

THE SINGLE ESSAYS

With 43% of women in the UK living alone,
Stylist asks what single life is really
like in 2014? Ten single women share
their candid stories

“FOR ME, SEX IS COMPLETELY OFF THE TABLE...”

LISA SMITH, 30, AUTHOR, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE



“I am an asexual romantic. I want to have a relationship but, for me, sex is completely

off the table. It just doesn't do anything for me, and at times, I find it embarrassing and repellent. It's not that I've had bad experiences; I've just only ever had sex to please a partner. I've never once done it because I wanted to.

I've been in three long-term relationships in the past – the longest lasting seven years, but eventually he cheated on me which may have been a result of me never wanting to have sex. I didn't know what asexuality was at the time and just assumed I never wanted sex because I didn't find my partner physically attractive. Eventually I went for psycho-sexual counselling, and was surprised when, instead of saying, 'You need to be fixed, here's the solution,' the therapist said, 'If you're not having sex and you're happy with that, it's not a problem,' which led to me identifying as asexual.

I've been single for nearly two years now and I'm on several dating sites. I've been honest in my profile. In the first paragraph it says, 'Be aware that I am asexual, I don't want to do anything of that nature,' and then a quick explanation of what asexuality is. Generally people are curious, rather than offensive. But I do get the occasional message saying, 'Oh, I'll teach you how to like sex,' or some men will suggest I need 'fixing'. My profile says everything that a person could possibly be warned about – because I don't see the point in wasting anyone's time. I don't want to have to worry about someone inviting me back to their place 'for coffee'. Because it literally would just be coffee.

I've been quite surprised at the positive experience I've had with online dating and I've met up with about 10 people in the last year. Most of the dates have been perfect on paper but we've haven't clicked. It's the same with normal dating I guess. Sometimes I think it might be easier to date an asexual man – because they'd never think something was 'missing' from the relationship; but it hasn't seemed to bother men as much as I thought.

I hate being single at 30. The worst thing is looking on Facebook and seeing what everyone you went to school with is doing. They have high-flying careers, own their own businesses, have three kids, a husband, mortgage. I'm 30, I don't have a boyfriend. I live with my parents and I don't have a paid job at the moment. I think you just get to a certain age and it's like, 'Holy crap, I thought I'd be at a different point by now'.

The pros for being single make a very short list. Apart from being able to watch what you want on telly and go where you want, there's nothing good about it. I am very lonely.

I've never wanted to have children. For fun, I'll watch horror films, but if I really want to be scared, I'll watch a programme about women giving birth. I think it's the most frightening thing in the world. But I would love to meet my perfect man and get married one day."

asexuality.org

“IN LONDON, PEOPLE KEEP THEMSELVES TO THEMSELVES...”

RACHEL SYMONS, 24, PR CONSULTANT, LONDON



“Single life is very different to what I'd thought it would be. I find it quite boring. I broke up with

my boyfriend in 2010. He was in the army, it was a long-distance relationship as he was

often posted overseas, and we just grew apart. When we were together, I yearned for the excitement of being single. I thought I'd get to meet new people and try new things. But since I moved to London from Bournemouth two years ago, I've found it really difficult to meet anyone. I've not been on a single date since I got here.

In London, people keep themselves to themselves. If you catch someone's eye on the tube, they won't come and talk to you, like they might in a smaller city. I would love it if dating was how I imagine it was in the Fifties – when the men would take women on 'proper' dates and behave like gentlemen. Now, sex is at the forefront of everyone's minds.

I've been single for so long now I'm worried I'm getting a bit cynical. I can't see how there are any decent single guys left out there, although I'm sure there must be. But I don't need to settle down yet, I'm hoping that will happen when I'm in my late 20s."

“I WAS WIDOWED AT 29...”

GEMMA MARRIAGE, 31, CHARITY PROJECT OFFICER, SUFFOLK



“I never thought I'd be single again at 31. It feels like I'm starting completely

from scratch. It's scary.

I was once married. Colin and I got together in 2009 after meeting at a scuba diving club. We were a couple for about two and a half years before he was given his diagnosis. He had been feeling unwell, experiencing constant pain in his stomach, loss of appetite and difficulty swallowing food and after lots of tests was diagnosed with testicular cancer. We thought, 'It's really bad, but it's OK, because it's curable.' But then doctors confirmed that actually, it was cancer of the oesophagus, which is terminal. I went home

and googled it, and the statistics showed that 95% of those diagnosed die within the first year. We were crushed.

Colin was given a couple of years at the most so he started chemotherapy straightaway to prolong his life. The day of his diagnosis we also decided that I would move into his house; he needed support and I wanted to be there for him. A few months into his treatment, in March 2012, we spent the day at Cheltenham races where he proposed.

When we had finished his six-month course of chemo, Colin was actually feeling really well. The cancer had almost disappeared so we took the plunge and excitedly booked a wedding for August.

We were busy planning the wedding when suddenly Colin started to feel unwell again. His condition started to deteriorate quickly. He was admitted to hospital where they told us that in just a few months the cancer had

“I STILL LOVE MY HUSBAND BUT HE'S GONE SO I HAVE TO LEARN TO LOVE AGAIN”

advanced so much that he only had a couple of weeks left. We had to bring the wedding forward. I spoke to a registrar and we arranged to get married the next day. Our friends and family rallied round to decorate the hospital waiting room with flowers and we already had our outfits sorted. We were eventually married at 5.30pm on Saturday 7 July 2012 in front of about 15 close friends and family. We were married for 10 days before Colin eventually passed away, making me a widow at 29.

Before Colin died we had a long conversation about my future. At the time when he told me he wanted me to be happy and find someone else when he was gone, I said, 'No way.' I couldn't imagine being





with anyone else. But now he's gone I understand what he was saying. Colin was amazing, but I don't want to be alone for the rest of my life.

I have mixed feelings about the thought of dating again. I'd like to have a family in the future but getting back on the dating scene is scary. Generally people don't meet widows this young. I come with complications: Colin and I never split up. It's not like being divorced; I still love my husband but he's gone, so I have to learn to love someone else too. A man might feel daunted by that.

I haven't actively taken any steps to date yet. I'm seeing how it goes on a day-to-day basis. We had some of Colin's sperm frozen so I can use that as a back-up option if I don't meet anyone else. But ideally I'd like to bring up children with a father around."

waywidowedandyoung.org.uk

"MEN FIND ME INTIMIDATING..."
SARAH HOLGATE,
30, MUSIC EVENTS
MANAGER, LONDON



"Most of my friends are single, unmarried, without kids, so it helps take the pressure off

being single at 30. But this is not how I imagined my life to be. I always thought I'd be married with kids by 27.

I've been told I can be quite intimidating to men. I work in a male dominated industry, but I don't take any s**t. I'm not shy. But I don't understand why there aren't men out there who find that attractive.

I've had four serious relationships, the longest lasting five years – but he became more like a friend than a boyfriend; he's now helping me set

up a business. I don't think there's only one person for everyone but with all my previous relationships I knew that I would end up being with them. There has been a strong chemistry – I'm hoping that will happen again.

The scariest thing for me is that 10 years go so quickly, and I know 40 is only a flash away. So I feel like I have to make it happen soon because time is running out. I had an amazing time in my 20s – I travelled extensively, I worked at music festivals and had a lot of opportunities that I would have missed if I had a child or husband. But I'm hoping that this year I will meet my soulmate. I want to share my life with someone."

"I'VE NEVER HAD A BOYFRIEND..."
TRACY HUGHES,
43, ASSISTANT
DIRECTORATE
ACCOUNTANT,
COVENTRY



"My longest 'relationship' lasted two dates. I've never had a boyfriend. I had a very

strict upbringing and never went to university because I left school at 16 and went straight into work. I was never told I was pretty or attractive, but I was always told I was clever. So I've just concentrated on getting qualifications because I thought that was the only thing I had going for me.

I'm quite shy. I think it's because I've never really experienced what other people do when they're growing up – going out and getting drunk, chatting people up, getting dumped or rejected. If I tried to speak to someone now and got knocked back, I think I would just crawl into a corner and die, whereas if you do that at 13 or 14, you just move on; then when you're older you can deal with the rejection.

People are quite shocked when I tell them I've never

had a partner. Often, a new colleague's first question to me will be, 'What school are your children in?' I have a new hairdresser too and she talks to me as if I have children and partner. When I say I've never had a relationship people look at me as if I'm mad. I've lived on my own for 24 years now and it does get very lonely. A lot of the time I'll just

"I'M LOOKING TO MEET SOMEONE 30 YEARS LATER THAN NORMAL PEOPLE WOULD"

come home from work and go straight to bed. But I do like the freedom. When I go on holiday to Spain, I don't have to worry about where anybody else wants to go or what we do when we go there. If I want to spend the whole day on the beach I can.

It's only really since I've become older that I've thought about wanting someone to spend time with. Not necessarily a full relationship, because I might not like it, but just somebody I can call up and see things with. It is daunting though, because I'm looking to start meeting people 30 years later than normal people would. I'm trying to stay positive and believe it will happen, but I do have days when I think, 'What's wrong with me?' But then again I have other days when I think, 'Nothing's wrong with me – it's everybody else.'

"MY MUM'S PILING ON THE PRESSURE..."
PIA CATO, 28, CAKE
DESIGNER,
GLOUCESTERSHIRE



"I like being single. I'm making the most of being able to do whatever I want and not having to answer to anyone. I'm not lonely, I live in a shared flat, but

I have been through low points when I've thought, 'That's it, I'm never going to get married.'

I run my own business so I'm used to going to networking events. But when I tried internet dating recently, it was so awkward because it just felt like I was interviewing the men. As if I was sizing them up for a job, or as my potential boyfriend. It didn't go well.

I think my mum feels worried that I haven't met anyone yet. She's always saying, 'Have you got a boyfriend? Are you dating? We want grandchildren!'

That said, I would have loved to have someone there to support me when I set up my bakery; especially as there are so many ups and downs to running your own business. Sometimes I'd end up in tears on the phone to my mum, but she couldn't come and see me because she lives two hours away. It'd be good to have someone there to lean on emotionally.

I used to put so much pressure on myself to go on endless dates, knowing that they weren't right. I'm more relaxed now and I don't feel ready to have kids yet anyway. My housemate always says that having a boyfriend should enhance your life and you shouldn't have to make too many sacrifices for him. So I'm waiting for one that does."

"IT'S EASIER TO BE GAY AND SINGLE..."
SOPHIE WILKINSON,
26, JOURNALIST,
LONDON



"I've been in two long-term relationships with women, the longest being about nine months,

but they were very off and on. And intense. Being single is really fun, I can be utterly



spontaneous. I can turn my phone off and go off-radar. I can also do things outside my comfort zone without having to justify them to anyone else.

At my age, I think it's actually easier to be gay and single than straight and single. There's a lot of pressure for young women to hit certain milestones – get a job, get a boyfriend, settle down, marry – and I feel like I don't have to deal with any of the pressures of those arbitrary markers of achievement. I've also developed a strong foothold in London's lesbian scene. It's a small world but there are plenty of opportunities to date safely within it, everyone is a friend of someone.

The worst thing about being single is the lack of regular sex. But I do see people casually which alleviates that problem. I'm never lonely. Luckily, I have so many friends from so many different walks of life that I can find people to do different things with me every night of the week – going to gigs, galleries, restaurants, as opposed to trying to dedicate all my time to one person. If I meet the right person and we want to have kids then I suppose marriage is the best way of solidifying a relationship. But I think it's misguided to plan your own life then attempt to find someone else to slot in."

"THE YOUNGEST MAN I'VE DATED WAS 20..."
MONICA PORTER*, 61, FREELANCE JOURNALIST, LONDON



"I never set out to date younger men, but I was staggered when I started online dating just how many young

men got in touch with me. I didn't know why they were interested but when they explained it to me, it made total sense. These guys in their mid-to-late 20s didn't really enjoy being with younger women. Young women want

to be in exclusive relationships, they want commitment. But men of that age aren't ready for that. An older woman, in her 60s, has none of that emotional baggage because she's already been married and had kids who have grown up. She is single and free to do what she wants.

In 2013 I decided to spend a year dating as wide a variety of men as I could. The youngest was 20. I met up with 20 men in total, sometimes for sex; sometimes for companionship. The oldest was 63, but actually the older men were just as unreliable as the young men.

Being good in bed, I've now discovered, has nothing to do with age. There are guys who are really crap in middle-age, and then you have men like the 20 year old who was a natural – a lot of feeling, sensitivity, generosity. It was a revelation.

I would never settle down with a younger man. They need to grow up, live their lives and do the family thing. I've dialled down the dating now anyway, family is the most important thing to me at the moment – I'm a grandmother and have two great sons – and I'm focusing on moving house. Also, my ex-partner and I split up two years ago and he moved out; but he's since had to move back in due to financial difficulties. It's been a little awkward but it's manageable."

"I'M HAVING AS MUCH FUN AS POSSIBLE..."
DONNA WHITE, 27, PR OFFICER, LONDON



"I was in such a bad state when I split up with my last boyfriend. I thought, 'Oh my goodness,

my life is over. I'm going to be a miserable bachelorette forever.' But now, I've been single for a year and it's been amazing, really good fun. It's made me a much more positive person. I've reinvented myself. I've got back in touch with all my friends who I neglected while I was in a relationship.

The downside to being

"I'VE BEEN SINGLE FOR A YEAR NOW AND IT'S MADE ME MUCH MORE POSITIVE"

single is not having anyone there to ask about your day. I used to call up my boyfriend most lunchtimes, so I do miss that. But for the time being I intend to keep having as much fun as possible and enjoy this bit of time off. I'd like to go on one date, just to ease me back into it, but I'm not forcing it. When it happens, it happens."

"WOMEN ON THEIR OWN ARE MORE RESILIENT THAN MEN..."

PATRICIA LLOYD, 87, RETIRED, SURREY



"I was first married in 1950. My husband-to-be, Brian, was just home from India, having spent six years out there serving the British Indian army behind the Japanese line. We'd met at a dance in Saffron Walden. The electricity failed, so we were plunged into darkness and we had to wait 45 minutes for dinner. We got talking, and it went from there.

We were together for 43 years until he passed away in 1993. He had been having medical tests on his bladder for 20 years so we knew eventually one of them would come back with bad news and we'd be told he had developed cancer. I was in my late 60s when he died.

Brian's solicitor, Glen, lived nearby and would take me to visit Brian in the hospital in the late stages when he was very ill. His wife, Sheila, had passed away the year before and he wasn't coping very well, so we grew very close. He was there to pick up the pieces when the worst happened to me and we supported each other. We decided that it might be nice to

be together. Brian had been a very generous man and the last thing he said to me was, 'If you meet anyone or know anyone you'd be happy with, you marry them. Don't hang about; life's for living.' And that's what I did. Glen and I were married the next year, I was 69.

We were together for almost 11 years before Glen passed away from cancer of the heart. But before that, we were both diagnosed with macular degeneration within three months of each other – one consequence was that we couldn't see to drive. That was a very black period. The only good thing was that if one had a bad day, the other understood.

Glen died eight years ago last October, and I've been living on my own since then. I like my independence, but I wish I was more mobile. You never get over not driving, or being able to pick up a book or a newspaper and read it. But you jolly well just have to get on with it, especially because it doesn't take long to look around you and see someone else a damn-sight worse off.

I think it's important that elderly people keep in touch with their early friends, and I am able to touch type so I like to keep in contact via email. I also go to a sewing group and call on my neighbours a lot for help. I think women are more resilient than men when living on their own once a partner has passed away. Without a doubt. Because we never stop banging on doors and aren't afraid of asking for help. Men are a bit more inclined to sit back, pull the covers over their heads and say, 'I can't.' I think that's fatal."

For more stories on the highs and lows of life as a single woman visit stylist.co.uk or tell us about your experiences on Twitter @StylistMagazine #singlelife