



SINGLE MOMS & LOVING AGAIN

Four single moms lay bare their journeys of loss, loneliness and longing to **Ritu Ailani**

Love is elusive for single mothers in Indian society – not only because of the ordeal of pulling out of a bad marriage, and the worry of how your child will perceive your new relationship, but also because of the ever-so-prevalent stigma around single mothers taking a second chance on love. Yet, there are women out there who have managed to free themselves from these shackles and found love again. Of course, love looked different for each of them the second time around: For some, it meant getting married again; for others, it meant loving themselves above anyone else. Either way, these women had the courage to go for what they've always deserved.

“Getting hurt doesn’t mean you close the door to your heart”

DEVINA KAUR

Author, social entrepreneur, single mother to a 14-year-old daughter

Raised in a conservative Assamese family, Devina was married off at a very young age. Her daughter was still a baby when she realised her marriage wasn't working out and called it quits. Her parents relentlessly tried to make them reconcile and suggested they have more children, but she had already made up her mind. The decision was met with shock, disbelief and judgement from her kith and kin; some even severed ties with her. She >

became a social outcast for no longer having the 'protection' of a man. "Our parents always want the best for us, but their conditioning often limits us from living an authentic life," she says. "As women, we have to unlearn everything we have been taught by society and come into our own."

Despite her divorce, Devina's faith in love remains unshaken. "Getting hurt doesn't mean you close the door to your heart," she says. "It just means you have to go within and reconnect with yourself." Much like the Harlequin romance novels she's so fond of reading, she believes that everyone has a twin flame out there and deserves a happy ending. However, it took years of accepting and forgiving for her to reach catharsis. "When my marriage ended, I found myself desperately looking for a man to save me," she

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Devina Kaur

admits. "I believed my identity was based on having a relationship – on being married." She tells us dating as a single mother was tricky because of the scars she was carrying from her broken marriage. It took professional help for her to reverse this old programming.

These experiences pushed her to start Sexy Brilliant, an initiative that helps women be their sexiest, most brilliant selves by removing the toxic shame of being too much – Too fat, too loud, too ambitious – which then became the title of her first book. She

now has another book in the offing – *Single Parenting: Uncensored* – an account of her struggles to make ends meet as a single mother.

Today, Devina is open to finding a partner who will acknowledge her past and be willing to start a new family. "There are lots of men like this around – men who are looking for a strong, self-made woman," she says, advising other single moms to hang in there. "We need to leave fear behind and move on – and choose ourselves again and again." >

"I chanced upon something that turned out to be beautiful, but I wasn't looking for it."

SHRIVIDYA RAMAMURTHY

Banking and finance expert, single mother to a 31-year-old daughter

"When you take up a course and realise your heart's not in it, you start thinking about the money you paid for it and feel guilty for wanting to quit mid-way. You wonder if you're not trying hard enough, and make yourself miserable by sticking around longer. Marriage can feel like that sometimes." Shrividya Ramamurthy, who offered us this analogy to marriage, got married at just 18. "I was very young and didn't know what I wanted out of life," she says, in hindsight. Things didn't feel right from the get-go, but, before she could say 'Jack Robinson', she already had her daughter. "She's the best thing that's happened to me, and it is with her that I grew up," she smiles. It took Ramamurthy a decade to admit – to herself and her husband – that their marriage wasn't working out. "You feel a sense of failure, as though your judgement has been wrong," she explains. Thankfully, her parents stood by her. She calls them her Rock of Gibraltar. "What took you so long?" her father asked. Even after the final nail in the coffin, Ramamurthy found herself hesitant to use her maiden name again.

A failed marriage did not make her bitter. She had to bear the brunt of remarks about her relationship status – at family functions, with her circle of friends and among business acquaintances – but she took them in her stride as long as they didn't affect her child. She didn't want to taint her daughter's idea of love and marriage. It was like watching sausage getting made, but she powered through.

At times, she admits, the feeling of not having a companion did creep up – especially in the evenings after returning from work – but she never went out of her way to explore the dating scene. "I didn't go to restaurants or nightclubs, so there was no scope of meeting eligible men; I was a working woman raising a child single-handedly – I didn't have time for any of that!" she tells us, adding. "I chanced upon something that turned out to be beautiful, but I wasn't looking for it."

Today, she's in a happy place, co-parenting her grandson along with her ex-husband. Her advice to single mothers is to not set too many rules for themselves and their potential partners, and to be happy in the moment.

"Focus on your own life; when you're thriving, everything will fall into place."

MALINI SABA

Businesswoman, single mother to a 12-year-old daughter

"Society looks at divorced women as failures," says Malini Saba. "The fault is always made out to be theirs because they didn't sit there and put up with it." In her younger days, people's comments about her personal life did get under her skin. "She's a used car; you want a young,

unused car to drive around," is one of many derogatory things she's heard about herself. Today, at 53, Saba is much more sure of herself.

She's not against love, but has made the choice to be single and loves living life on her own terms. "I don't feel like I'm missing out because there's no man sleeping on the left side of my bed. In fact, it's amazing because I get to sleep right in the centre of my bed!" she quips. If she decides to date again, she's inclined to go out with a younger guy. "At least he'll be more fun," she laughs, "At this point in my life, I just want to have fun!"

That said, she's careful about who she lets into her life as a single mother. "Whomsoever I date should be safe – for me and my child. I won't entertain someone who wants a relationship with no strings attached." That's why she advocates self-love. "Focus on your own life," she tells herself and other women, "When you're thriving, everything will fall into place."



Malini Saba

"There's no shame in prioritising your happiness and moving on"

SUMATHY RAMAKRISHNAN

Insurance advisor, single mother to a 28-year-old daughter

Sumathy's love story could give Bollywood script writers a run for their money. After she lost her father to cancer at 22, her grandparents married her off to an acquaintance. She had to follow a host of rigid customs as a married woman and was willing to adjust, but, over time, more serious issues cropped up – issues on which she could not compromise. Her husband would never find time for her and

their daughter. They never went on vacations, never attended social functions or had dinner together in 19 years of marriage. That was not her idea of a family. She brought this to his notice several times, and decided to get a divorce when he refused to budge. Societal judgements did not bother her, because she knew she had done everything she could to make things work. "Yes, a divorce hurts



Sumathy Ramakrishnan

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everybody – especially your child," she says, "but, if your partner is unwilling to meet you halfway, there's no shame in prioritising your happiness and moving on."

As destiny would have it, a long-time family friend proposed to Ramakrishnan when she was finalising her divorce in the court. He had been in love with her since they were 16 and had remained single for her. She was, at first, reluctant to dive into another marriage right away, but realisation soon dawned. "All these years I'd been begging my ex-husband for time, and here was a man who had waited for me this long with blind optimism!" What she'd been longing for all her life, she found on the other side of fear. **F**