

I'D RATHER FACE TROUBLE THAN WALK AWAY

Amanda Holden talks to Victoria Young about marriage in tough times, her biggest regret and the chemistry between her and Simon Cowell

Amanda, 43, lives in London with her husband, Chris Hughes, and their daughters Lexi, eight, and Hollie, two. She was married to comedian Les Dennis and they divorced in 2003.

I can't make everybody like me, although I'll try very hard to. But it used to matter to me much more. When I first married Les, I think I was seen by some as a gold-digger, and I'd go out of my way to change opinion. But my view now is that you just have to give yourself a break and accept that not everyone will like you. I mean, I find myself irritating sometimes – so other people must too!

Being on *Britain's Got Talent* has allowed me to be me. If you don't like me after that then you're entitled because you know me. But don't judge before that. People may have had the wrong impression of me before. I'd divorced a national treasure and very publicly had an affair, so I think a lot

of people must have thought I was a bit of a slut, not least because if you're a woman you're somehow not allowed to do that kind of thing. But in fact, I've always been very much a relationship person.

Simon Cowell was on my radar before we met. Then I had dinner with him in LA with my friend Jane, which he since says was a date. I question that! I was having the time of my life but left at 10.30pm in a pre-booked cab. Later, he sent me a text with the number nine on it. I think it meant that was how the date went. I'm presuming he meant out of ten because if it was out of 20 it's insulting. Although... I did insist on leaving at 10.30pm, so I would probably only have given myself a six and a half. Now I would have stayed till the end – who knows, maybe things would have turned out differently if I had.

I think the reason Simon and I work is that we understand each other very well. Off camera, I'm quite naughty, and

he is as well. I think he likes the fact that we both have a filthy sense of humour. Simon also enjoys the fact that I'm very honest. Also, I know how his mind works, and if it's been a long day for him, it's almost like having an on-screen husband because I know him so well. I know which way to "fluff" him, as it were, to make the day seem quicker and shorter.

It's a real friendship. But I'm not deluded about the fact that when my time is up on the show, my time will be up. I just expect Simon to tell me himself. I'd like to think we'd still see each other as friends, though.

He's not a father figure in any way, shape or form. Although I'd say that I was sometimes a mother figure to him. He takes the mickey out of me when I say things like "It's not my cup of tea", which he says his mum says a lot. And I'm constantly turning to Alesha [Dixon], saying, "What kind of music was that?"



"I would describe myself as a feminist – in the best sense of the word"

Was that 'garage'?" I represent the demographic of hundreds of women who have no idea what a rapper might be saying. I am not cool and never have been.

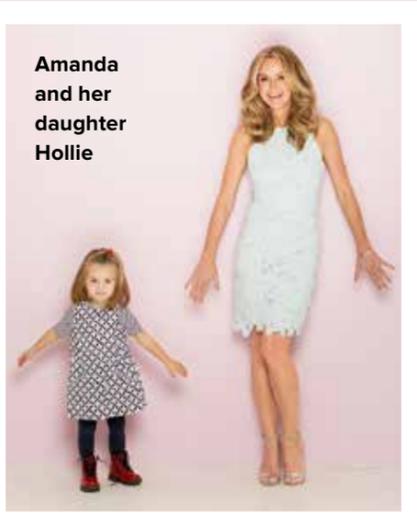
Simon really is as charismatic as everyone says. Now I know him, I love watching people practically faint or swoon like he's a member of a rock band. But I'm now so comfortable in his company that we once fell asleep next to each other on the sofa. I had my mouth open and looked a total sight.

It's true that he hasn't changed any of his son's nappies – I double-checked. But I looked at him the other day and something has softened about him. This isn't to do with a chemical peel, plastic surgery or Botox – something has changed his face, and it's love.

I'm really close to Piers Morgan. We got off to a dreadful start because he was editor of the *Daily Mirror* when my marriage to Les was ending. But I'm quite open to changing my view, and now I love him and he's a real mate. I really confide in him and I trust him, which is so ironic given our start. I know he'd never leak or sell anything, and if I told him something in confidence, he wouldn't betray that. But I'll never forget the fact that I'm talking to a bloodhound.

Piers would be there for me in my hour of need, 100 per cent. Simon would be too, but I wouldn't want to show so much vulnerability to him. He gave me some really good advice once. He said, "Have you ever been dumped?" I said, "Oh yeah – where do I start?" And he said, "Let me give you a tip – never admit you've been dumped." So about two years later he said, "Have you ever been dumped, Amanda?" and I went, "No, never." And he started laughing his head off and I said, "You trained me well, darling."

Simon says my backbone is made of steel. I don't think that's something I was born with – I have acquired it. If something is bothering me you will not have a clue about it. I just put on a brave face and carry on. I'm more sensitive than a lot of people think but when I need it to be, I'd say my backbone is more like titanium. >>



Amanda and her daughter Hollie

My mum always said I'd rather walk into trouble than run away from it. I could have left the country when I divorced from Les. But I didn't want to be dictated to, and that came from my mum and my grandmother, who's very stubborn – still living on her own at 93.

I don't want to be defined by the things that have gone wrong. I never want to seem to be weakened by circumstance, or defined by tragedy or personal sadness. I'll do my vulnerability in my house with my husband and my family. It's been so well documented that I lost a baby, and that I nearly lost my life when I had Hollie [pictured above]. But I don't want to be that girl that goes on about it. Writing it down and putting it in a book was a way of drawing a line under it so I can move on.

Chris and I have been tested beyond the call of duty. He's not a public person so our relationship was tested right from the start, when we were stalked by the press. And we've been through hell and back, losing a baby, and there is no one who can share that experience with me except him. No one else can understand – not even my mum or dad.

That kind of grief makes or breaks. A friend wrote to us and said, "Hang on to each other because this is a horrible ride." I physically got that image in my head and I don't think I've ever let go.

We've been together for 11 years and the secret to our success is humour. This is incredibly funny and even

through the dark times we could make jokes, and that's what saved us. We take the mickey out of each other mercilessly, and he hates it when I say anything nice about him, but we are so well suited.

Now we are through the other side. But we're always wondering what's going to happen next! When we feel too happy, that's when I get a bit panicked that something bad is going to happen. I'm used to having something to worry about.

When I became a mother my priorities changed. I work less now and I do every club under the sun with Hollie, from Monkey Music to Diddi Dance. I know I'm not having any more children and I want to make the most of it. I'm desperate to get my acting back on track but the reality of acting is 16-hour days in a muddy field away from home. And I don't want to be away from home.

“I don't want to be defined by the things that have gone wrong”

The thing that drives me is wanting my children to have a good future. I want to work towards that financially and I want them to be able to see their mum doing something she enjoys and works hard at.

I would describe myself as a feminist – in the best sense of the word. I like men to open doors and stand up when I sit down at the table. But I want to earn the same money as that person sitting next to me – unless it's Simon, obviously. And I want my opinions to be valued the same as everyone else's.

The other word I'd use is bossy. I'm happy to be called bossy. It comes from having a very strident grandmother. Nan is very tactile, and the life and soul of the party. She and my grandpa so obviously loved each other, and she'd always tell me that you should make sure your husband sees you in lipstick

first thing in the morning! But she's also stubborn to the point of unreasonable.

Chris and I have our own bank accounts, plus a joint one for bills.

I spend my money on what I want, and that's that. I couldn't go to Christian Louboutin and buy a pair of shoes unless it was my money. That doesn't mean I don't run in and hang up something new I've bought and say I've had it for ages because he thinks I spend way too much on clothes. He sometimes says, "Try and think of the girls' future!"

I have a really good relationship with food and I love eating. And I also love a glass of wine. I could never do the 5:2 diet. But I eat healthily. I'm mostly vegetarian and we don't do puddings. We all eat together when Chris comes home because I'm quite old-fashioned and I like us all to sit around the table.

Mum and Dad are the best grandparents.

They live in Cornwall and we normally meet in the Cotswolds. I have pictures of my dad in full hair and make-up, done by Lexi, and I've walked in to find my mum bound and gagged as a kidnap victim. But they love every minute!

AMANDA UP CLOSE

What do you value in a partner? Humour. And Chris is an amazing kisser, which really matters.

Biggest regret? Not leaving my marriage to Les three years earlier. We had a good six years but then one of us should have said, "This isn't going to work any more." I regret how badly he came off.

When did you last feel really happy? Last weekend in the Cotswolds, watching Lexi and Chris play netball, while Hollie was pootling around. I could hear the birds tweeting and the bees buzzing, and it was one of those blessing counting moments.

Three things you can't live without? Red wine, butter... and Christian, my make-up artist.

PHOTOGRAPHS: TREVOR LEIGHTON; STYLING: ANGE SMITH; HAIR: MIKEY KARDASHIAN; USING SHOW HAIRCARE AND BABYLISS PRO; MAKE-UP: FRANCESCA NELL; USING ARMANI AND SISLEY; PREVIOUS SPREAD: JACKET AND SHORTS: ZARA; TOP: MARKS & SPENCER; OPPOSITE PAGE: DRESS: COAST; BANGLE, FOLLI FOLLIE; HEELS, DUNE; THIS PAGE: TOP: ZARA; TROUSERS: H&M; HEELS: KURT GEIGER; BANGLES: LOLA ROSE

They're both pretty laid-back. Mum was very relaxed when I was a child, but I'm not quite like that. I clear up toys while my children are still playing. Lexi says, "Mummy, I was right in the middle of a game," but as far as I'm concerned, her dollies all over the floor are just mess.

During my marriage to Les my mum was my touchstone. But now I would always call Chris before anybody else – partly because I don't like to worry my mum too much. My life has been a bit dramatic so these days I tend to let her know after the event – to spare her.

I don't feel fame has changed me. **Chris wouldn't put up with me if I was a diva.** The only thing that irritates me about my family is that we'll be sitting watching telly and they'll say, "What would you normally be doing on a Thursday?" The answer is, I'd normally be watching *EastEnders*, Nanny! They have this idea that I'm always at red carpet events.

Chris is always telling me I don't have a hobby. But my job is my hobby – it's my dream. But most of all I love being with my children, and any other hobby would take me away from them.

I'm very happy being 43. I remember being 11 when my mum turned 40 and thinking she was so old! But I look at people who are older than me, like Jennifer Aniston, Sharon Stone and Jane Seymour. Women are getting better and better with age, and if you're lucky enough to be happy I think it shows from inside out.

I'm very lucky to have really strong girlfriends. My best friend Jane lives in LA. And I have many other girlfriends who really matter, including actresses Sarah Parish and Angela Griffin.

If Lexi and Hollie ever said they wanted to go into showbiz, I would love it. I suspect that Lexi is a behind-the-scenes girl. But Hollie waves at waiters, blows kisses to people, and if she knew the word she would call everyone "darling". So she might be in front of a camera. I'd be fine with that.



My big hope for them is that they find the person they want to be with first time. I think you can handle most things if you have a happy family life. But I said to Chris the other day I might be 80 when I have my first grandchild if Lexi waits till she's 40 to have a child.

So the only advice I'll give them about men is, "Don't get married before you're 24, but please have children before you're 25."

Britain's Got Talent is on Saturday nights on ITV w&h