

What made you finally settle down?

Love isn't always the tie that binds, as relationship columnist Helen Croydon reveals

I NEVER IMAGINED THAT I'd find myself in a relationship where I was financially supported by a man. I'm a career-driven, independent woman – not the gold-digging type. Or so I thought.

Then in 2007, I found myself Googling dating websites. Fresh from a long-term relationship, I was searching for romance when I stumbled across sugardaddie.com, a site which matches up younger women with older, successful men.

At the time, I preferred older men, and found their confidence, success and wisdom attractive. I harboured fantasies of trysts with a City high-flyer who I'd only see a couple of times a month.

And at first it was simply that; glamorous, exciting and – just as importantly – low-commitment. Right from the beginning my dates showered me with gifts, from Prada dresses to prepaid Selfridges store cards. Others whisked me away for spa weekends and one Canadian property developer even flew me first class to New York to take me shopping. It was intoxicating, exhilarating

and addictive and, after a while, I was forced to admit these 'treats' were no longer just an added attraction – they were the *main* attraction.

Initially, I felt guilty. But I managed to convince myself that, since neither my dates nor I wanted love, this was a relatively honest model for a completely commitment-free relationship. Then, two years later, I succumbed to an offer of a cash allowance from a long-term date. I know this must seem incomprehensible. Trust me I was shocked, too. But it was astonishing how at ease we both felt with the idea.

But after another year, I slowly came to realise that if I ever wanted to experience something deeper than the thrill of a posh date, I had to log off sugardaddie.com and start looking for someone my own age.

However, the experience taught me that sometimes we're not always honest about why we're in relationships. Aside from financial security (a recent survey* found that most women want a husband who out-earns them), what other factors





do women take into consideration when settling down? Loneliness? The ticking of a biological clock?

'For almost everyone, there are pragmatic reasons for being in a relationship,' says Prof Janet Reibstein, author of *The Best Kept Secret: Men and Women's Stories of Lasting Love* (Bloomsbury), who explains that similar goals, values and backgrounds make up a patchwork of reasons for being in a relationship. 'But almost every relationship, consciously or not, is based on parameters such as domestic practicality, financial security and parenting duties.'

I spoke to three women who found themselves in relationships where love wasn't necessarily the hook.

'I WANTED CHILDREN'

'Rebecca', 36, settled with a man because she didn't want to be alone.

'I was 25 when a sense of maternal urgency kicked in. A friend had just had a baby, and when I saw them together – my old friend and her daughter – I felt emotional, tearful even. I began to panic, worried that I would be left behind.'

Everyone – my housemate, my younger sister, friends from home – was either getting married or in long-term relationships.

So I joined a dating website, but, months later, still hadn't met anyone. Then a friend set me up with a mutual friend, Sam**. At first, I didn't fancy him – not in the way you do when you really fall for someone – but we got on really well. Plus he seemed like good father material and even though I found myself questioning the relationship a lot, I managed to convince myself we were in love. Sometimes I felt guilty that I didn't love Sam enough, but after speaking to friends and hearing about their bumpy relationships, I concluded that "no relationship is perfect" and that seemed good enough to me.

We got engaged after five months and married after a year. I fell pregnant quickly and a year later had a little girl, who is now five. Becoming a mother was everything I'd hoped it would be. When my daughter was a newborn, I remember staring at her for what seemed like hours, marvelling at her tiny fingers and toes. ▷

confessions

But soon afterwards, for the first time, I started to acknowledge that I wasn't attracted to Sam – and that he wasn't in love with me. I'd buried these thoughts before, but I began to realise that living in a loveless relationship wasn't healthy.

A year later, I told him I wanted to separate. It was a horrible conversation. Ironically, now that we're separated and live 200 miles apart, we've become friends again.

I don't regret anything. I'm glad I charged ahead. I can't even remember what it was like before I had my daughter. She is the most gorgeous, clever girl in the world. Recently, I met someone I really like; he is fantastic, and supportive and I can talk to him about anything. It's probably no coincidence that, now that the pressure to meet someone and have a baby has lifted, I've finally met a man I can truly – honestly – fall in love with.

'I WANTED SOMEONE TO PROVIDE FOR ME'

'Salma', 37, married in October last year and enjoys being a kept woman.

'When I met my husband I'd been single for two years. I was 34 and not desperate for a man, but I did have romantic ideas about eventually finding The One.

We met at a friend's house party; I remember thinking he was pleasant yet not feeling attracted to him. But soon afterwards, he got my phone number from a friend and pursued me until I agreed to have dinner with him. Our first date was at Galvin at Windows, a Michelin-starred restaurant in Mayfair.

Gradually, we became a couple. At the time, I was on a modest salary as a beauty sales rep, and watched my budget carefully, and began to enjoy the sense that he, as a 6'5" high-flying international buyer, was my protector. Virtually every other week he would surprise me with a weekend away. Then, one night, after sharing a drink in London, we realised there was a tube strike and we couldn't get home. So, spontaneously, he suggested getting a hotel room – and, just like that, he paid for a fabulous room in a luxury hotel. We spent the night in the bath with a bottle of champagne.

I loved this new lifestyle, but I felt a little guilty at having everything paid for.

I found it difficult to know how much I loved him and how much I loved the life he had introduced me to.

I'd always imagined I'd end up with someone I could share my deepest fears and childhood dreams with. He isn't that person. He doesn't ask deep personal questions and we don't know each other inside and out. Our sex life is fine; sex is mostly confined to weekends as he works so hard, and has become quite routine, but I assume that's the case with most marriages. He rarely drinks and there are times when I wish he would let go so I could see what is underneath.

However, we work well as a unit; we share the same interests and love outdoor activities and entertaining our friends.

After two years of not being sure about him, he proposed. I wasn't expecting it at all, and, caught off guard, immediately said yes. But I still worried that I wasn't in love with him.

We married last year, and I kept waiting for someone to ask me if I was sure I was doing the right thing. But no one did. Everyone presumes that you must be in love. If I had been asked, I would have said that I'm not totally sure, but our lives are interlinked in such a way that we are reliant upon each other. And I've seen what a lack of money can do to friends' lives; it can ruin everything.

I now have time to pursue yoga and meditation and I'm about to take a course to teach it. We are trying for children and it gives me comfort that I will be able to provide them with everything they need.

Finally, it seems ludicrous to abandon a man I could grow to love, who offered a life of security, in pursuit of a phantom man who may not even exist.'



'I DIDN'T WANT TO START ALL OVER AGAIN'

'Fiona', 42, was 25 when she married for her cottage-and-kids dream.

'Looking back, I can't believe I spent nine years with a man I wasn't in love with. We were students when we met. Nick** was a floppy-haired academic who used to talk about starting a PhD. I loved the idea of a slightly eccentric man poring over books in the middle of the night. And, besides, I'd recently emerged from a very intense relationship with a man who broke my heart. Nick seemed safe, calm and reliable.

Then at 3am one night after we'd been out, he asked me to marry him. I was 25. The next morning, after I sobered up, I thought he had forgotten about it but weeks later he said, "We should really start planning our wedding."

Soon, it had become impossible to back out. We told our friends and family, but, more significantly, actually saying no would have meant a drastic redirection. I had my life mapped out with him. We had been discussing our future for years. I imagined a country cottage with a rose garden, children in floral dresses and an art business I could run from home.

At the time, I was working as an art valuer, which paid a pittance but was my passion. If we'd split up I would have had to find a higher-paid job or drastically change my lifestyle. Besides, I admired him. He was an intelligent gentleman.

For nine years, our marriage trundled along. We bought a run-down cottage but it never turned out the way I'd dreamt. Gradually, my unhappiness turned into bitterness and I felt inexplicably angry.

Finally, I decided to move out. He was shocked, saying he thought everything was fine. I told him in tears that I felt bored and he accused me of being selfish and not appreciating my life with him.

Now, seven years on, I can go for weeks without even registering that period of my life happened. The man I am married to now is wonderful and I don't care about the art career anymore. I would say to anyone who is tempted to do what I did, don't. A miserable marriage is a huge price to pay for a rose garden.' ●

Sugar Daddy Diaries, by Helen Croydon (Mainstream Publishing, £7.99) is out now. To order a copy for £6.39 with free UK p&p, visit allaboutyoubookshop.co.uk

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