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## For women over 50, heartbreak can trigger transition

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Maria Shriver isn't alone in facing unexpected life transitions.

Shriver and her husband, actor and former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, suddenly separated this month after 25 years of marriage — and an admission by Schwarzenegger that he had fathered a child with a member of their household staff.

Now Shriver, a 55-year-old former television journalist, is left to contemplate her next move in what she called a "painful and heartbreaking time."

Deb Engle of Winterset, Iowa, a co-founder of "Tending Your Inner Garden," an introspective program for women, said such life transitions are common scenarios for women Shriver's age.

"I'd say that's probably our most common demographic or age group," Engle said.

A newly empty nest or a lost job can send women scrambling for a new game plan. But often the end of a marriage triggers the action.

Women over age 50 who do not have their own identity outside a marriage — through a job, activities or volunteer work — can face tough transitions after a divorce, said Steve Lytle, an attorney in Des Moines.

And women over 50 who have not been in the job market for decades are the most vulnerable divorcees, he said.

"You'll never be able to achieve parity in most cases if you've been out of the job market for 20 years and you're now 55. It's an economic fact," Lytle said.

When a marriage breakup involves adultery or betrayal, anger often overwhelms women, making transition even more challenging. Lytle advises his female clients to try to let go of anger.

"You can be happy, or you can be angry and sad," he said. "It's up to you. If you want to draw on the past and think about that bastard, you will. But you will achieve peace and happiness in your life not through what we do in the divorce case, but in other ways."

### Not what they imagined

Barb Palar of Des Moines has dealt with anger during several years of life transition, which involved a layoff from her employer of 12 years, a divorce, high school graduation of her three children, buying a house for herself and a series of career moves.

"I felt anger; I felt anxiety," said Palar, 52. "I had extreme financial worries — that was huge. And I was going through menopause at the same time, which included anxiety, depression and insomnia."

The things that had driven her identity in the past — being a wife, busy mother and successful career woman — all of a sudden were gone at the very time that she had assumed her life would

be settled, Palar said.

"I thought we would be coasting in right now," she said.

"I feel for Maria Shriver," said Valerie Sandford, 56, of Clive, Iowa, whose life circumstances also have changed dramatically — and unexpectedly — in the past six years.

Sandford spent 35 years building a solid career in the insurance industry, only to discover that she couldn't shake that identity when she wanted a change. But she could accept a new job with a different company — Principal Financial Group — in a different state. She moved to Iowa from Connecticut in March 2005, just weeks after her mother died.

Sandford's husband soon joined her in Clive to start a new chapter in their life — they thought.

"My husband had a heart attack the first week he was here and died in our bed," Sandford said.

Recently, Sandford attended a party where she realized most other guests were couples.

"I thought, 'That's how it's supposed to be,'" she said. "And now it's not."

### **Uncharted territory**

At mid-life, women often start contemplating other things they want to do in life — and they're surprised at an unfamiliar sense of urgency, Engle said.

"We talk about the biological clock that gives women a sense of urgency about having children," she said. "But I think there is another biological clock that ticks later — in about the mid-50s. This is the stage of life where there is no blueprint."

For a lot of people, the 50s may be uncharted territory, agreed Jane Rider, a clinical social worker with Hearthstone Counseling Associates.

"Transitions are times when all of a sudden the old dreams no longer are working, or because we never dreamt that far," she said. "So it's time to think about new possibilities and new dreams."

Lytle, the divorce lawyer, said he tells clients in their 50s to remember that the odds are they will find love again and maybe even remarry.

"I tell them, 'You won't even remember this, hardly. It will just be a bitter little memory in your life,'" Lytle said.

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