her place among her friends as they talk about and plan their daughters' weddings, baby showers, grandchildren's birthday parties, babysitting.

Instead of complaining about her comments, you need to acknowledge you know her comments come from her love for you. Be appreciative.

Once you discern the underlying pressure for your mother (see Action Plan #3), you can find the proper response – which does not have to be defensive ...since the issue has little to do with you.

## **ACTION PLAN #3**

### **Goal: To learn how to respond to people's comments about your being single**

Comments from People in General:

1. You don't want to be rude, but there are a number of ways you can respond without giving credence to the comment.
2. There is a general flow to conversations that require a back and forth exchange. Therefore, when asked why you are single (or any other comment), you do need to have a response that keeps the flow. But, your response does not have to be with words; you just need to keep the rhythm of the conversation
3. For instance: When someone asks, "You're so attractive and smart, why aren't you married?" you can shrug and then immediately change the subject by commenting on the person's blouse or asking about her children or work.
4. By giving a non-committal response, like a shrug or a quick, "don't know" or "no idea," and changing the subject, you have acknowledged the comment, and you have maintained the flow of conversation. Thus you have not been rude. More importantly, you have not had to "explain" your singleness. You are being matter of fact, and then you move on to a more interesting topic.

Comments from your mother:

1. In a quiet moment, ask her why your being single is such an important issue for her. She may try to bring the topic back to you, but keep it focused on her. Be gentle, though; she may not consciously know, so it may take some probing – for both of you.

2. If she can explain her underlying concerns, be empathic. However, whether or not she can, you can ask about her feelings, such as the loss of her dream of being a grandmother. When she tries to bring it back to your being single or your not giving a man a chance (etc.), gently get back to what it means to her.
3. In preparation for this conversation, prepare what you want to tell her. For example, start with telling her you love her and appreciate her wanting the best for you. Then, add you would really appreciate if she did not share her concerns *with you*. Remind her she can still talk to others, such as her husband or her friends.
4. When she forgets (which she will) and asks you about a recent date, for example, remind her in a loving way of your request. You may have to remind her a number of times before she changes what has become a habit. Think of it like training a dog or a child – to change a behavior, you have to be consistent and persistent, yet gentle.
5. Continue to be non-defensive, non-argumentative. Remember, her comments have nothing really to do with you!

## **SHOCKING TRUTH #4**

### **The Effect of Touch Deprivation on Singles has Never been Studied**

Marilyn is a 38 year old Always Single woman. She has a successful career as a stock broker. One day she told me this story.

"I met this guy on the internet. We talked a few times before getting together. He was kind of boring, but at the end of our first date he put his arm around me walking to my front door. My body tingled, as if I had been thirsty for so long, and he just gave me some water. I so longed to be held, I went to bed with him.

"The next day, I hated myself. Why did I sleep with him? I think I know – it was a toss-up between two bad choices – die of thirst to be touched or have sex with a man I didn't like. I chose the latter."

In the study I did for my book, [\*With or Without A Man: Single Women Taking Control of Their Lives\*](#), many women described becoming depressed, cranky, emotionally numb when they went too long without physically being with a man. Sometimes they were like Marilyn and wanted just to be held, to feel a man's arms around them.

Research on married and single women shows that if women were pushed to choose between having intercourse or cuddling, physical touch would win, hands down.

When single women say they are depressed because they don't have a man, they may be giving the only explanation that makes sense to them. Yet chances are that is only part of the reason. Another part may be they are missing physical touch.

This may be why many women find Charlene's experiences familiar. Charlene, divorced for many years, has not been in a relationship for five years. She says she isn't depressed, just emotionally numb.

"I've numbed out my feelings; I've just shut down. I think I know why years ago single women were seen as dried up spinsters. I *have* dried up. I go through my life looking fine on the outside, but inside it's like a cloud shrouds my spirit. I'm not depressed; I just feel a part of me is dead inside – not all the time, but I know it's there. It's easier this way; if I don't have sexual feelings, I won't be so hungry for them"

Sexual feelings are a part of a woman's joyful juices. If one part of her dries up, so might the rest. And without that vibrancy, women may feel dead inside. This may be one reason women like Michelle have unloving sex or devote their energies to looking for a man. The looking keeps them vibrant.

In fact, research on the effect of touch-deprivation for newborn babies proves just that – without physical contact, babies become apathetic and can die. They are called "failure to thrive" infants because they cannot live without the nurturance that comes from being held.

There is also research on the effect of touch deprivation for the elderly. If they go long periods of time without having any physical contact they are more likely to get depressed.

The Shocking Truth is that no one has studied the effect of touch deprivation on AS and SA women. Without research, there is no way to know the impact of the absence of their being held. Anecdotally, it sure seems to exist.

**NO ONE HAS STUDIED THE EFFECT OF  
TOUCH DEPRIVATION  
ON ALWAYS SINGLE AND SINGLE AGAIN WOMEN  
ACTION PLAN #4**

## **Goal: To notice how you handle touch deprivation**

1. Do your research: take a close look at your behaviors and moods for 30 days. Keep a record of what you find.
2. List all the ways you get physical touch during this month
3. Make a separate list of the unhealthy ways you deal with the absence of male touch. For example, you eat, drink, or smoke too much. Or, you have sex with a man you don't really like or value. Or, you stop going out with friends. (Never being aware of your sexual feelings may fall into this category.)
4. Make a list of the healthy ways in which you deal with the absence of touch. For example, you play with your cat or dog, go dancing, take a pottery class. Masturbation is healthy. Doing it several times a day probably isn't.
5. If you are not getting enough physical touch, make a list of ways you can include more positive touch in your life. For example, (besides those mentioned above), get a regular massage, be around young children, make a point to hug your friends when you greet and separate.

## SHOCKING TRUTH #5

### You Can Have Intimacy *without* Having a Man

When you think about intimacy, what comes to mind? Having a quiet tete-a-tete, lying together after love making? Holding hands? Waking along the shore? Sitting together in a café, dreaming about the future?

Do you automatically associate intimacy with a lover? Curiously, every study about women – married and single – says the same thing: women get their intimacy needs met by other women, whether it's their best friend, sister, or mother. When women are stressed or emotionally hurting, they turn to these other women who can understand them in what I call "female-style intimacy."\*

Women and men have different styles of expressing intimacy. Women share something with a man and want him to listen and empathize. The man, in his male-style intimacy, shows his affection by trying to solve the problem -- which may leave the woman feeling he doesn't understand. You've had that experience, right? And, probably more than once.

You want a man to show his love and caring through empathic responses or by just listening. You are put off by his attempt to solve what may not be a problem that needs solving. Or, it may be a problem that, when you are emotionally ready, you can easily solve yourself.

Female-style intimacy – that closeness without the complication of sex – offers something very special. Yet, the irony is that women tend to devote less time and energy to nurturing a close female friendship than they do to nurturing a love relationship. It's as if you can afford to take your best friend for granted, but you can't do that with a man.

Think about this: When you have a fight with a man you love, do you think about it afterwards? Do you reflect back to what you said or should have said? To what he meant by what he said? Chances are you probably

have conversations with him in your head for days, weeks, maybe longer. You probably want to get together with him so you can understand and sort out what happened, so you can resolve the problem.

Now ask yourself the same questions about a fight you have had with your best friend. How much do you reflect back to what you said or should have said? To what she meant by what she said? How many conversations with her in your head do you have for days, weeks, even longer trying to understand and sort out what happened so you can resolve the problem? You may actually do some of this. But, do you try to get together to resolve the problem? Or, do you just feel bad and hope the tension will pass with time?

Too often, there is a real difference between the energy women put into resolving conflict or tension with their best friends than with their lovers. Women tell me they don't want to lose their best friend so they let the problem ride, hoping it will pass. Yet, with their lover, they don't want to let it pass.

Of course, you know resolving conflict with a lover is an important ingredient for true intimacy. The same, though, is true with your friends. You need to have good fights with them; good fights mean each of you feeling heard by the other and coming to a mutually agreeable resolution (or agreeing to disagree). Without good fights, you are cheating yourself of *true intimacy*.\*\*

You don't have any control over finding a man you love, but you do have control over deepening the intimacy you can have with your friends.

By neglecting your friendships or taking them for granted, by not nurturing them, you may feel empty or lonely, blaming those feelings on the absence of a lover. While the absence of a lover may be one cause of loneliness, the absence of intimacy is *always* a prime cause. If you don't have close friends, you will feel lonely – whether or not you have a man.

The Shocking Truth is that well-nurtured best friends are absolutely vital to your need for intimacy.

**WELL-RESOLVED CONFLICT IS A CRUCIAL  
INGREDIENT FOR INTIMACY – WITH A LOVER *AND*  
WITH A BEST FRIEND**

\*Gender styled intimacy is fully explored in [\*Why Don't You Understand? A Gender Relationship Dictionary.\*](#)

\*\* For "true intimacy, see Friendship chapter [\*With or Without A Man: Single Women Taking Control of Their Lives\*](#)

## **ACTION PLAN #5**

**Goal: To discover ways to include more intimacy in your life**

1. Make a list of your female friends; use a different color for your close friends than for your more casual friends or acquaintances.
2. Beside the name of each of your close friends write what you like and value about each one.
3. Do the same beside the name of each of your other friends.
4. Now, put a star next to any of the people who might be willing to share their deep feelings with you – even if they don't do so now. Do you share your feelings with them?
5. If you do not share your deep feelings, think about what stops you with each of the people on your list.
6. Now, look for a surprise. There may be people on your acquaintance list who have the potential to become a closer friend, but you have never taken the initial steps – or you have not responded to their initial steps.
7. Think about the friends with whom you have “unfinished” business. This means you have some unresolved conflict or tension. Can you think of a way to raise the topic again, so you both can deal with the issue now? If not, consider consulting a therapist, with your friend or by yourself, to figure out how to clean up the relationship.
8. In addition to your current friends, make a conscious effort to find new people who reflect all the changes you have made in yourself. Sometimes old friends, if they haven't changed themselves (i.e., are depressed, immature, unmotivated), tend to hold you back to behaviors you have outgrown.

9. Make sure you do not confuse the absence of intimacy with the absence of a man. You may still miss his absence, but that is a separate issue.

**NOTE:** Problems women have with their women friends tend to be the same problems they have with men. It's easier to learn how to resolve conflict with friends before doing it well with a man.

## SHOCKING TRUTH #6

### Worst Part of Being Single? It's *Not* the Absence of a Man

This shocking truth was revealed to me in a study by Dr. Pauline Boss did of family members of Vietnam War MIAs (missing in Action) and people in a coma ([\*Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief\*](#)). The study showed that the worst thing for the family members was *not* their loved one was missing or unconscious. That was horrible, but it wasn't the worst.

The worst thing was the "not knowing." Not knowing if the military person was alive and would return home some day. Not knowing if the person in a coma would one day wake up. The study showed the worst thing for the family members was being held in abeyance, not knowing if they should keep hoping or grieve and move on. The name for this in-between position is Ambiguous Loss.

When I reflected on this study, although it is an unlikely comparison, I realized that is exactly what is so difficult for single women – the not knowing.

Not having a loving partner is an ambiguous loss – that is, a loss for which there is no resolution. It's the not knowing will you meet him tomorrow, next month, next year, never?

If you knew for sure you would never meet a man, you would be horribly sad, perhaps mad, but eventually, you'd come to grips with the loss. You'd grieve your lost dreams, mourn, and move on. You would figure how to live your life knowing you will never have a loving man.

On the other hand, if you knew for sure that some day you would find a partner of your choosing, you would keep hoping and looking.

Ambiguous Loss means there is no resolution for single women; there is nothing you can do; you have no control over making an appropriate man

appear in your life. Yet, society, family, even yourself, believe you should be doing *something* about being single.

The result of Ambiguous Loss and the pressure from others to find a man may leave you blue. You may experience this feeling as “depression.” But....

The Shocking Truth is that being single is *not* causing the depression. That feeling of being blue comes from the uncertainty of not knowing – the Ambiguous Loss.

**The Shocking Truth is that Ambiguous Loss, the space between knowing and not knowing, between moving on and waiting, is the hardest part of being single.**

## **ACTION PLAN #6**

### **Goal: To learn to cope with ambiguous loss**

1. Consider that just having a name for this feeling might be helpful. (Some women tell me it doesn't make them feel better about being single, but they are glad to hear they aren't depressed.) Giving this feeling a name helps to remove self-blame.
  2. Imagine looking into a Crystal Ball,\* seeing you will meet the most wonderful man in six years. What would you do differently with your life while waiting? Write it down.
  3. Now imagine the Crystal Ball said you will never meet a man. What would you do differently with your life? Write it down.
  4. Look over what you have written from the last two steps. What can you learn about what's missing in your life? What do you need to include to make your life more meaningful – whether or not you meet this man?
- **The Crystal Ball exercise, abbreviated here, comes from the [Workbook for With or Without A Man: Single Women Taking Control of their Lives](#)**

## SHOCKING TRUTH #7

### Politics Matters for Single Women

Have you heard of AARP? Of course you have, American Association of Retired People.

Do you recall a time when you hadn't heard of AARP? Probably not. AARP was started in 1958; in less than 10 years this national organization for retired people had become well known. The power from the national organization provided momentum and credence. People started paying attention to the needs of senior citizens. Today, it is a tremendously powerful political influence on all issues affecting men and women over the age of 50.

So what, you may ask, does AARP have to do with single women? It is a role model for how to empower people who have no political power. Before the organization started, retired people had no national voice, in the same way that single people now have no voice.

You may wonder why singles need to have any political power since you think of being single in terms of not having a man. But singles are a huge social, commercial, and political factor; more than 51% of households in the United States are headed by a single person. This number causes great reverberations in society that have yet to be fully understood. Only the media and advertising seem to get it.

Fortunately, a number of years ago, two men got it and established an organization that is now called [Unmarried America](#). It addresses issues for men and women (heterosexual, gay, and lesbians) who are not legally married – those who wish they were and those who never choose to marry.

Unmarried America is not concerned with the social aspects of being single. It is solely a political organization that lobbies congress and informs

the public and the media on all issues relevant to those who are not married – such as prejudices and discrimination in laws concerning jobs, finances, immigration, housing, taxes, health care, car insurance – and much more. You probably aren't even aware of the areas in your life that are negatively affected because you are single.

In 1958, no one could possibly have imagined how powerful AARP would become, even in its first 10 years. Just imagine, 10 years from now, when Unmarried America is politically powerful, you could be saying, "I was there in the early years."

Ah, but I can hear you saying, "I don't want to be single now, and I really don't want to be single 10 years from now!"

Whether you are single or not, there is a benefit to joining and supporting Unmarried America. The social and political prejudice towards singles, if there is no change, may still be affecting your children and grandchildren; it may be there if you do marry but then return to being single (divorce or death). Even if you are not single, as a member of society you should be interested in removing a prejudice that affects more than half of the U.S. population. You should be glad there is an organization to protect and fight for the legal and financial rights of all singles.

Societal prejudice is addressed only when those who are directly affected decide to take action. Let me give you the most obvious example. The benefits women have today evolved only because a few women, back in the early 1970s, decided there needed to be a change in the image and limitations on women.

Those few women got together in someone's home to talk about how to raise their self-esteem and counter the biases against women. Word spread and soon there were lots of small groups of women around the country. These groups eventually came to be called Conscious Raising (CR) Groups.

From one small group to tens of thousands. A momentum was growing that led to a major shift in society's view of women. And, it didn't take that long. Women under 40 years of age may not know or may have forgotten the prejudices against women back then. Did you know that women couldn't have their own bank account or rent or buy a home by themselves (to mention just two examples)?

These changes only happened because those who were directly affected said, "Enough." They took action with their own family and friends. Some took action on a larger scale – the neighborhood, city, state, national government.

I challenge you to say, "Enough." Start by creating your own consciousness raising groups – which *can* lead to a major shift in how society views single women.

You may or may not be interested in joining an organization to address change in the larger society, but I hope you join yourself in demanding change in how those in your immediate life view you – and how you view yourself.

One advantage to CR groups for singles, as it was for women, is to identify the ways in which you are negatively affected – ways you may not even recognize.

At the very least, I hope you demand you join *yourself* for your own change in how you view yourself as a single in a world that is still prejudiced about singles and that more highly values marriage.

For ideas on how to do this, see the chapter in [\*With or Without A Man: Single Women Taking Control of Their Lives\*](#)

## **ACTION PLAN #7**

**Goal: To notice the bias against singles and consider steps to counter it**

1. Do not do anything more than you are comfortable with.
2. Start with confronting the messages within yourself. Pay close attention to how you have absorbed biased messages about being single. (Reflect back on prior Action Plans)
3. Start noting the societal messages both in your community and in the larger society. Note biases in advertising, in where you are seated in restaurants, in hotels charging more for singles, in your church or synagogue.
4. In your immediate world, speak when you hear people making comments that include biased messages about singles.
5. When your married siblings or friends socialize but don't invite you, you might question if it is because you are single. They may think they are being kind so you won't feel "a fifth wheel." Then remind them that that phrase itself is a bias; that wheels have to be paired.
6. You might send letters to companies/organizations where you find the bias.
7. Consider starting your own CR group with other singles to help with all the above Steps

8. Get information about [Unmarried America](#). See if there are ways you might want to get involved.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis has more than 40 years' experience as a family therapist with offices in Washington, DC area and Cincinnati. She has a master's degree in social work and a doctorate in consulting psychology. She has been on the faculty of several universities and on editorial boards of three professional journals. In 1997, she was honored with the Visionary Award by the Washington, D.C. Rape Crisis Center.

She is the author of a number of books about single women and relationships – for couples, families, and siblings (see below). Dr. Lewis's first book, *Siblings in Therapy*, (1988) helped bring national attention to the importance of siblings in the lives of adults and children.

She has appeared in dozens of major U.S. newspapers and magazines as an expert on issues about adult singles, baby-boomer women in transition, women's friendships, marriage and changing gender roles, and sibling relationships in adulthood.

In 1996, she founded Unique Retreats for Women. They include weekends for Women Ready for Change, for Singles, for Wives of Highly Successful Husbands, and for Adult Siblings. These retreats are devoted to personal growth, problem solving, and fun. Throughout the year, she designs retreats for organizations and other specialized groups.

She is available for speaking engagements, workshop presentations, and private consultations.

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