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Posted at 04:17 PM ET, 02/10/2012

The single life: Results from our survey

By Amanda McGrath

Is being single, especially for those over 40, a cause for celebration? Disappointment? Alarm? Relief?



(Bret Harman)

In this weekend's Washington Post Magazine, Ellen McCarthy explores the [lives of women and men who have yet to find "The One."](#) Indeed, what "being single" means, socially and culturally, is changing: According to data from Pew Research Center and the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 96.6 million single Americans. Just 51 percent of the adult population is married, compared with 72 percent in 1960. And a recent Pew/Time Magazine survey found that 39 percent of people think marriage is becoming obsolete.

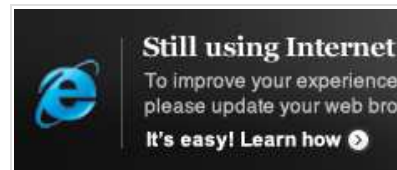
For the past week, we've been asking people [to fill out an online survey](#) to tell us more about the single life: the advantages, disadvantages, assumptions, stigmas and rationales. More than a thousand responses came flooding in; here, a round-up of the results.

Our survey was by no means scientific, but it helps to know from whom these responses are coming. The average age of our survey participants was 46.2 years old. Women made up 82 percent of the respondents; men, 18 percent. About 35 percent said their annual income was under \$50,000; 41 percent were making between \$50,000 and \$100,000; and 23 percent bring in more than \$100,000 a year.

Why do you think you have never been married?

We asked this question two ways: First, we offered 19 multiple-choice options. The top five selected from that list:

- *I've had loving relationships, but never found the right partner for marriage*



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- *I value my independence*
- *I choose the wrong partners*
- *I prioritized my career*
- *The potential partners I meet are not up to my standards*

We also let people answer the question in their own words:

"I keep thinking I was standing in the wrong line. That I should have thought more carefully about where to attend college. The person I was looking for married someone else or just never crossed paths with me. Now that I am in my early 50's I don't know what I would do if I met her tomorrow."

— Steve, age 52

"There is a lid for every pot, but some of us are crepe pans. I think there just isn't anyone who would be a good partner for me. Either that, or I just have incredibly bad luck and he's out there, but I have never run into him, no matter what I've tried."

— Anne Marie, age 50

"Was too busy having fun adventures and didn't really think about it. Then one day I woke up, looked around, and realized most of the rest of the world seemed to be married with kids. My mom used to say to my sister, brother, and myself, 'Never get married. Never have kids.' I don't know why she said that, but none of the three of us have ever been married and we do not have kids. Maybe I was brainwashed?!"

— Anonymous

"It was never that important to me. For most of my life, I have been able to attract more female sexual partners that I need. I do not like to negotiate or compromise on personal matters."

— Joe, age 55

"There are a lot of things in life you can't plan for in any meaningful way. Finding a partner, falling in love — I may *want* those things but I can't make them happen. They either happen or they don't. In my case, life kept on happening — college, grad school, work and travel abroad, pregnancy, single parenting, back to grad school for a new career, etc. Somehow, getting married just didn't happen."

— Susan, age 48

"I think once I decided (at about 21) that I didn't want children, that took the pressure off. I wouldn't want kids without a partner, but deciding that made me focus on my career and on caring for what I wanted first."

— Anna, age 57

"I think I was too immature my first 30 years. Even now I'm not sure I am mature enough. I think I, and the two or three women who might have had me, are fortunate that we never tied the knot."

— Earl, age 63

12:00 PM	Dr. Gridlock
12:00 PM	Talk about Travel
1:00 PM	Advice from Slate's 'Dear Pr
Weekly schedule	

"I haven't come across the right person. Timing has not been favorable. As an African-American woman the pickings are slimmer and men of our race have many choices."

— *Keisha, age 40*

"I am a larger woman. While I think I'm fabulous and attractive, it's clear that the majority of single men disagree. My dating pool has always been severely limited because of this. So, when I have met potential partners, who are already few and far between, they've been severely flawed. Any woman has to kiss a lot of frogs to find a prince, and the number of available frogs for me is very small. I figure I'm due to find that prince around the time I turn 90."

— *Lori, age 43*

"I'm not a big risk taker and I believe you need to take that 'leap of faith' in really opening up to someone. I tend to hold back a bit and get nervous when I meet someone fabulous ... which doesn't happen very often."

— *Suzy, age 44*

"I never got married because I just didn't. I think also, I have never had faith in the institution of marriage as such, and I have the type of persona that does not mind being alone. In fact, it has come to the point that I need to be alone, probably a great deal more than the average person."

— *Alison, age 49*

"If it weren't for bad taste in men, I'd have no taste at all. Also, 'compromise' is not a word that's easy for me to work with because I am usually suspicious that it means 'I love you, now change' for women. It doesn't seem like a fair deal for women in some ways and for men in other ways."

— *Susan, age 62*

At this point in your life, do you want to get married?

(Hover over the chart to see the full answers and percentages.)

How happy is your life compared to that of people who are married

What are some of the advantages to being single?

“Complete freedom: to take sudden trips to places I like; to be free from entangling obligations and burdens; to make dramatic changes to my life fairly quickly without having to consult anyone else. Do not have to be subject to significant criticism for life choices. Do not have to accommodate my biological family (whom I very much detest) with wife and children.”

— *Don, age 66*

“Quicker decisions. You can live life closer to the authentic you. ”

— *Ruby, age 40*

“My decisions about my time, money, energy, are my own. My life is relatively drama free. I don't worry about being abused, cheated on, left, minimized, or dominated. I can live where I want, move when I want to, keep the house as clean (or not) as I choose. When I thought it would be fun and interesting to move abroad for a few years (and it was!), I didn't have to worry about interrupting someone else's career. My house is peaceful and calm; there's no fighting, frozen silences, or bickering.”

— *Maggie, age 54*

“Not having to negotiate another's moods. I sometimes notice an off-putting dynamic between couples (either straight or same-sex) where one partner undermines the other, or plays a role which requires the partner to maintain a level of forbearance. Not having someone ask “Are you really going to wear that?” Or ask “Am I going to like this?” at dinner. I like the freedom to come and go as I please, accept or reject invitations according to my own values, listen to the music I enjoy, and just being on my own, unjudged.”

— *Tim, age 50*

“With a highly demanding career, I can use my free time to focus on self-rejuvenation, exercise, etc. Some days I can't imagine arriving home at 8:30 pm to a family who needs my full attention.”

— *Shannon, age 41*

What are some of the disadvantages to being single?

The down side: feeling acute loneliness, feeling freakish (at family and other reunions), having people ask if I'm gay, having wives become insecure/defensive around me at parties, assuming that I am after their husbands when the opposite is true.

— *Mattie, 53*

"There are no "still great you are single" gift showers — I have been to a zillion bridal/baby showers — thus I still have the mismatched plates from when I was 22."

— *Mary, age 42*

"I think personal growth comes with having to compromise with someone, loving them enough to make their needs equal to your own and figuring out how to meet both. I think that, without that daily presence or challenge in our life, we can become caricatures of ourselves — our best and especially our worst tendencies magnified and exaggerated because there were no moderating influences in our lives. Strong friendships can help in this regard, but I don't think it's the same kind of moderating force that comes of compromising within an intimate relationship.

— *Amy, age 43*

"Anything out of the ordinary becomes magnified. Special events (like weddings) or emergencies (medical issues, or a car breaking down) become a bigger deal somehow."

— *Suzy, age 44*

Loneliness, and the sense that one has been weighed in the balance and found wanting.

— *James, age 61*

"You mess up the seating chart at fancy dinners. It can be difficult to find a date for an event where one is appropriate. There is no one to take care of you when you are sick or to drive you home after surgery. Most couples do not wish to socialize with you. The tax code is much more generous to married people. Politicians never say they are fighting for working singles — just working families. "

— *Pamela, age 62*

"When the economy was at its worst, people were more aware of letting someone go who had a family — regardless if their spouse was also working. If I was fired, there is nobody else to help pay the mortgage, Pepco, etc.

— *Melinda, age 41*

"There really are no "disadvantages". Your life is what you make it no matter what. There's always someone to talk to or go out with, maybe it takes some planning but that's ok."

— *Joyce, age 45*

Are you actively looking for a serious relationship with a romantic

What do you say when people ask why you're not married?

"Smile, shrug. Although it's a major peeve when it's a happily married man who says it with a bit of a wink. It's patronizing."

— *Marianne, age 41*

"Should I be?"

— *Barbara, age 45*

"Damn, I KNEW I forgot something!"

— *Margaret, age 51*

"First I sigh heavily. I tell them that either I was too picky or I dated women out of my league. Sometimes I blame it on drinking beer but many beer drinkers are married."

— *Robert, age 59*

"I say that the ones who asked weren't the ones I wanted and the ones I wanted didn't ask."

— *Judith, age 70*

"I absolutely hate this question because the unspoken sentiment is that there is something wrong with me. My stock answer now is 'I'm accepting applications and conducting interviews. Please let me know if you know of any potential candidates.' "

— *Nancy, age 54*

"Depending on who's asking: 'I haven't felt it necessary.' 'I'm waiting to find more people who are as happy married as I am single. There's not many.' ... 'I have a hard time believing that marriage is for everyone. We don't say everyone should be a parent, a teacher, a police officer, lawyer. We don't say everyone should enjoy Brazilian music, dark chocolate, or chunky peanut butter. But yet, people seem to believe that EVERYONE should enjoy the experience of being partnered/married. I'm just not sure that's accurate, and until someone comes along and wants

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to be with me while still letting me be me, I'm going to keep on being single."

— *Dina, age 43*

What are some assumptions other people make about you? Are they correct or incorrect?

"That I'm either living a much more sparkling life than I am or the opposite, that I'm frantic and desperate and sad. That singleness is completely a matter of choice, as if I can wave a magic wand and get married if I wanted to without having to take into account whether anybody wants to marry ME."

-- *Kathy, age 49*

"Some men think that I'm willing to sleep with anyone, any time. This is incorrect. Some men think that I am experiencing severe sexual deprivation. Um, they are probably right. Some people assume that I deliberately decided not to marry. This is not true. Some think I'm "too picky." This is also not true. At least one man I had dated assumed that I had endless empty, lonely nights. This was also not true. I have had managers who expect me to work through holidays and on weekends because, obviously, I don't have a life! This is not true. Some people assume that D.C. is a tough place for a woman to meet a man, especially for a woman of a certain age. This is true. I can't be certain of this but I think that some people assume I'm a bitch, or have some fundamental personality flaw, that has kept me from finding The One. This is also not true. Some people have assumed that I'm gay. Not true."

— *Karen, age 52*

"They assume I have loads of free time. I don't. They assume I have trouble "getting a man." I really don't. They assume I am psychologically disturbed. I don't think that's so. They assume I am a lesbian. I'm not. They assume I have trouble committing. This is true!"

— *Maggie, age 54*

"People assume I'm either a playboy or a Peter Pan. Some assume that I enjoy being single and that's it. All three assumptions are incorrect."

— *Ted, age 40*

Do you ever feel stigmatized or ostracized?

"Completely. In society, there is still a lot of pressure and expectation to be married. When you're not, society sees you as a failure, an old maid, and a spinster. It's much different for women than it is for men. Maybe it's easier in D.C., because there are so many single women. But when I go home to see my family, their friends and neighbors treat me like I'm a freak.

— *Melissa, age 40*

"Absolutely. The dreaded single supplement of the travel industry. ... The phrase "family values" really makes me grit my teeth. It is as if an entire portion of society is dismissed."

— *Nancy, age 54*

— Mary, age 67

"Yes. Single older women are considered less valuable in almost every situation. I am facing significant discrimination in the workplace right now."

— Aubrey, age 59

If you could change the course of a past relationship so that it led to marriage, would you?

64 percent: No, I think my past relationships ended just as they should have

36 percent: Yes. If I could go back in time and do something differently, I would.



View Photo Gallery: What's it like to live without a partner while longing for one, over years, then decades?

By Amanda McGrath | 04:17 PM ET, 02/10/2012

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