

More are open to saying 'I do' a second time

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HEADING INTO KNOWN TERRITORY

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Mr Mohamad Faizal Abdul Razak and Ms Salbiah Ramli said their biggest struggle was over parenting styles. They each have two children from a previous marriage. -- ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE

WHO'S afraid of marriage? Not Mr Mohamad Faizal Abdul Razak, who got married last month even though his first marriage did not work out.

He and Ms Salbiah Ramli, a divorcee, dated for a year and a half before tying the knot.

'I think many singles don't get married because they are scared of the unknown. But because we've been married, we know what it's like,' said Mr Faizal, 33, a civil servant.

Added Ms Salbiah, 29, also a civil servant: 'We know our faults and we try to change ourselves.'

They are not alone. Remarriage rates have gone up even as total marriage numbers have fallen, according to a Department of Statistics report last week.

The total number of marriages - at 24,363 last year - was 6.6 per cent fewer than the 26,081 the year before. This marks the first year-on-year dip in the number of marriages since 2003.

Marriages, in which one or both partners had been previously married, made up 26 per cent of total marriages last year, up from 19 per cent a decade ago.

Counsellors and experts attribute this to a growing social acceptance of remarriages and an increased willingness among divorced people to give marriage another go.

'In spite of the increasing divorce rate, being married has not lost all of its shine,' said marital and family therapist Benny Bong.

'No matter how disappointing the first marriage may be, marriage as an institution and the state of being married are both seen by society at large as being desirable.'

This was the case for Mr Bob Lim, 41, and Ms May Tan, 37, who met through dating agency Lunch Actually. 'I did not write off marriage after my divorce. It was always about finding the right person, that's all,' said Mr Lim, a consultant.

He had been divorced for six years before marrying Ms Tan, a baker, in 2008. 'It's been three great years,' he said.

Lunch Actually founder Violet Lim said around 10 per cent of its clients had been married before.

'When we started Lunch Actually seven years ago, I recall that many clients had a preference of not dating divorced people. However, as divorce rates are also on the rise now, people are generally becoming more open-minded,' she said.

The divorce rate fell slightly to 1.9 divorces for every 1,000 residents last year, after holding steady at 2 since 2005.

In raw numbers, the number of divorces and annulments crept up slightly last year to 7,405, from 7,386 in 2009.

Dr Matthew Matthews, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said having been married before may actually make a person more willing to do so again.

'Some divorcees, instead of losing faith in marriage as an institution, attribute the failed marriage to marrying the wrong person, so they are more confident about remarriage because they know whom they should marry for things to work out,' he said.

But married life is not likely to be rosy the second or third time around, warn counsellors.

Mr Bong said statistics in the United States show that remarriages are just as likely to end in divorce as first-time marriages.

Challenges include children from previous marriages, acceptance of the new spouse by the extended family and negative experiences that each partner brings from a previous marriage, he added.

Mr Faizal and Ms Salbiah said their biggest struggle was over parenting styles. He has two daughters from a previous marriage while she has two sons.

'She is stricter than I am. We've had to come to a compromise on how to raise our kids,' he said.

Couples remarrying are aware that love can go only so far. Which is why Mr Faizal said he and his current wife attended a marriage preparation course to tackle potential issues.

Mr Lim noted that he and Ms Tan had taken time to make sure their union would be successful.

'I spent more time talking through and resolving issues than I did before, rather than avoiding them. It helps that my wife feels the same way,' he said.

'Also, you realise that marriage is a perpetual work-in-progress. It needs to be worked on continuously.'