

'I bought a cello and found a new rhythm of life'

A film released this week charts a divorcée's search for inner peace. Here, Helen Croydon talks to three women who took extreme measures to escape from heartbreak

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The film *Eat Pray Love* hits the cinema screens this week, tracing a woman's journey of self-discovery as she travels the world, distancing herself from an unhappy relationship.

The film is based on the hugely successful book of the same name, by the American writer Elizabeth Gilbert. The allure of Gilbert's memoir seems to be the extent to which her story resonates with her, mainly female, readers.

But is change a real remedy for heartbreak, or is it just temporary pain relief? Here, three women relate how they embarked on soul-searching missions after their relationships ended.

Anne-Marie Urbanowitz (47)

"Music gave me a fresh voice"

Four years ago, my marriage had reached crisis point. There were constant arguments. One day I saw him lose his temper in a way that he never had before, and I had to leave. While he was out, I packed a car full of belongings for my son and me, and we left. In one sense it was instant relief but there was also a voice screaming: "Oh, my God, how will I manage?" I stayed with friends, and after six weeks found a place to rent.

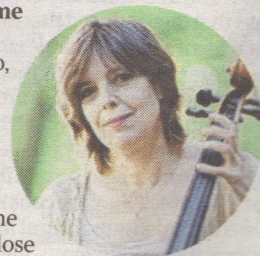
Immediately, I felt a stunned sense of space, as if my whole life had expanded. I realised just how much I had compromised to fit in during my 18-year relationship. For example, I would work longer hours in my acupuncture business because that was what my husband wanted. I didn't see friends because he thought that they were taking me away from him too much.

In a relationship, you put sides of yourself away. I wanted to get those sides out again. When I packed, among the personal possessions I took was sheet music that I'd collected even though I had never played an instrument. One day, a friend suggested that I learn. As soon as she said this, something gripped me internally. I went out and bought a cello — I saw this huge instrument and felt an urge to tame it.

Even allowing myself to spend money on something I wanted made me realise how I had always prioritised someone else's desires. In my marriage I had to justify every expenditure.

Learning the cello helped me to believe in myself. The wonderful thing about it is that there is almost a relationship between you and the instrument. It's a dialogue. And as you learn, you have to stick with your knowledge that what you are doing is right. That helped me to get back my confidence.

I found myself singing in the shower. My ex-husband had never liked my voice and used to tell me to shut up. Having discovered how liberating it feels to sing I



self-expression re-framed how I saw myself. I literally had a new rhythm and a new music.

In terms of getting over my feelings towards my husband, learning to play gave me a task into which I could pour my emotion. It was a place where I was legitimately allowed to struggle. My grief led me rather than go through a process of discovery. But it's only when you allow time to explore yourself that you can build a new future.

I've remained single since my marriage break-up and I enjoy that. I run a warehouse and I consult on feng shui.

Theresa Sheraton (32)

"Sailing the Caribbean was my escape"

Nine years ago, just as I thought my boyfriend was going to propose, he ended it. We'd been together for four years, since university, and I had moved from Sheffield to London for him. I was devastated. Everything in London reminded me of him. The only way out of those dark months was to look to a different future. I could have chosen anything, it just happened to be sailing.

I signed up for a fast-track residential course, and before I knew it I was out at sea with 30 other young recruits, most male. There was no time to think about my ex. If we weren't doing physical work we were learning theory. There was no relaxation time; definitely no time to reflect. I had new friends and a fresh environment and there was no association with him.

There were also more pressing things — such as survival. Not long into our training we sailed around Cornwall in the thick of winter. The weather was so





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In terms of getting over my feelings of loss towards my husband, learning music gave me a task into which I could outpour my emotion. It was a place where I was legitimately allowed to struggle. Most people ping into another relationship rather than go through a process of discovery. But it's only when you allow time to explore yourself that you can build a new future.

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There were also more pressing things — such as survival. Not long into our training we sailed around Cornwall in the nick of winter. The weather was so dreadful that everyone became seasick. There was sick all over the deck. My layers of clothing were soaked to my skin. When I came off my watch, I lay shivering in my bunk, listening to the howling winds and feeling the boat being thrown around. I was so scared I called my mum and whimpered: "I don't think we're going to make it." She simply said: "I'm

sure it will be all right dear," and put the phone down.

After nine months of gruelling training I became a yacht master and for two years worked all around the Caribbean. What an awesome feeling it was, being one of the few female captains. I was dealing with super-wealthy clients. Most were pleasant, though I did get the odd one who was sceptical about a female skipper. Once, a guest approached me as I was coming in to shore and tried to advise me what angle to take. I stepped away from the wheel, smiled and said sweetly: "Would you like to do it?" He scuttled away in fear and left me to get on with it.

At times, I felt as if I had got over my ex but when I came home for visits I realised that I still felt the same as when I left. I hadn't dealt with the disaster but had run away. Eventually, the excitement started to wear off. I realised that the life wasn't really me. I started to think about what I wanted as I got older. I didn't want to be living out of a cabin, working all hours, with no social life and sun-wrinkled skin. Having said that, it was one of the best periods of my life. If we hadn't broken up I would never have gone and that is something I am extremely grateful for.

I'm now living happily with my boyfriend in the Netherlands and I'm studying canine anatomy and physiology so I can become a canine hydrotherapist.

Jacqui Webster (39)

"Triathalons have become my new love"

I had given up my life in the UK — my job, my friends and my flat — to live with my boyfriend of five years in Amsterdam. I thought we would end up together, so when it ended in 2007 the rug was pulled from under me. I had a life plan that suddenly became invalid.

Shortly afterwards I went on a two-month business trip to Australia. While there I couldn't think what I was going back to. Amsterdam was no longer home and returning to London felt like going backwards. An opportunity arose for a three-year research post in Australia, funded by a British government body, so I



Julia Roberts stars in *Eat Pray Love* as Elizabeth Gilbert, who sets off on a voyage of self-discovery after her marriage breaks up

took it. I never thought that would cure how I felt, but it's the best available remedy.

Work colleagues persuaded me to do a mini-triathlon in which we sailed around the Sydney Opera House. I had no training and it hurt like hell. I was inspired by the stories of all the other competitors, so I joined. I remember thinking: "How hard will it be?" Actually, it was very hard with shorter races and people faster than me that I should — and could — do.

After six months I built up to an Olympic-distance triathlon. The course ran through a beautiful part of Australia. We ran across a landscape of blue lagoons and wooden bridges over inlets from the sea. I enjoyed the sense of pushing myself.

Over the next year I increased my training to 15-20 hours a week. I competed in Ironman Australia, a 3.8km swim, followed by a 180km bike ride and a full marathon, all in one day. I was vaguely conscious of pushing myself because my ex would think that I was overweight. He would never have believed I could train for triathlons. When I asked to compete for Great Britain at the Long Course Triathlon World Championships last year, that was what he would have said to me in my head. I was thrilled to do it.

People who knew the old me would say: "Don't you miss going out?" But that when you find something you love, you aren't making sacrifices. I used to take my friends to a drinking session at 7pm for a three-hour cycling session. Now I meet them at 7am for a three-hour cycling session. I don't think anything is a break-up, it's something you work through. You may well see a job or a travel trip as a way out or processing thoughts, but it's a matter of how you see it. If it's a positive activity, it's better than drinking to oblivion. It's a shame we need a break-up to do something different. Maybe more couples would do it if we went on these journeys.

I'm still in Sydney, still flying. I'm loving life. Last week I finished my three-year PhD report. Soon I'll start training for next year's Ironman Switzerland.

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My ex called me a trundler when we went out running. He'd never believe I could train for triathlons