

Secrets of a Second Marriage:

Beat the 8-Year Itch

By **ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN**

Elizabeth Bernstein on Lunch Break looks at the secrets of the second marriage. What makes a second marriage different, better and more likely to succeed, according to census data?

Every morning, Jacquelyn Beauregard Dillman stands on her front steps and waves to her husband of 29 years, Bob, as he drives off to work. Every afternoon, the couple has what they call their "lovey chat," just to check in. Neither ever leaves the house without a kiss goodbye.

Both of them were married before. "I love this man with all my heart and being," Ms. Dillman, 72, a retired oncology research nurse in Newport Beach, Calif., says of her husband, a 64-year-old medical oncologist.

Is marriage better the second time around? Overall, second marriages are shorter, with a median length of 14.5 years versus 20.8 years for first marriages, the Census Bureau says. The reason: Second marriages begin later in life and are more likely to end when a spouse dies.

Comparing first and second marriages that end in divorce, however, reveals they last the same amount of time—about eight years—according to the Census Bureau report "Marital Events of Americans: 2009," based on data collected in 2008.

"The fact that the divorce rate isn't higher for remarriages shows that a lot of people are trying very hard and with great success to make their second marriages work," says Andrew Cherlin, professor of sociology and public policy at Johns Hopkins University. "We used to think that second marriages were much more fragile."

The divorce rate, which peaked around 1980, is at its lowest level since the 1970s, according to the Census Bureau. In 2009, 9.2 out of every 1,000 men age 15-plus, and 9.7 out of every 1,000 women, divorced in the past 12 months. People often cite the statistic that 50% of marriages end in divorce. This number may no longer hold. The Census Bureau last looked at this number in 1996, and estimated some 50% of first marriages end in divorce, noting that number was based on numerical modeling, not survey data. It didn't address the question of second marriages. Many experts now believe the rate is in the 40% range.

Second Time's the Charm?

Is a second marriage more likely to end in divorce? There's no definitive answer.

- First marriages tend to last longer than second marriages, 20.8 years versus 14.5 years, U.S. Census data show. But second marriages tend to occur between partners later in life, meaning they are more likely to end in death than first marriages.
- The gap disappears in a comparison of only those marriages that end in divorce, with a median of eight years for both first and second marriages.

Source: U.S. Census, 2009

Still, second marriages have become commonplace. Nineteen percent of marriages that occurred in 2008 were the second marriage for at least one spouse. Second marriages have their own well-known stressors. Children can be reluctant to accept a stepparent; raising kids leaves newlyweds little time to gain intimacy. One spouse may be paying to support children of the previous marriage or may want to preserve assets for them. And never mind the other baggage that people bring with them after divorce, whether it's fear of losing their independence or a bitter ex.

With the deck stacked against them, how do so many people find happiness by remarriage? Dr. Cherlin says many learn from the mistakes of their first marriage. They gain understanding of what they need in a mate, and what they cannot tolerate, making them more careful about choosing the second time around.

"The author Samuel Johnson once said that remarriage is the triumph of hope over experience," Dr. Cherlin says. "But we may have found that experience triumphs anyway."

After Shane Hollett's 16-year first marriage ended, he thought carefully about what he had done wrong in the relationship and realized he had married too young—at age 23, before he understood what commitment really means. And he had married someone with whom he had little in common. She was meek and liked to stay home with the kids; he has a forceful personality and likes to go out. "Her personality wasn't equal to mine in strength," says Mr. Hollett, 63, a fundraiser for the Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland. "I knew I controlled the situation, and I manipulated her."

If he ever remarried, Mr. Hollett knew he didn't want it to end in a second divorce. He thought about what he wanted in a mate: a college-educated, independent, ambitious woman, a companion with whom to enjoy travel, restaurants and exercise. "I wanted a partnership, someone who could stand toe-to-toe with me and push back," he says.

Before long, he met Kim, now 52 and his second wife. They both worked at a Cleveland TV station, he as a weatherman, she as an editor. Once, when he visited her at her house, he found her hanging curtain rods, hammering a screw into the wall. Hammering was faster than using a screwdriver, she explained. Right then, Mr. Hollett says, he realized this might be the woman for him.

The couple spent a year as friends, getting to know each other. In October, they will celebrate their 20th wedding anniversary. Of course, they have faced challenges: Both consider themselves opinionated. Mr. Hollett's two preteen daughters resisted the

remarriage at first. Ms. Hollett says she had to learn to trust her husband, because she knew he'd had an affair during his first marriage. Still, they found happiness.

Practice Makes Perfect?

Some ways to help the odds when remarrying after divorce.

- Spend some time being single. Explore conflicts you have in relationships of all types, preferably with a therapist's help. Ask yourself what it's like to live with you.
- Figure out why you want to be married. Is it financial security? A father or mother for your kids? A new life? Make a list of what you really want—and don't want—from remarriage. What will you give up and what do you hope to gain? Does your new partner provide what you need—or are you simply trying not to be alone?
- Talk about money up front. Consider separate finances. Many second marriages have three pots: his, hers and ours.
- Give your partner space to be with his or her children alone. Talk about who will make parenting decisions.
- Make sure your new partner will agree to couples therapy if necessary. "Marrying someone who refuses to go to therapy is like buying a new car and welding the hood shut," says Michael Zentman, a psychologist. "You need to be able to open it and repair it."

Source: WSJ reporting

Experts say the success of a remarriage depends largely on how well the partners dealt with their divorces. "If both sets of ex-spouses are on cordial speaking terms and, if children are involved, both sets work effectively together as parents, the ripple effect will be relatively minor," says Michael Zentman, a psychologist and director of the postgraduate program in marriage and couple therapy at Adelphi University, Garden City, N.Y.

Dr. Zentman advises couples to get an emotional divorce, not just a legal divorce. "An emotional divorce requires thoughtful self-examination and the recognition that it almost always takes two people for a marriage to fail," he says. Acknowledge your role in it so you can avoid repeating it.

Timing helps determine the success of a remarriage, psychologists say. After a divorce, partners who wait to gain a sense of themselves and what they are looking for have a much better chance of making a second commitment work. "It's important that they're not just getting remarried to be married again," says Constance Ahrons, a San Diego psychologist and therapist specializing in divorce and remarriage.

Divorced people who don't take time to explore their mistakes often will do one of two things, therapists say: Marry the same type of person and repeat the pattern of their first marriage, or seek out the opposite of their ex-spouse.

How can you get a better shot at marital bliss the second time around? Know thyself—and thy baggage. And pay attention to all three aspects of chemistry: physical, spiritual and intellectual. "A friend is solid and always there for you, but you also need someone who challenges you," says Toni Coleman, a licensed social worker in McLean, Va.

Learn to deal constructively with big conflicts and to let go of smaller ones. "What you see is what you get," Dr. Ahrons says. "You're not going to change anyone."

Email [Elizabeth Bernstein](mailto:Elizabeth.Bernstein@wsj.com) at Bonds@wsj.com or follow her column at www.Facebook.com/EBernsteinWSJ