

1. You Already Know How to Start Over

There is a line in Naomi's story that quietly reframes everything that follows. When the legal fees were mounting, the redacted bank statements were arriving, and her then-husband's lawyer was threatening court proceedings, someone suggested she represent herself in the Federal Circuit Court of Australia. Her immediate response was: **'I came over to Australia as a Vietnamese refugee. I started out with nothing. What have I got to lose?'** Wow! That sentence is not bravado. It is the compressed wisdom of a child who survived a boat crossing, pirate attacks at sea, and a refugee camp before building a pharmacy career, an education business, and a family — and who, in middle age, had to find the survival instinct again.

What Naomi's story illuminates is something that psychologists working in the field of post-traumatic growth have documented carefully: the experience of having already survived significant adversity does not leave people more fragile in the face of new crisis. In many cases, it does the opposite. Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, whose foundational research gave us the concept of post-traumatic growth, found that people who had worked through earlier trauma frequently demonstrated what they called **'existential wisdom'** — an ability to locate their worst-case scenario and recognise, quietly, that they had already been there. Naomi had. The question 'What's my worst case?' was not rhetorical. She had an answer, and it steadied her.

This speaks directly to territory we have explored on Don't Let The Old Man In before. In my conversation with Craig Williams — former Royal Marine and ultra-runner — Craig described something very similar: the way early confrontation with discomfort and genuine adversity leaves a residue of competence that you can draw on decades later. You don't have to have run a hundred miles or escaped a war to access this. But you do have to resist the midlife habit of imagining that you are less capable of starting over than you were at twenty-two. You are not. In most cases, you are considerably more capable — you simply have more evidence of what can go wrong, which the anxious brain converts into certainty that it will.

The invitation from Naomi's story is this: somewhere in your own history is a version of you who managed something you did not believe you could manage. A career transition. A health scare. A financial reversal. A relationship that ended. That person did not disappear. They became you. When you are in the early, disorienting stages of a major life change — separation, redundancy, loss, the simple dislocation of the second half of life — it is worth asking not

'Can I do this?' but 'What is the hardest thing I have already done?' The answer will almost certainly surprise you.

2. The Children Are Watching — and So Are You

One of the most practically useful moments in this conversation comes when Naomi describes what she calls her 'three-step framework' for navigating separation with clarity: keep what is working, stop what is fuelling the conflict, and start building toward something worth moving forward for. Simple enough to write on a card. Difficult enough that most people in the grip of a separation do neither the keeping nor the stopping, because all their energy is consumed by the argument about who is right. Naomi's question — 'Will this still matter in three months?' — is not a cliché. It is a reset mechanism for a nervous system that has gone into threat mode.

But the deeper argument Naomi makes is not about logistics. It is about what children absorb from the environment their parents create during a separation. Developmental psychologist Robert Emery, who has spent decades researching the impact of divorce on children, found that the single most reliable predictor of children's long-term wellbeing after their parents' separation is not the structure of the custody arrangement, and it is not the financial settlement. It is the level of ongoing conflict between the parents. Children who witnessed sustained parental conflict — regardless of whether they were exposed to the legal proceedings themselves — showed significantly higher rates of anxiety, depression, and relationship difficulty into adulthood. The separation itself is rarely the wound. The aftermath is.

Naomi puts it in the plainest possible terms: when she asks a client what they are ultimately fighting for, no one — in seven years of practice — has said they want the boat, or the business class seat, or the satisfaction of being proved right. What they say, almost universally, is that they want a relationship with their children. And yet the behaviour that courts, legal bills, and raw pain produce is precisely the behaviour most likely to compromise that relationship. Naomi's role — and it is a remarkably specific one, sitting between the therapist and the lawyer — is to hold the mirror up early enough that people can see the gap between what they say they want and what they are actually doing.

This resonates with what I have heard from many guests on this show. Peter Reek, whose book *Shift* explores the psychology of midlife reinvention, describes a version of this in his own story: the moment when he recognised that the story he was telling himself about what he was doing was completely disconnected from the impact he was actually having. Naomi offers a similar intervention — not a grand reframing, but a single, precise question that breaks



the loop. 'Will this still matter in three months?' Is the equivalent of the pause at the top of the breath before you say the thing you cannot take back. The men who learn to ask it — and to genuinely wait for the answer — are the ones who come out of separation as better fathers, better co-parents, and better versions of themselves.

Experiment

If you are navigating a separation, or any significant conflict in a long-term relationship, try Naomi's three-column exercise. On one page, draw three columns headed: KEEP, STOP, and START. Under KEEP, list every arrangement, pattern, or behaviour that is currently working — for you, for your children, and for the shared logistics of your lives. Under STOP, list the specific behaviours or patterns that are adding fuel rather than resolving anything. Under START, list one or two things — not twenty — that would move you toward the future you actually want. Review this list at the end of each week for a month. Notice what changes.

3. Men Are Looking for Peace — Not Just a Better Version of What They Had

There is a phrase Naomi uses when describing what men say they are looking for after a significant relationship ends, once they have moved through the initial fog and begun to think about what comes next. They do not say they want excitement. They do not say they want to replicate what they had. Almost universally, what Naomi hears is: **'I want peace.'** It is worth sitting with that word. **Peace.** Not the absence of intimacy or engagement or challenge, but the absence of a particular kind of noise — the ambient tension, the unresolved argument that resurfaces in different clothes, the sense of never quite being heard in the way that you mean.

Naomi connects this to something she observes consistently in the difference between how men and women communicate under pressure. Men, she argues, tend to argue the specific point at hand. Women — and she acknowledges the generalisation — tend to contextualise from history, bringing prior incidents into the present moment in a way that can feel, to the man across the table, like the ground is shifting without warning. Neither pattern is wrong. But they are



genuinely different, and in the charged atmosphere of a separation, they can become incomprehensible to each other. The man goes quiet — not from indifference, but from overload. The woman escalates — not from irrationality, but from the accumulated weight of things that have never been addressed. Both end up alone in the same room.

This maps directly onto research by psychologist John Gottman, who spent decades studying what he called **'the four horsemen' of relationship breakdown: contempt, criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling**. Gottman's work found that men are significantly more likely to become physiologically overwhelmed during conflict — what he called 'flooding' — and that this flooding is often misread by partners as emotional unavailability or lack of care. In reality, the man has simply hit a threshold his nervous system cannot process. The withdrawal that follows is not strategy. It is biology. Understanding this does not excuse it, but it changes what is possible in the conversation.

What strikes me about Naomi's observation on peace is that it is not just a description of what men want in a new relationship. It is a description of what men in midlife are beginning to want from themselves. We have heard versions of this throughout the conversations on Don't Let The Old Man In — from Stephen Keys reflecting on the difference between early-career ambition and the quieter, more sustaining values that emerged after his divorce, and from Matthew Lumsden on the distinction between the life we perform and the life we actually live. The men who come through separation most effectively, Naomi says, are the ones who use the disruption to ask a question they had been deferring: what, actually, does my life need to feel like from here? 'Peace' is a starting point, not an ending. But it is an honest one.



SPLIT HAPPENS.
It doesn't have
to be sh*t
happens.

NAOMI CAO
DIVORCE COACH

DON'T LET
THE OLD
MAN IN

4. Social Rebuilding Is the Work Nobody Talks About

When a long-term relationship ends, the visible losses are obvious and well-documented: the financial disruption, the change in living arrangements, the restructuring of parenting. What is talked about far less — and what Naomi addresses with particular directness — is the social loss. The friends who belonged to the couple. The social infrastructure built around shared school drop-offs, sports sidelines, and dinner parties. The friendship group that quietly chooses sides. For men, this social loss is often more severe than for women, and it lands in a place that many men are already depleted: the area of emotional connection and community.

This connects to one of the most important bodies of research on male health and wellbeing in midlife: the data on social isolation. The Harvard Study of Adult Development — the longest-running study of human wellbeing in history — found that the quality of a man's social connections is among the strongest predictors of his health, happiness, and longevity. Men with rich social lives in midlife were significantly less likely to experience cognitive decline, depression, and premature death than those who were isolated — regardless of their financial status, professional achievement, or physical health indicators. The mechanism, as Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz describe it in their recent work *The Good Life*, is not complex: connection regulates the nervous system, provides meaning, and offers the repeated, low-stakes experience of being known. Without it, the nervous system runs hotter, the body wears faster, and the sense of meaning erodes.

Naomi's response to this — building Facebook groups for post-separation adults in Sydney, creating mixed social events, facilitating men's nights alongside women's nights — sounds almost quaint against the scale of the problem. But it reflects something I heard from Pasco Knight of Men's Circles UK: that the solution to male social isolation is rarely found in grand gestures or institutional programmes. It is found in someone taking the first step, creating a container, showing up consistently, and making it safe enough for other people to arrive. Naomi became a social alchemist — her own phrase — not by designing the perfect system, but by noticing that people were isolated and doing something practical about it.

For midlife men coming through a separation, or simply navigating the social narrowing that often comes with the second half of life, Naomi's observation is worth hearing plainly: making friends as an adult is hard, harder for men than for women, and it does not happen by accident. It requires the same kind of intentional effort that you would put into rebuilding your finances or your fitness — regular, unglamorous, specific action. The men who build a rich social life in the second half of their lives do not wait until they feel ready. They start before they feel ready, and readiness follows. We have heard this before on *Don't Let The Old Man In* — and from Naomi, it arrives not as theory but as lived



practice, built from the wreckage of her own isolation and the hundreds of men and women she has sat with since.



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!



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