

Introduction comments from POD...

Including this may not be for you. But it will be for someone in your circle eventually. Feel free to send to them as "interesting advice from an Aussie Irish guy...."!

## 1. The Communication Paradox: When Talk Becomes Noise

Gillian Coote opens with a devastating observation about gendered communication patterns in failing marriages: **"Women talk and men don't speak, so women don't talk and men don't speak."** It's a paradox worthy of the double bind theory Gregory Bateson described - two people trapped in mutually reinforcing patterns of miscommunication. Women fill silences with what Gillian calls "a whole lot of stuff that is completely irrelevant," not because they're frivolous, but because they're desperately trying to maintain connection. Men respond with withdrawal, not because they don't care, but because they're overwhelmed by the volume without the substance.

Have you ever experienced that! I grew up with it in my house.

This mirrors John Gottman's research on the "demand-withdraw pattern" - one of the strongest predictors of divorce. In his four-decade study of couples, Gottman found that when one partner pursues and the other distances, both parties experience the interaction as deeply unsatisfying, yet neither can break the cycle. The woman interprets silence as rejection or indifference. The man interprets talking as criticism or chaos. Both are right. Both are wrong.

What Gillian is describing isn't just about communication styles - it's about what happens when two people stop believing they can reach each other. The talking becomes a substitute for actual connection, and the silence becomes a defence against feeling inadequate. By midlife, many couples have practised these patterns for so long they've become automatic. The tragedy isn't that we can't communicate - it's that we're communicating perfectly how disconnected we've become.

If you find yourself in this situation and are actually interested in doing something different, this experiment will be for you.

### **\*\*The 5-Minute Substance Test.\*\***

For the next two weeks, commit to one five-minute conversation with your partner each day with this constraint: you can only speak about things that matter. No logistics, no children's schedules, no surface-level updates.

Ask yourself before speaking: "Is what I'm about to say substantive or am I filling space?" If you're the silent partner, your job is to speak at least once during these five minutes about something you actually think or feel - even if it's difficult, even if it's uncomfortable.

If you're the talking partner, your job is to say less and listen more. Both partners keep a brief note afterwards: What did we actually communicate? Did I feel heard? Did I feel understood? At the end of two weeks, compare notes. You're not trying to fix anything yet - you're simply becoming aware of whether you're actually connecting or just performing connection.

## **2. The Bright Shiny Object: Why Men Leave for Someone, Not for Themselves**

One of Gillian's most piercing insights is about why men leave marriages: ***"Men don't generally leave for nobody. They don't just say, this is done, this is broken... Instead what they do is they let it crumble in their head and then they go, oh, there we go. Time to go. There's a reason. There's the thing, there's the next bright, shiny."***

This pattern speaks to something deeper than simple infidelity - it's about how we men can avoid the hard work of self-examination. Esther Perel calls this **"exit affairs" - relationships that serve primarily as an escape hatch rather than genuine connection.** The new relationship becomes the reason to leave rather than the consequence of leaving. It's emotionally easier to tell yourself (and your wife, and your children, and your friends) that you've met someone



else than to admit you simply don't want to do the work of being married anymore.

The problem is that this strategy rarely leads to genuine renewal.

Shirley Glass's research on infidelity shows that relationships begun as affairs have significantly higher failure rates - **not because they started "wrong," but because the person never actually addressed what wasn't working in themselves.** They brought the same patterns, the same avoidance, the same inability to articulate needs into the new relationship. The bright shiny object tarnishes quickly when you realise you're still the same person.

But in the podcast episode, Gillian shared that admires are the men who **"have tried, they have thought, they have considered, they have talked, they have had counselling."** These are the ones who **leave for themselves**, not for someone else. They've done the hard work of understanding what failed and why. They're not running from something - they're moving toward something they can articulate.

**Here is an experiment if you are in the throws of leaving a relationship for another one.**

### **\*\*The 90-Day Single Protocol:\*\***

If you're seriously considering leaving your marriage, commit to this before making any decisions: for 90 days, act as if the new relationship (if there is one) doesn't exist. Don't contact them. Don't fantasise about them. Don't use them as emotional support. Now ask yourself the hard questions: Why do I want to leave? What specifically isn't working? What have I contributed to this failure? What would I need to feel like staying? Write these answers down. Share them with a therapist. Share them with your partner if you can. The point isn't to force yourself to stay - it's to ensure that if you leave, you're leaving because you've genuinely outgrown the relationship, not because you're running toward a fantasy that lets you avoid looking at yourself. If after 90 days you still want to leave, you'll leave clearer. If you find you can't do the 90 days, you've learned something important about yourself.



### 3. The Competing Narratives: Why His Story and Her Story Don't Match

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Gillian describes watching couples tell completely different versions of the same marriage: "They come in to see a lawyer and they run at the mouth and they go on and on... he, he, he and I, I, I. And then you get a man who says, I just want out. Just get me out of this." What's remarkable isn't that people remember events differently - it's that they've lived through entirely different marriages.

This phenomenon is well-documented in psychology.

In Anais Nin's famous words, ***"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."*** By the time a marriage reaches a divorce lawyer's office, each person has spent months or years constructing a narrative that justifies their position, explains their pain, and assigns blame. The woman's narrative often centres on emotional abandonment, unmet needs, and accumulated resentments. The man's narrative often centres on feeling criticised, controlled, or simply exhausted by conflict. **Both narratives are true. BUT.....Neither is complete.**

What makes divorce so psychologically complex is that you're not just ending a relationship - you're fighting over whose story gets to be the official version. The litigation process, unfortunately, intensifies this dynamic. Each side presents their narrative to lawyers and judges as if there's an objective truth to be discovered. But as Gillian knows from decades of practice, there rarely is. There's only what each person experienced, what each person needed, and what each person didn't receive.

The real wisdom comes in recognising that you can't change someone else's narrative. You can only be clear about your own - not to win an argument, but to understand yourself well enough to avoid repeating the same patterns next time.



## 4. The Barracker Trap: Friendship, Empathy, and Enabling

Gillian makes a crucial distinction about the role of friends during divorce: while you need support, you don't need "barrackers" - Australian slang for cheerleaders who are so invested in your team winning that they can't see the game objectively. This matters because the people you surround yourself with during a divorce will shape how you move through it.

Research on social support during major life transitions shows that **the quality of support matters far more than the quantity**. What grieving people need isn't validation of their victimhood - it's what the psychologist Harriet Lerner calls "**witness bearing**": someone who can hold space for pain without amplifying it, who can validate feelings without validating every action taken in response to those feelings.

The barracker phenomenon is particularly dangerous for men in midlife divorce because male friendship groups often struggle with emotional nuance. The template is simple: **your mate is hurting, therefore his wife is wrong**, therefore you support him by agreeing **she's wrong**. But this leaves men stranded in anger with no pathway toward growth. They get stuck in the story of being wronged rather than moving through grief toward acceptance.

What Gillian's talking about is the difference between empathy and enabling.

Empathy says, "I see your pain and I'm here with you through it."

Enabling says, "You're right to feel this way forever and you should never question yourself."

Real friends - the kind you need during divorce - can hold both truths: your pain is real AND you have work to do on yourself. They don't let you off the hook while also not abandoning you to shame.



## 5. Divorce Is Worse Than Death: Grief Without Ritual

Gillian offers a haunting comparison: ***"With death, if someone dies, you're not angry with them... you have a funeral, you get together, you cry, you talk, you remember, you... drink wine, you laugh, you're with each other. With divorce there's none of that."*** This observation cuts to the core of why divorce is so psychologically devastating - it's ambiguous loss without the social scaffolding that helps us process grief.

Pauline Boss coined the term "ambiguous loss" to describe losses that lack closure or certainty - missing persons, dementia, estrangement. Divorce fits squarely in this category. The person is still alive, still exists in the world, might still be co-parenting with you, but the relationship as you knew it is dead. There's no body, no funeral, no culturally sanctioned period of mourning. Instead, there's paperwork, negotiations about furniture, and the surreal experience of seeing your ex-partner's life continue without you.

What makes it "worse than death," as Gillian suggests, is the anger. When someone dies, you grieve what you had and what you've lost. When someone leaves you (or you leave them), you grieve AND you feel rage at the choice. You oscillate between missing them and hating them, sometimes in the same hour. Friends don't know what to say. Family members take sides. There's no script for "my marriage is dead but my ex-partner is still very much alive and dating someone new."

The absence of ritual leaves people stranded in their grief with nowhere to put it. Men particularly struggle because they often lack the emotional vocabulary and social permission to grieve openly. The result is grief that goes underground - into drinking, working too much, rushing into new relationships, or simply becoming emotionally numb. The trick here is to find a new and impactful ritual to signal the passing of an important relationship.

**For me I wrote a poem when I was in Battersea Park in London as that had been an important location when we first met each other. I wrote a poem to honour what we had together, the life we built, the children we had but also to recognise the life we thought we might have, did not happen. That was helpful for me.**

Divorce or any kind of relationship breakdown with someone who was very important to us at one stage in our life is both part of life and often a hugely impact on our life. For many of us it brings huge relief and freedom. For many of us it brings sorrow, loss and isolation and for others it brings anger.

Whatever the impact for you, you can get through it. Do not go on the journey alone. There are many people with wise words and insights to share. Look for them.



Feel free to pass your words of wisdom in the comments on whatever platform you are watching/ listening this on. You might just help someone else who is starting their journey.



**DLTOMI** is a podcast brought to you by Pod O'Sullivan, where he has real and candid conversations with experts, celebrities and ordinary men about navigating midlife. The ups, the downs, the surprises, the opportunities, the secrets and how to do it on your terms, gracefully or even disgracefully!



## LISTEN ON YOUR FAVOURITE PLATFORM

