

Single AND LOVING IT!

» Once upon a time, single meant sad. But now, if you're on your own, the chances are you could be happier, thinner, fitter, more confident and less stressed!

Jammed into a corner at yet another wedding, number 11 on a table of ten, my friend Anna suppressed her irritation as the bride's aunt made conversation: 'Oh, you still haven't got yourself a boyfriend? Don't worry, I'm sure you'll meet someone nice soon.' The thing is, Anna's been single for two years now, and she's more than happy with her lot. What makes her unhappy is that people expect her to want to be in a relationship and feel sorry for her that she's not. Yet she's got a great job, plenty of friends and enough time to enjoy doing the things she really likes – and she doesn't have to waste time on things that bore her just to please someone else.

With one in three marriages now ending in divorce, it's hardly surprising that women are choosing to stay independent. Indeed, recent research suggests that by 2010, 40% of people will be living alone, with 'young, free and singles' becoming more common than both the nuclear and single-parent family. Today, singledom is seen as a lifestyle choice and celebrities from Kate Moss to *Desperate Housewives* star Teri Hatcher are

myself and I'm happier and more content as a result,' says 32-year-old Amelia, a PR manager. 'That's not to say that I don't want to be in a couple, I just haven't met someone I really want to be with. In fact I've declined two marriage proposals because neither was "the one". Part of the attraction is that I never have to check someone else's diary before I arrange to do something, which makes me far more spontaneous. This sense of independence is really important to me – I'm confident about being by myself and, as a result, I've got lots of different groups of friends. And I still go out dancing, which a lot of my coupled-up friends miss out on!'

LONE STARS

'People are much more comfortable with being on their own these days,' says Mike Halson, managing director of networking website Single Living (www.single-living.com). 'Finding yourself single can be a positive thing. It pushes you to make decisions you wouldn't normally make, such as changing your job or going travelling. When you're in a relationship, you tend to put off things that you'd really love to do because your partner might not want to join in or may discourage you. When you're single, there's no one to stop you following your dreams.'

According to relationship psychologist Susan Quilliam, women enjoy huge benefits and a sense of freedom from being single and there's no longer any stigma attached to being on your own. 'Not only does it boost your confidence, but you have time to find out who you are,

rather than defining yourself in terms of a relationship,' she says.

It doesn't mean that you have to spend night after night on the sofa

'IF YOU CAN COPE HAPPILY ALONE, YOU'LL NEVER HAVE TO SETTLE FOR A RUBBISH RELATIONSHIP'

just as happy alone. 'I'm not looking to fall in love and marry,' says Hatcher. 'Not because I'm angry or defensive; it just is not on my agenda right now.'

It's an attitude reflected by the statistics. According to a recent BBC survey, about half of Britain's under-35s are single and many of them have no desire to get married. 'Being single has made me try many more things by

with a bottle of wine like Bridget Jones – rather, you have the chance to work out what you want from life. 'Being single makes you stronger,' says Quilliam. 'If you can cope quite happily on your own, you'll never have to settle for a rubbish relationship.'

You're also more likely to look after your physical health if you're single, according to research conducted in Queensland, Australia. The study revealed that single, divorced and widowed women are healthier than their married counterparts, challenging long-held beliefs that married people have better overall physical and mental health. Singles struggle less with weight gain, too – evidence shows that most married women put on a stone in the year following marriage, and newlyweds pile on more pounds than singles, widows or divorcees. Cooking for ▶



HEALTHY SINGLE HABITS FOR HAPPY COUPLES



Coupled and content? You can still enjoy the health benefits of being single...

- Set aside a day a month that's just for you and use it to pamper yourself. Book in for a regular massage or beauty treatment.
- Encourage each other to cook healthy meals at home – don't get indulgent with the butter just because you're not on the singles' scene.
- Find an activity you can enjoy together, such as running, tennis or rollerblading.
- Dress up and look sexy when you go out as a couple. Just because you're loved-up doesn't mean that you shouldn't grab his attention from time to time.
- Continue to expand your circle of friends – the more friendships you build up, the more positive experiences you're likely to have.
- Make more effort to go out to lively bars together or take up a new pastime such as salsa or learning a language instead of staying in watching TV.

month, and much more likely to have attended an evening class or local group. A wide circle of friends also means single women tend to have a strong support network.

SUDDENLY SOLO

Choosing to remain single may have its benefits, but finding yourself suddenly solo can be devastating. Ultimately, however, most women emerge feeling stronger. 'Any relationship break-up is a bereavement,' says Susan Quilliam, 'but, after going through the grieving process, people get a rush of energy and confidence. They've learned lessons and bounced back full of hope for the future.'

Sarah, a 30-year-old marketing manager, feels much happier now she no longer has to worry about her problematic relationship. 'There was nothing worse than going into work after having a big row, feeling I was going to burst into tears at any moment,' she says. Her new-found confidence means she's enjoying the dating scene and, like most contented singles, she's looking for fun rather than a life partner. And, of course, being single doesn't mean being celibate. Girl about town Angelina Jolie refuses to limit her options and was recently quoted as saying, 'There's a stereotype that women have to give their hearts in a relationship. I have two lovers and before we became partners we decided that's all we would be.'

So, if you find yourself single, see it as a chance to do the things you really want to do and be the best-ever you. □

one makes it easier to opt for a healthier diet and invest more time in preparing a balanced, nutritious meal.

SINGLE-MINDED

Having more free time also helps singles stay in shape, mentally and physically. Research led by Michaela Benzeval from the University Of London found that single women enjoyed better mental health than those who were married, thanks to indulging themselves in relaxation techniques such as yoga or massage. 'I go to the gym two or three times a week,' says Karen, a 32-year-old PR officer. 'When I was in a relationship, that went out of the window. I would spend the weekends

seeing my boyfriend and the week seeing my friends, leaving no time for myself.'

The reduction of your social circle when you become half of a couple may also reduce your lifespan. Research at Carnegie Mellon University, US, has shown that people who belong to many different social groups, such as sports clubs, have healthier immune systems and live longer.

'Thirty-something single women tend to have well-developed networks and are involved with a wide range of social activities,' says Richard Scase, author of a report by the Economic And Social Research Council. They are more likely to have visited friends and been to the theatre or cinema in the past