

When Marriage Turns Sour

Middle Age Manual



The Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention
The University of Hong Kong

FOREWORD

Suicide among the middle-aged in Hong Kong has become a major concern. Within a short span of just six years the suicide rate for those aged 30 to 59 has risen significantly; from 11.7 in 1997 to 18.7 persons per 100,000 in 2002. This dramatic increase within such a short period is both alarming and distressing. Using the data from the Coroners' Court, our research indicated that factors such as relationship problems, unemployment and financial debts have been identified as risk factors closely associated with suicide of the middle aged.

In response to these concerns, The University of Hong Kong-Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research & Prevention has published the following series of manuals for middle-aged people. Documented in these materials are true stories, evidence-based information and recommendations on ways to tackle the challenges encountered by the middle aged.

They are:

- (1) **How to beat depression**
- (2) **Managing Financial debts and Unemployment**
- (3) **When Marriage Turns Sour**

This manual, *When Marriage Turns Sour*, is the third of the entire collection. This manual is designed to provide information and resources for the middle-aged to deal with extra-marital affairs.

Apart from conducting suicide research and training programmes, our Centre also produces resources to promote community education. This manual is written in an effort to promote community awareness on mental health.

We wish to thank the Hong Kong Jockey Club for its generous support in publishing this series of manuals. During the course of their development, a number of mental health professionals closely reviewed the materials and provided valuable information and critical input. Therefore, we would also like to express our gratitude to these experts for their contributions, which have greatly aided the development of this series of manuals.

Paul Yip, Ph.D
Director of the Centre for Suicide Research & Prevention
May, 2004



Many Middle-aged men are finding themselves under tremendous financial pressure being breadwinners of the family. They are worried about being laid off while still having to pay off their mortgages. Mortgage payments, living expenses, children's expenses and other financial responsibilities all add up to heavy financial burdens.

When there are massive layoffs and a continuous drop in real estate prices. Not only is their financial situation at stake, but their personal sense of self worth comes under fire as well.¹⁻³ Many men in debt also find themselves losing their own sense of confidence and self-integrity. They bear a sense of shame about themselves and find it difficult to face their families. Often it is very hard for men to talk about their problems. The notion that "men don't cry" is so deeply ingrained in the male psyche that they feel it is unmanly and weak to ask for help.

There is a new definition for men in modern times. **Real men** have the courage to talk about their **real problems**



Middle age is also a time when people begin re-evaluating their lives. Some people get disappointed and feel that their life is unfulfilling. Many men cope by compulsive working gambling, delving into extramarital affairs,⁴ and even falling into substance abuse.

Middle age is a stage when men need to be **acknowledged** for the **efforts** they put into their work and **creating success.**

INTRODUCTION

• Middle-aged Women

Many women find themselves caught up in multiple roles when they enter this stage in life. Caretaking, parenting and working constitute their roles as a mother, housewife and employee. Many women feel themselves getting pulled in many directions by their spouses, children, parents and employers. Many feel they cannot control their own lives because they have to devote all their time taking care of others.

The cultural definitions of gender roles have identified women as caregivers and nurturers.⁵⁻⁷ Many traditional women view marriage as a life-long endeavour. Since their personal value and social standing as women are often derived from their roles as wives to their husbands after marriage, it is natural for them to devote most of their energies into taking care of their family.⁸⁻⁹ For those middle-aged women who take pride in their families, extra-marital affairs or divorce can hurt them deeply. They may feel that they have lost their husbands, families, and personal identity and all that they have. Depression is not uncommon among women who have marital problems.

Middle age marks a major turning point in the lives of many women. It is a poignant time for them to evaluate the first half of their lives and set up goals for the next half. It is critical for many women to shift their attention from fulfilling the expectations of their families and society to balancing their personal needs with the needs of those they care about.

Learning to value themselves and attend to their needs is important in building a happy and healthy life. It takes a lot of courage to evaluate one's life and make necessary changes. In this process of self evaluation, a therapist can be a good companion on the journey.

Middle-aged women
need to be acknowledged for their
dedication in cultivating
meaningful relationships.



Real life story of a woman

Ah Jing married a villager from a walled village and later gave birth to a son and a daughter. Initially, the family led a happy life but things soon got worse. She discovered that her husband had extramarital relations barely after her daughter completed her first month of life. The man even brought along his mistress while proposing to divorce her, and even asked for the right to bring up their eldest son. Unable to withstand the sudden blow, Ah Jing, in near collapse, swallowed a large quantity of painkillers to commit suicide. Luckily she was rescued.

Ah Jing confessed that she once waited with great patience for her husband to change his mind until she saw him bring along the woman. Only then did she give up hope and agree to a divorce. She said, "At that moment, I felt myself being given the death penalty." Since Ah Jing could not support herself and her children, she could do nothing but move back to the house of her mother-in-law in the conservative walled village. There no one showed her any compassion, instead people put the blame on her, saying that she was the reason for the extramarital affair. This type of censure was depressing and her weight fell from 150 lbs to 110 lbs.

Luckily her good friend and neighbor Ah Lai stood by her. Ah Lai recalled - "I often arranged to meet her outside as an excuse to stop her from getting confused and to try to lessen her stress." With the encouragement of Ah Lai, she eventually sought help from doctors and social workers.

Ah Jing had always shared the same beliefs as common folks in that domestic scandals should not be openly publicised. That was deeply ingrained in her mind, so she did not dare to seek support from outside sources. In the end, she plucked up enough courage to seek help from hospitals and social workers. Only then did she find a way out of her misery.

With the advice of a doctor, she eventually moved out of the walled village and looked for a job. But misfortune always comes in multiples; her three-year-old eldest son died from suffocation. This tragedy prompted her to try a second suicide attempt. But thoughts about nurturing her bed-ridden daughter made up her mind to lead a more resolute life.

Not only was Ah Lai her guardian angel, she was also her matchmaker. She encouraged Ah Jing to broaden her social life by taking part in community activities. As a result, Ah Jing befriended her current husband Mr. Dai. The past unhappy marriage had eclipsed her future prospect of marriage but Ah Lai kept on persuading her, "You've nothing to lose, the worst has already passed you." Her words finally convinced Ah Jing and she formed a happy family with Mr. Dai. In the end, not only did she secure a stable job, she also won a good husband and a good father for her daughter.

Numerous tragedies jeopardizing human relationships take place due to marriage breakdowns. This is what Ah Jing tells us: "Do not magnify the setbacks in your life; marriage isn't everything."

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Extramarital affairs can lead to deep psychological wounds. Many women felt that they have invested everything in their marriage and the family for their whole life. When they lose their husband, they feel that they lose everything. There is also a deep sense of hurt and betrayal. Many women become depressed and even suicidal at this point. A survey¹⁰ profiling the users of the EMA hotline service revealed that 13.7% of the callers show signs of suicidal ideation and behavior.

PRACTICAL TIPS ON HANDLING EMA

What to do when you find out that your spouse has extra marital affairs?

Paulina Kwok, Centre Supervisor of Caritas Family Crisis Support Centre and an experienced social worker in handling EMAs wrote a book on "Ways to prevent and manage EMA."¹¹ She indicated that there are different stages to the development of extramarital affairs. The following are some ways to handle EMA at different stages of the process:

Stage Characteristics	Ways to Manage
1. Gestation Stage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deteriorating marital connection Minimal communication Strange distance between couple One party starts to fantasise about having another lover 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase one's attractiveness by altering appearance and attitude State your stance and the harmful effects of EMA Settle conflicts and differences through enhancement of communication Set a time schedule for partner to settle the affair Request appropriate changes in your partner. Re-establish trust in the relationship.
2. Testing Stage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner already has the affair Increasing sense of distance with partner 	
3. Stage of Discovery & Conflict <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner admits having EMA Intense conflicts and antagonism Children affected by the tension 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carefully accept and manage one's emotions of shock, betrayal, grief and sadness Find supportive persons and social workers to vent your feelings & discuss with Skillfully evaluate and discuss ways of improving your relationship with your partner
4. Dragging-on Stage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The triangular nature of the three-party relationship is set. Absence of intimacy between the married couple. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider options to settle the marriage: restructuring, compromise, separation and divorce Re-establish one's purpose in life Extend one's social support Establish one's financial independence
5. Stage of Separation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> One way or mutual agreement on divorce Spouses decides to give up the affair or maintain the three party relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acceptance of reality Establish a new life in terms of setting new life goals, new living arrangement and support system Avoid speaking negatively of partner around your children

PRACTICAL TIPS ON HANDLING EMA

• Self Reflection Exercise Part I

Self Reflection Exercise Part I

When I found out that my partner had an affair, I felt:
(Please circle or write out your feelings)

depressed

jealous

nothing

lose everything

anxious

betrayed

hard to accept it

abandoned

numb

useless

I want to die

angry

If you feel suicidal right now,
please put aside this handbook, go and pick up your
phone and call the emergency numbers on page 15-16.

There are people who want to listen to you.
One call, one thought can change the entire situation

PRACTICAL TIPS ON HANDLING EMA

• Self Reflection Exercise Part I

2. I feel that I am :
(Please circle or write out your thoughts)

I'm useless

I'm unlovable

I'm unattractive

better off dead

I'm ugly

I'm still good

I'm stupid

I am still pretty cute

I'm still lovable

I'm still important

I think about death frequently
or have thoughts of suicide

If I find myself saying negative things about myself
and that they affect my feelings,

I will become aware of my thoughts and feelings.

These thoughts can be transformed.

I will love myself and not hurt myself by saying these negative things. Please refer to Self Reflection Exercise II.

If these feelings persist for more than two weeks and significantly affect your occupational and/or interpersonal functioning, please call someone whom you can talk to or call your primary care physician or a social worker immediately.

PRACTICAL TIPS ON HANDLING EMA

• Am I feeling depressed?

Am I feeling depressed?

Extra marital affairs can be very distressful and many even feel depressed about it. The National Institute of Mental Health has devised The Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D),¹² which is a quick self-test that measures a person's level of depression over the prior week.

For the following 20 items, please select the choice that best describes how you have felt over the past week:	Rarely or none of the time (<1 day)	Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)	Occasion-ally or a moderate amount of the time (3-4 days)	Most or all of the time (5-7 days)
1. I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.				
2. I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor.				
3. I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with the help from my family and friends				
4. I felt that I was not as good as other people.				
5. I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing.				
6. I felt depressed.				
7. I felt that everything I did was an effort.				
8. I felt hopeless about the future.				
9. I thought my life had been a failure.				
10. I felt fearful.				
11. My sleep was restless.				
12. I was unhappy.				
13. I talked less than usual.				
14. I felt lonely.				
15. People were unfriendly.				
16. I did not enjoy life.				
17. I had crying spells.				
18. I felt sad.				
19. I felt that people disliked me.				
20. I could not get "going."				

Scoring:

- Step 1 :** For each answer, assign the following value
- 0 - Rarely or none of the time (<1 day)
 - 1- Some or a little of the time (1-2days)
 - 2 - Occasionally or a moderate amount of the time (3-4 days)
 - 3- Most or all of the time (5-7days)

Step 2 : Add the total scores

- If the score is 22 or higher, the person may be suffering from major depression.
- If the score is 15-21, the person may be suffering from mild to moderate depression.
- If the score is below 15, this test does not indicate that the person is depressed.
- If the score is 15 or higher, please consider seeking professional help.

PRACTICAL TIPS ON HANDLING EMA

"One single call, one single thought
can change the entire situation."

Feeling depressed can be a very painful experience. 60%-80% of people with depression feel better after they receive therapy and medication treatment.¹³⁻¹⁵ Call your doctor and schedule an appointment now. You can also talk to a social worker, who will work with you on this issue; there is no need to be alone. Like a common cold, depression is highly treatable and you can get better. The earlier you seek help, the faster you will recover. Call now and talk to someone about it. The numbers are listed on page 15-16.

One call, one thought can change the entire situation

Suicide

Not everyone who experiences depression wants to commit suicide. 15% of people who are depressed have had thoughts of suicide, according to a study conducted in the US.¹⁶ Some people become so depressed that they can no longer bear their pain and want to end their lives.

If you are feeling suicidal right now...
Find someone to talk to right away.

Pick up your phone and call the numbers on page 15-16.



Healing from EMA

With extramarital affairs ruining your marriage, you might feel that a crisis is looming ahead of you now. This could, in fact, be a turning point for you to reflect on.

Dr. Cecilia Chan, Professor at the Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong identified two crucial elements in her work with those who have spouses involved in an EMA; these are: self love and forgiveness. She warned people against constantly playing the role of a self pitying victim, complaining and holding grudges against their enemies. She said that emotions like anger, hatred and retaliation are "poisonous substance". They are harmful to the body and the mind. These destructive sentiments can also plant seeds of hatred in the children of the victims. Furthermore, these emotions are like chains shackling the soul from reaching happiness, independence and freedom. She counseled that when the timing is appropriate, spouses can try to forgive their partners for the sake of their own personal well-being as well as to free themselves.

Forgiveness

By forgiveness I mean that

I am willing to let go of the past wounds and
decide to never again to suffer hardships.
I am determined to heal my heart and soul.

By forgiveness I mean that

I will never again consider hatred or anger
as something significant.

By forgiveness I mean that

I will not brood on the injury of an event in the past, and
will also remove from my mind notions of hurting others and myself.

By forgiveness I mean that

I am willing to see the bright side of things and
not to make judgments on right and wrong or to censure people.

(Author unknown)

PRACTICAL TIPS ON HANDLING EMA

• Self Loving exercise

Self Loving exercise

Dr. Cecilia Chan also stated the importance of self-love, a special gift we can give to ourselves. This involves not only forgiveness, but also respect for ourselves, having confidence in ourselves and making ourselves look pretty and attractive.

Place your hand on your heart and say to yourself:

" I love you, it's okay."

" I completely accept you."

"You are very important to me."



Self Reflection Exercise Part II

If I find that I'm saying negative things to myself, I will love myself and re-write the statements into:

(Please circle or rewrite your thoughts)

I will learn to love myself.

I will find new meaning in my life.

I am still lovable.

I am important .

I will take care of myself.

I am still a useful person.

I will make myself happy.

I will take care of myself.

I believe that I am a valuable person.

PRACTICAL TIPS ON HANDLING EMA

• Self Reflection Exercise Part II

Self Reflection Exercise Part II

I will take good care of myself, I will:
(Please circle the following items or write out some positive things to do)

Talk to someone I trust

Say positive things to myself

Exercise

Eat in moderation

Go and talk with a social worker

Go shopping

Do something I like

Take good care of my body

Be gentle to myself

Listen to my own emotions

PRACTICAL TIPS ON HANDLING EMA

Self Love Poem¹⁷

I will take good care of myself, I will say, To love yourself:
(Please circle the following items or write out some positive things to do)

is not to pick on your own faults.

is not to burden yourself with spiritual pangs.

is not to view yourself with hatred.

is not to treat yourself harshly.

is not to punish yourself by the wrongs of others.

is not to refuse the help of goodwill.

To love yourself

is not to neglect your health.

is not to underestimate yourself.

is to be patience and tolerant.

is to be bold enough to say you love yourself.

is not to procrastinate and to act with hesitation.

is not to make yourself panic.

Conclusion

In recent years, the divorce rate in Hong Kong has been rising. The inter-marriage between people in Hong Kong and China is increasingly common and the age difference between spouses widens. This can bring about many family problems. Extra marital affairs and domestic violence challenge the institution of family which is the foundation of society.

Extra marital affairs hurt not only the spouses, but can have long lasting effects on the children of the family. When you encounter extra martial affairs, try to resolve the problem in a calm and mature manner for the sake of your family and yourself. No matter what happens, do not hurt yourself or your family members.

It is understandable to feel great distress when your family is going through major transitions. Knowing how to manage your emotions effectively during these crucial moments is important. Learning to love oneself and to forgive others while letting go of feelings of hatred are constructive ways of creating a better future for oneself. Building a network of support and seeking the help of friends and service professionals help you to survive through this stormy period and start a new life.

SELF HELP NUMBERS

Crisis Hotlines

Family Caritas Crisis: 18288
The Samaritans: 2896 0000 (Multilingual)
Samaritan Befrienders: 2389 2222
Social Welfare Department Hotline: 2343 2255
Suicide Prevention Services: 2382 0000

Counseling Services

Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service: 3413 1500
Breakthrough Counselling Centre: 2736 6999
Christian Family Service Centre: 2861 0283
Hong Kong Caritas Family Service: 2843 4670
Hong Kong Christian Service: 2731 6316
Hong Kong Family Welfare Society: 2527 3171
Social Welfare Department Family Services Centre Hotline: 2343 2255 (push 1 and then 7)
Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service: 2388 7141
Ask your physician for a referral to a private practice psychologist, counselor, or psychiatrist.

Hotlines for Men

Caritas Hotline for Men: 2649 1100
Po Leung Kuk Hotline for Men: 2890 1830

Unemployment

To apply for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance at the Social Welfare Department: 2343 2255 (push 1 and then 1 again)
Christian Action: 2382 3339 offers job training on different skills
Christian Family Service Centre Hotline: 2787 1355
(Sat 10am-10pm, weekday 2-5pm)
Methodist Epworth Village Community Centre: 2558 3035
Hong Kong YWCA Counseling Hotline: 2711 6622
(weekday 2-4 for women, weekday 7-10pm for all)

SELF HELP NUMBERS

Extramarital Affairs

The Caritas Hotline services for EMA: 2537 7247
Treatment groups for women who experience EMA and divorce: 2498 0328
Time-out service is designed for people to have a safe place to go to calm down and tackle their crisis 3476 1300.
Hong Kong Anglican Church Sheng Kung Hui Counseling Service: 2713 9174
Hong Kong Catholic Marriage Advisory Council: 2810 1104
Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres: 2386 6256

Financial Debts Counseling Services

Caritas Family Crisis Support Centre
Debt Counseling Project
24 hour debt Hotline: 2382 2929
Hotline number: 18288
<http://fcsc.caritas.org.hk>

Christian Family Service Centre
Sunny Life Family Support Project for the Debtors
Tel: 2701 5592 / 2793 3573
Fax: 2304 7762
Hours of Operation: Mon-Fri 10:00-13:00, 14:00-18:15, 19:15-22:15

Official Receiver's Office
Tel: 2867 2448
oroadmin@oro.gcn.gov.hk

Tung Wah Group of Hospital
Healthy Budgeting Family Debt Counselling Centre: 2548 0803
Mon-Fri 10:00-22:00, Sat 10:00-18:00
<http://fdcc.tungwahcsd.org>

All of the above organizations are listed in alphabetic order

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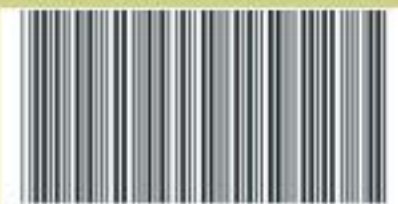


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