

I do, I do ... I do, I do ... I do, I do

It's June, that time of year when dewy-eyed lovers tie the knot. But we live in parlous times, when first-time nuptials are referred to cynically as 'starter marriages' and more and more people find they yearn for wedded bliss so much they do it over and over again.

Gerry, a successful Toronto real estate broker, admits to feeling a little sheepish when he asked his best friend to be his best man. The wedding was Gerry's third, which meant it would be the friend's third gig as Gerry's best man. The friend asked if he could read the same speech he'd made at the second wedding and simply substitute the new bride's name. Just joking, of course.

"There were some laughs among my buddies," Gerry says, "and I'm not sure how serious they thought I was, but I met this wonderful woman and she wanted a big wedding." Gerry recalls his then fiancée saying, "Just because you've done this before doesn't mean I can't." His daughter from the first marriage and twin sons from the second stood in the wedding party.

Gerry invited many of the same guests who'd come to his previous weddings. "I'm sure some of them wound up comparing notes. A few didn't show because they are friends with my second wife and they sent a short note of apology. It was complicated -- and I would have preferred to elope -- but I wanted to make her happy."

It's not just celebrities who get hitched over and over again. It seems that plenty of real life people are pledging "till death do us part" more than a few times. This being June, and marriage being on everyone's mind, we decided to look at a few people whose minds it has been on more than most.

When no-fault divorce was introduced in 1985, chucking a marriage became as easy as ordering a pizza. Nowadays, more than one-third of marriages in Canada end in Splitsville. According to Statistics Canada, there is an increase in the number of adults who enter a second union (either common law or marriage) at an earlier age. Numbers on subsequent marriages have not been tracked, but there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that a significant number of people are walking down the aisle for a third or fourth time. In fact, many social observers feel third marriages are becoming as common as second marriages.

"In London and New York, there seems to be a very acceptable pattern among the media elite and the upper-middle class," the late Olivia Goldsmith, author of the novel *The First Wives Club*, said. "The first wife was a throwaway. The second wife was a reaction to the first -- she's the bimbo. The third wife is the charm."

Gerry, 58, was married for five years to his childhood sweetheart during his mid-20s. They got married because "everyone else was doing it and our family expected it, but we were more friends than passionately in love." They had one child and then parted amicably.

A few years later, he met wife number two at a conference in New York. "I was so excited about meeting someone new that I rushed into it," he says. "She was at that stage where she really wanted kids, so there was this sense of urgency. She was outgoing and I'm more reserved. We thought our differences complemented one another but they didn't."

Still, they made it work for 15 years before things finally fell apart. He remained "despondently single" for the next six years. Then, at age 54, he met wife number three through an online dating site, a "beautiful, wonderful 40-year-old woman who changed my life." Last summer, they tied the knot at a swanky Toronto hotel before 200 people.

Although multiple marriages, especially those with a quick turnover time, invoke a degree of societal scorn, as when twice-divorced J.Lo announced her engagement to Ben Affleck or when Lisa Marie Presley's third marriage (to Nicolas Cage) lasted four months -- Statistics Canada estimates that a third of men and women will enter a "second union" by age 39.

It's a trend that, no doubt, has a lot to do with "starter marriages," those youthful marriages that typically last five years or less and end without children. Many involved in these quickie live-in flings don't even regard them as the real thing. (A 32-year-old associate of mine made her diamond ring from her first marriage -- which lasted less than a year-- into earrings to wear at her second wedding: "I never tell people I am divorced because, as far as I am concerned, it was a mistake I made in my early 20s and it never happened.")

"I think, by my age, many people have been married twice and it's no longer shocking to get married a third time later on," says Gerry. "I mean, if you are not happy, you have to move on. But a fourth, now that probably is too much. I really want to make this one work. My kids will disown me if it doesn't. They are only now giving my wife a chance."

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It may sound redundant, but a marriage-preparation course might be especially helpful the third or fourth time round, says Behar.

"It's good to think about what you might be facing, being a third mom, or that the first spouse might be jealous of the second," she says. "Sometimes people just don't like the stepkids; or the half-siblings don't get along. It's not automatic."

One thrice-married man (who asked to remain nameless for fear of sparking more interfamily feuding) told me he can no longer bear to visit his Muskoka cottage in the summer. He has a sort of time-share agreement worked out with his two ex-wives. "The problem is, they always stay longer than their allotted time or show up at the wrong dates. They each try to redecorate in their own way and then my current wife shows up and hates their stuff being everywhere," he says. "I tried to talk to my first wife about it, and she says, 'I helped build and pay for this place; I can do what I want.' It's too much trouble and time to sell the damn thing!"

To complicate matters, he has two grown children (and a grandchild) from his first marriage and his current wife has a teenager (from a previous marriage) who lives with them. His 90-year-old mother is still deeply attached to the first wife (who had a third child with another partner) and actively dislikes his current wife. His children act in a similarly icy fashion towards her and still keep in close touch with the second wife. In short, this isn't the Brady Bunch.

"Planning Christmas and trying to please everyone is impossible," he says. "There is always a meltdown. There are all sorts of different loyalties and different expectations."

So why would a person, after one marriage bites the dust, keep showing up again and again at the altar? Why not just live together? According to Bookman, the urge to make it legit has nothing to do with religion or culture. Serial marriers, he suggests, are simply romantics. "Everybody has this dream idea of growing old in the rocking chair with the love of their life," Bookman says. "These people keep trying and hoping to get it right."