

TWENTY EIGHT

The Pressure Era

Putting a ring on it. Isn't this the main reason why couples break up at this stage? My age-28 split happened due to a toxic – and entirely mistaken – belief that my girlfriend Karen was looking for me to do just that.

As the slow trickle of friends tying the knot turned into a fast-flowing torrent, I began to interpret all of Karen's behaviour as nest-making. The arrival of an Ikea catalogue sparked internal unrest. If she

lingered at a jewellery store window for more than seven seconds, I'd drag her away with a determination I thought only professional Highland Games players possessed.

"I'm just not ready for marriage," I blurted out one day. "It hadn't even crossed my mind," was her retort. "But you have been behaving like a w*nker lately."

She was right. When she left me two months later, I could only blame myself. I'd transferred my insecurities onto her like an ironing-board burn through a sweater.

"Men's expectations are often still set to the timelines of their parents' generation," says researcher Alice Templeton, who's studied the life crises of twenty- and thirty-somethings. "His parents ask when he's getting married, then he sees friends' weddings on Facebook and questions whether he should be doing the same. We're group animals, after all; we don't like feeling like the odd one out."

But while men are freaking out about the pressure, 28-year-old women are embracing freedom. "You start to think about what *you* want from life," Templeton adds. "By your late twenties, you know your interests and passions, and you want the freedom to explore them. Some women feel it's their last chance before 'settling down'; for others, it's the first time they've been free, as our early twenties are consumed by education and getting on the career ladder."



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