



# Divorce and Adults

## Human Development and Family Studies Extension

Although it may be little comfort if you are currently facing divorce, recent estimates indicate that you have lots of company. More than half of all marriages in the United States and three of every five marriages in Missouri end in divorce; the majority (53 percent to 55 percent in Missouri) involve children.

Divorce is one of the most stressful life events a person can experience. This is true regardless of whether you are the person who sought the divorce (the leaver) or the person who was unprepared for divorce (the left).

The spouse who is the leaver often feels heightened remorse and guilt while the left spouse may be unprepared for the marriage to end. The more sudden and unexpected the announcement, the more stressful the initial emotional reaction.

The decision to divorce is typically made with ambivalence, uncertainty and confusion. It is a difficult step. The family identity changes, and the identities of the individuals involved change as well.

For example, if your family identity was one of a close knit group, one that enjoyed sporting events and hobbies together, that identity is going to change. Your personal identity will change in that you will no longer be a

husband or wife or married person. If these identities or roles were important to you, you may feel grief from the loss.

Grief over the loss or death of a marriage is somewhat like the grief process described by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) in *On Death and Dying*. That is, you may experience feelings of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance, although there will likely be no order or pattern to your feelings of grief.

For example, you may begin the divorce process with a feeling of acceptance but later find yourself sinking into depression or becoming filled with rage.

---

### Mourning and a sense of loss are common, even if you are the person wanting the divorce.

---

Even if you no longer love your partner, you may still mourn the loss of the dream of living happily ever after.

If you have children, you may grieve because you will see less of them, or you may feel guilty about the changes in their lives that will be caused by the divorce.

Grief is normal, but if the intensity of grieving is too great or the grieving

period seems to go on too long, then seeking counseling may be helpful and appropriate.

Couples facing divorce soon realize that divorce is not an event with a clear beginning and an end, it is a process. This process often begins long before any legal action and may last for years afterward, especially if children are involved.

According to Paul Bohannon (1970), the divorce process consists of several overlapping stages or experiences:

- **The legal divorce** — the dissolution or ending of the marriage by the courts.
- **The emotional divorce** — the chain of events and feelings that lead up to and continue through the divorcing process; the emotional separation or disengagement from your partner.
- **The economic divorce** — the division of money and property, requiring individuals who once functioned as a couple to learn to function independently.
- **The co-parental divorce** — the negotiation of parenting following separation.
- **The community divorce** — the changes in relationships with friends and community during divorce.

- **The psychic divorce** — the process of separating oneself from the spouse and developing autonomy.

## The legal divorce

The legal purpose of divorce is to allow individuals to legally remarry. The divorce decree has no legal value beyond that. It is not a problem solver, although it often forces the couple and their children to give up hopes of reconciliation and look more realistically at their expectations. It does not end the relationship, except in those cases in which there are no children involved.

The **legal divorce** typically involves developing a **parenting plan**, including who the children will live with most of the time and the division of property. The parenting plan will include such things as shared parenting, sometimes called joint custody, which means that the parents will jointly make decisions regarding their children.

This is sometimes confused with **joint physical custody**, which means the children will divide their time more or less equally between the two parents. **Sole custody** means that the children live with only one of the parents most of the time, and that parent will make most of the parenting decisions.

Unfortunately, rather than bringing closure, the adversarial process related to legal divorce may cause or increase anger, hurt and bitterness.

It is common to feel out of control and helpless as the attorneys and courts take over some of your decisions. If you wish to have more control over the decisions, make this clear to your lawyer. You also may want to consider using **mediation** rather than the traditional adversarial approach to dividing your property and developing a parenting plan.

Mediation, a fairly new alternative,

is designed to help divorcing couples make decisions together with a trained mediator who may also be a lawyer. The mediator will help you and your ex-spouse learn to negotiate with each other as well as learn to accept your new roles as ex-spouses.

Developing a parenting plan to be presented to your individual lawyers and the judge for approval is a part of mediation.

## The emotional divorce

Emotional divorce involves letting go of the feelings involved in the marriage. You may feel that you and your spouse have grown apart, and you may have become disappointed and angry with each other. One or both of you have become aware that the marriage is no longer meeting your needs.

For some, this task is completed long before the legal divorce while others may struggle with emotional issues related to the divorce for years.

Joseph Hopper (1993) studied divorcing couples and found that they described themselves as having been aware of their marital problems for a long time, sometimes for 10 to 20 years. Nonetheless, divorce involves the loss of love and a loved one, and it can be difficult, especially if it creates feelings of rejection.

## Preparing and planning

When facing divorce, you and your ex-spouse will need to discuss plans for the future, including how you will tell the children, how you will work together as parents, how responsibilities will be divided, and how to inform your family and friends. Bitterness and conflict may arise or worsen as you begin to make plans.

## Separating

Like many others experiencing divorce, you may feel a deep loss as you let go of your attachment to your ex-spouse. Separation may also lead to more practical changes. Typically during divorce, one or both spouses will move. You may feel you do not have the time or ability to get everything done because tasks that once may have been shared by two people are now handled only by you. This can be overwhelming. If you have children, you will also have to establish guidelines for sharing time with them and learn ways to share parenting while living apart.

## Forming new relationships

Divorce requires the formation of more flexible and cooperative relationships between ex-spouses. If you have children, you will have to let go of your role as spouse, while maintaining your role as parent. Forming new relationships might also involve the acceptance of your ex-spouse's new relationship and that person's relationship with your children.

Many of the changes during divorce may seem problematic or stressful. Fortunately, most of these problems lessen with time.

## The economic divorce

Two households are more expensive to maintain than one, so you may experience a decrease in financial resources after divorce. Because the heaviest financial burden typically falls upon the parent who has physical custody of the child, usually the mother, women are more likely to suffer financial hardships. Mothers are often forced to take on more hours at work, reducing the amount of time available for their children. A change

in child care arrangements and more reliance on children to contribute to household duties may also occur.

Divorce may require each former partner to learn new financial skills. If tasks such as organizing and paying taxes, monthly bills and insurance had been handled by your spouse, you will now have to learn to complete them independently.

There are several important things to keep in mind as you deal with the economic changes caused by divorce:

- **Resist involving your children** in financial burdens. Worrying about money can be difficult for children at a time when they may be seeking extra support and stability.
- **Figure out your financial needs** and available resources. Make a list of money coming in and money going out. Budgets can be powerful tools for easing financial stress.
- **Monitor your expenses**, especially in the initial months after divorce.
- **Make plans for improving your financial situation.** You may need to seek additional education or training in order to increase your income.
- **Look into retirement plans and insurance policies** and make attempts to ensure the security of yourself and your children.
- **Plan for your children's future.**

Both parents generally are responsible for a child's education. Can you begin setting aside money for this purpose now? It is important to begin an educational savings fund even for young children, if possible.

## The co-parental divorce

Most parents are very concerned about the effects divorce will have on their children. Although this concern is important, some evidence indicates that children do better in supportive,

University of Missouri-Columbia

single-parent households than in two-parent households with high levels of conflict. Or course, if the divorce does not stop the children's exposure to conflict between their parents, they will likely not do better.

After divorce, you must learn to continue your role as mom or dad while letting go of your role as spouse. This requires you to accept that you can no longer control the actions of your ex-spouse. This can be very difficult. There are certain tasks that will help you fulfill this role effectively:

- **Avoid criticizing your ex-spouse** in front of the children.
- **Do not use your children to send messages** to your ex-spouse.
- **Speak directly to your ex-spouse** about issues related to the children. Some parents find that scheduling a brief business meeting on a regular basis works to keep lines of communication open about the children.
- **Avoid asking your children for information** about your ex-spouse.
- **Resist the desire to make your child a confidante.** Although it is important that you receive the emotional support you need, being your confidante can be unhealthy for the child. Seek out adult friends, family members, support groups or counselors to fill this role. Separation and divorce result in distinct changes in the parent-child relationship. These changes are different for parents who have physical custody of the children and those who do not.

## Single parents with physical custody

Single parenting requires that one parent take on a larger percentage of the child rearing tasks. It is not unusual for that parent to experience an increase in stress as more

responsibilities are shifted to them. Listed below are certain experiences and feelings typical of residential parents:

- Finding that your children provide structure for your life but do not keep you from feeling lonely.
- Becoming closer to your children.
- Feeling that you are solely responsible for the children and what happens to them.
- Expecting the children to take on more tasks in the household.
- Feeling overwhelmed by decisions and tasks of being a single parent.
- Feeling isolated from life apart from the children.

## Nonresidential parents

Nonresidential parents will likely have a different experience. They may be frustrated about the loss of time with their children and may feel they need some control over their relationship with them. As with residential parents, there are some feelings and experiences that are typical for nonresidential parents:

- Feeling lonely as you adjust to having less time with the children.
- Feeling out of touch with the events in your children's lives.
- Experiencing distress after visiting the children.
- Fearing you are losing your place in the lives of the children.
- Feeling frustrated that your ex-spouse has control over the time that you have with your children.

## The community divorce

Initial support from family and friends often tapers off as the divorce process continues. It may be common for you to feel that fewer people are available for assistance and support at a time when you most need it.

You may no longer feel comfortable

around your married friends. The group of mutual friends you developed as a married couple might feel torn about the divorce. Because they may not be comfortable taking sides, they may not be an active support group for you.

Divorce may also alter a person's feelings about relationships. Fear of relationships and feelings of vulnerability are common among divorcing people. Dating may be particularly difficult if you have not dated in years. Fear and feelings of vulnerability may lead you to avoid social involvement.

If you are dealing with these sorts of feelings, there are things you can do to help rebuild your support network.

Consider joining support groups such as Parents Without Partners. These groups can help keep you involved and you will meet people to talk to who can relate to your situation.

Many divorcing people find themselves making new friends following divorce. In the long run, this may be less stressful than trying to maintain contacts with your "old" friends.

If you are not feeling good about yourself as a result of the divorce, it might be helpful for you to get counseling or join a support group to help with self-esteem problems.

## The psychic divorce

The psychic divorce is the true separation from the ex-spouse. This is the process of learning to live without a partner to support you or to be supported by you. It may take time for you to regain independence and faith in your ability to deal with life experiences.

The psychic divorce also should include developing some insight into why you married and why you divorced. Paul Bohannon suggests that marriage should not be an act of desperation — a last resort. Marriage should not be used to solve your problems or to offset your weaknesses. All too often, those are the reasons people marry.

It is especially important to think about these issues because people tend to remarry rather quickly, and they often marry again for the same poor reasons they married the first time.

People tend to divorce for many reasons but essentially they divorce because they were unable to establish a good marriage or were unwilling to settle for a bad marriage. Determining who is to blame for the divorce is not a healthy way to spend your time. Instead, spend your time adapting to divorce.

Answer these questions to see how well you are adapting.

- Have you accepted that the marriage is over?
- Have you made peace with your ex-spouse?
- Are you realistic about how you contributed to the divorce?
- Have you established a support network outside the marriage?
- Have you developed future-oriented as opposed to past-oriented goals? In other words are you now planning your life as a single person?

Most people do successfully adapt to divorce. You will experience a great sense of achievement when you master the six stages of divorce presented in this guide.

## Resources

Ahrons, C. (1994). *The good divorce*. New York: Harper Collins.

Marston, S. (1994). *The divorced parent: Success strategies for raising your children after separation*. New York, NY: Pocket Books.

Parents Without Partners (PWP), 561-391-8833, [parentswithoutpartners.org/index.htm](http://parentswithoutpartners.org/index.htm).

## References

Bohannon, P. (1970). *Divorce and after: An analysis of the emotional and social problems of divorce*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.

Coleman, M. & Ganong, L.H. (1995). "Family reconfiguring following divorce." In S. Duck, & J.T. Woods (Eds.), *Confronting Relationship Challenges* (pp. 73-108). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Hopper, J. (1993). "The rhetoric of motives in divorce." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 55, 801-813.

Johnston, J.R. & Campbell, L.E.G. (1998). *Impasses of divorce: The dynamics and resolution of family conflict*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York: Macmillan.

*This guide was originally written by Marilyn Coleman and Marni Morgan, Human Development and Family Studies Extension, University of Missouri-Columbia.*

*Kim Leon, state specialist in Human Development and Family Studies, reviewed and revised this edition.*