

From The Times

June 4, 2009

With this website I thee divorce

For those facing marital break-up, sites and chat rooms can be a lifeline, with one getting a new visitor every minute



Alexandra Blair

Three years after filing for divorce Jane Baker still finds herself trapped in her home, forced to share a kitchen and bathroom with the man who, she says, seemed to fall out of love with her overnight. "We have been living as we can. Existing. If he's in the kitchen I won't go there. He is never around at lunchtime, but in the evenings we have to tiptoe round each other," she says. "I function in one reception room and one bedroom. He uses the other two bedrooms. Three weeks ago I put locks on the doors because he was going through my things — for court or possibly vengeance, I don't know."

Divorce proceedings have taken so long in Jane's case largely because her once-cheerful husband suddenly became so uncommunicative. At no point has he explained why he has withdrawn from her life, she says, or even given his reasons for demanding a divorce. All she knows is that, after 15 years of happy marriage, he wants to leave her. Their son, at university, refuses to discuss the split and prefers to stay in his halls of residence during the holidays rather than return to a home in which his parents live as warring lodgers. They have finally been forced to go to court to sort out their differences — and their home cannot be sold until the case is settled.

Like tens of thousands of men and women facing divorce, Jane was at her wits' end when she turned to the internet. There she found [wikivorce.com](#), an online support group for couples facing the end of their marriage. The website, which was launched two years ago and boasts a new visitor every minute, is an online community that offers free access to information, support and advice for people going through divorce or separation.

While online chats about divorce and marriage troubles are multiplying on sites such as [mumsnet](#) and [iVillage](#), specialist sites such as [ondivorce.co.uk](#) and [divorce-online.co.uk](#), which claims 31,000 members, appear to be proof that divorcing couples are increasingly seeking friendship and advice anonymously and online through chat rooms and the blogosphere. But will these burgeoning internet divorce chat rooms mean an end to acrimonious courtroom battles and the need for professional relationship counsellors?

Jane, 56, who once worked as an interpreter, has been prescribed antidepressants and counselling in the past year. Friends are sympathetic but of little help unless they are divorced themselves.

"They either have no idea about divorce or they get bored, which is why Wikivorce is so fantastic," she says. "I have made so many new friends out there — who are inevitably superficial and some of whom I may lose as life moves on — but at the moment I have phone numbers I can call night or day, whereas if I did that with my friends they would get quite impatient."

The trigger for setting up Wikivorce came from bitter experience, says Ian Rispin, its founder. After 17 years of marriage his wife had filed for divorce — and in the course of a week, in the summer of 2005, he had lost his son, his job and his car. Over the next two years the Rispins fought a fiercely contested divorce that cost them nearly £15,000 in solicitors' fees.

As a former consultant with Accenture, and representing himself, Rispin judged that family law needed an extensive makeover. "We're trying to provide much better support for those who want to self-represent," he says. "We hope to help people who have no choice but to represent themselves."

Hence Wikivorce. The "wiki" element of the site, which draws on the success of Wikipedia, is that it is up to members to add an interesting helpline, resource or leaflet to the site whenever they find one.

Although the site sells one fixed-price divorce service and advertises legal advice for more complex cases, its *raison d'être* is to offer free advice and support via its members, and to build up an open library of applicable casework. Volunteering lawyers and barristers correct legal advice that is not accurate, although Wikivorce points out that the information on its site "should not be construed as legal advice".

Each year 150,000 divorces are granted in the United Kingdom. In the past 12 months 40,000 people seeking a divorce used the site and every day it claims to have more than 3,000 visitors. This month Wikivorce became the first British chat room on the subject of divorce to launch in Scotland and Australia — where the laws are different, although members felt that they had accumulated sufficient case histories and case law examples to help people in both countries.

Although some visitors guard their anonymity, others exchange real names and telephone numbers after a short time. Every June they organise a "Wikistock" meeting. There are 20,000 singles on the site, several wiki couples and so far they have celebrated one wedding.

But does Wikivorce act as a rallying point and, in helping to demystify the process, actually encourage people to get divorced? Is there a danger that clusters of single men and women could encourage the vulnerable and confused to see divorce as their only option, when really they are more in

need of marriage guidance counselling? Certainly not, says 47-year-old divorcee and mother of three Nicola Phipps, a part-time lecturer in broadcast journalism and a Wikivorce volunteer.

"We all know the harsh reality of divorce," she says. "It is the last option, not the first, but part of the process of recovering from it is getting out there again. You are very raw, vulnerable and your self-esteem is at rock bottom, so being able to forge non-threatening friendships can be very helpful.

"Some people are there for the journey, others want to give something back. It's a bit like antenatal classes — some people you will meet up with for years, others you are happy to see now and again in the supermarket."

For Ruth, 39, from a village in the Scottish Highlands, going through a divorce with two small children was the most isolating experience of her life. She stumbled across Wikivorce by accident, and says that the site appealed to her because it was created and run by ordinary people offering practical help.

"Their situations are all different but the emotions are the same — and some are farther down the line than you, which gives you real hope," she says. "I also found it much easier to speak to people I didn't know, possibly because there was no prejudice but probably because they had been in the same situation."

In Richard Green's case it was wiki friends who persuaded him that, while it might seem unfair that he should leave the marital home after his wife had filed for divorce, his sanity was more important than money. "They helped me to see that perhaps I was cutting off my nose to spite my face," he says. "I blogged it and there was something very therapeutic about releasing it into the public arena."

Nick Longford, the chairman of Resolution, the organisation that represents 5,700 family lawyers, welcomes the online support groups but warns people to think carefully before attempting to save legal fees and going it alone with the help of a website. Legally, divorce can be very complicated, he says, and although lawyers can cost anything from £150 to £400 an hour, you pay for their experience and emotional support in navigating the treacherous divorce waters. If you go to court, costs can double. If the case reaches a final hearing, they can treble.

"I would hate people to think that this is a panacea and make themselves vulnerable," he says. "As for selfrepresenting, there is an awful lot of law involved. We need a number of methods so that people can make an informed choice, but it's not easy and it can be a full-time job."

Of course, he would say that — as he admits — but he points out that while costs can spiral in court, most of Resolution's clients manage to sort out their differences through lawyers and do not end up in front of a judge.

Christine Northam, a counsellor with Relate — which is in talks about working alongside Wikivorce and endorsing it as a tool for support in divorce — agrees that chat rooms have their place but insists that they are no substitute for professional advice.

"These sites may help by giving you good emotional support — but they may also mean that you stay stuck in a rut and carry on thinking that all men are bastards, and so on," she says. "Counselling is about facing what has gone wrong and letting go. By knowing yourself a bit more, you should avoid making the same mistakes again — if you haven't had counselling you can get sucked into repeating those mistakes."

Northam also warns users to be aware of the risks attached to using divorce sites. No advice comes without an agenda, she says, be it from your mother, a friend or a newfound wiki mate, so users should consider thoughtfully where the advice they are given is coming from before acting on it.

But while professional legal and counselling advice can add to the growing list of costly fees involved in divorce, Ruth agrees that Wikivorce is no substitute for professional help. "Equally, it's no substitute for a shoulder to cry on," she says. "We shouldn't be working against each other but together because each person can offer different things at different times.

"The doctor has given me support but the web community has given me great emotional support, too. You either laugh or cry — but just to talk to someone who has also been married to an alcoholic and gone in search of bottles in the toilet is a big relief."

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