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## Psychological and Emotional Aspects of Divorce

The following information about divorce and its effects is adapted from an article by Kathleen O’Connell Corcoran. The initial article was published in 1998. We have updated the statistics cited to reflect the reality of divorce today.

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# The Prevalence and Effects of Divorce

Twenty years ago, the United States had the dubious honor of having the highest divorce rate in the world. While about half (53%) of first-time U.S. marriages end in divorce, several European countries have higher rates and Belgium has the highest rate of divorce at 70%. One statistic that has stayed the same is that there is a higher divorce rate for second marriages (67%) and even higher for third marriages (74%).

The rate of divorce peaked in the early 1980s and has been declining since then. Many reasons are cited for the decrease in divorce but main reasons include the fact that people are marrying later, the rise in the use of birth control, the feminist movement, and the rise of love marriages as opposed to marrying because a man is a good provider or a woman is a good homemaker.

However, not all of the news around divorce statistics is good. Data shows that the decline in divorce is concentrated among people with college degrees while rates of divorce for less educated people are closer to those of the peak divorce years.

The poverty rate of all custodial parent families in 2013 was 28.8%, about twice as high as the poverty rate of the total population (14.5%). Female-headed households with children were much more likely to be in poverty (31.25%) than male-headed households (17.4%) or households headed by married couples.

Of further concern is that almost 16% of custodial parents who work full-time were below the poverty line. Research shows that custodial parents are relying on government assistance more than they used to. In 2013, 46% of custodial mothers received government aid while 24% of custodial fathers received government aid. 28% of children of divorce live in a household with an income below the poverty line versus a 19% poverty rate among other children.

In 2014, almost half (48.7%) of all 13.4 million custodial parents had a court order or some type of agreement to receive financial support from the noncustodial parent. Child support income accounted for over two-thirds of annual income for custodial parents.

In 2014, the average annual child support due was \$5774 and the average amount received was \$3,953 or 68% of child support due. Once again, higher educated parents fared better. When parents had a bachelors degree or higher, the average annual amount of child support owed was \$7,002 with an average amount received of \$5,638 or 80.5%. Twenty-six percent of custodial parents did not receive any child support payments.

The societal expectation is that divorced life is less satisfying than married life. Divorce is associated with an increase in depression--people experience loss of partner, hopes and dreams, and lifestyle. The financial reality of divorce is often hard to comprehend because the same resources must now support almost twice the expenses. However, the reality of divorce can be quite different. After an initial phase of readjustment many people thrive after divorce.

It may be helpful to understand a little about divorce and the typical effects it has on men, women and children.

## **How Divorce Affects Women**

- Women initiate two thirds of divorces
- 75% of divorced mothers have custody of their children (even if they did not receive it in court)
- 36% of people under poverty guidelines are divorced women and children
- After divorce, women experience less stress and better adjustment in general than do men. The reasons for this are that (1) women are more likely to notice marital problems and to feel relief when such problems end, (2) women are more likely than men to rely on social support systems and help from others, and (3) women are more likely to experience an increase in self-esteem when they divorce and add new roles to their lives.
- Women who work and place their children in child care experience a greater stigma than men in the same position. Men in the same position often attract support and compassion.

## **How Divorce Affects Men**

- Men are usually confronted with greater emotional adjustment problems than women after a divorce. The reasons for this are related to the loss of intimacy, the loss of social connection, reduced finances, and the common interruption of the parental role.
- Men remarry more quickly than women.
- As compared to "deadbeat dads," men who have shared parenting (joint legal custody), ample time with their children, and an understanding of and direct responsibility for activities and expenses of children stay involved in their children's lives, and are in greater compliance with child support obligations. There is also a greater satisfaction with child support amount when negotiated in mediation. Budgets are prepared, and responsibility divided in a way that parents understand.
- Men are initially more negative about divorce than women and devote more energy in attempting to salvage the marriage.

## **How Divorce Affects Children**

- Half of all American children will witness the breakup of a parent's marriage. Of these children, close to half will also see the breakup of a parent's second marriage.
- 75% of children with divorced parents live with their mother.
- 43% of children growing up in America today are being raised without their fathers.

Research has shown the negative effects of divorce on children have been greatly exaggerated. In the past we read that children of divorce suffered from depression, failed in school, and got in trouble with the law. Children with depression and conduct disorders showed indications of those problems pre-divorce because there was parental conflict pre-divorce. Researchers now view conflict, rather than the divorce or residential schedule, as the single most critical determining factor in children's post-divorce adjustment. The children who succeed after divorce, have parents who can communicate effectively and work together as parents.

Children's psychological reactions to their parents' divorce vary in degree dependent on three factors:

1. The quality of their relationship with each of their parents before the separation,
2. The intensity and duration of the parental conflict, and
3. The parents' ability to focus on the needs of children in their divorce.

Older studies showed boys had greater social and academic adjustment problems than girls after a divorce. New evidence indicates that when children have a hard time, boys and girls suffer equally; they just differ in how they suffer. Boys are more externally symptomatic than girls, they act out their anger,

frustration and hurt. They may get into trouble in school, fight more with peers and parents. Girls tend to internalize their distress. They may become depressed, develop headaches or stomach aches, and have changes in their eating and sleeping patterns.

A drop in parents' income often caused by an income now supporting two households directly affects children over time in terms of proper nutrition, involvement in extracurricular activities, clothing (no more designer jeans and fancy shoes), and school choices. Sometimes a parent who had stayed home with the children is forced into the workplace and the children experience an increase in time in child care.

A child's continued involvement with both of his or her parents allows for realistic and better balanced future relationships. Children learn how to be in relationship by their relationship with their parents. If they are secure in their relationship with their parents, chances are they will adapt well to various time-sharing schedules and experience security and fulfillment in their intimate relationships in adulthood. In the typical situation where mothers have custody of the children, fathers who are involved in their children's lives are also the fathers whose child support is paid and who contribute to extraordinary expenses for a child: things like soccer, music lessons, the prom dress, or a special class trip. One important factor which contributes to the quality and quantity of the involvement of a father in a child's life is a mother's attitude toward the child's relationship with their father. When fathers leave the marriage and withdraw from their parenting role as well, they report conflicts with the mother as the major reason.

The impact of father or mother loss is not likely to be diminished by the introduction of step-parents. No one can replace Mom or Dad. And no one can take away the pain that a child feels when a parent decides to withdraw from their lives. Before embarking on a new family, do some reading on the common myths of step families. Often parents assume that after the remarriage "we will all live as one big happy family." Step family relationships need to be negotiated, expectations need to be expressed, roles need to be defined, realistic goals need to be set.

Most teenagers (and their parents) eventually adjust to divorce and regard it as having been a constructive action, but one third do not. In those instances, the turbulence of the divorce phase (how adversarial a battle it is), has been shown to play a crucial role in creating unhealthy reactions in affected teenagers.

Joan Kelly, PhD, former president of the Academy of Family Mediators and prominent divorce researcher from California reports that, depending on the strength of the parent-child bond at the time of divorce, the parent-child relationship diminishes over time for children who see their fathers less than 35% of the time. Court-ordered "standard visitation" patterns typically provide less.

Divorce also has some positive effects for children. Single parents are often closer to their children than married parents are. This can be a problem, for example when a child takes on too much responsibility because one or both parents are not functioning well as a parent, or when a parent talks to a child about how hurt they are by the other parent, or how horrible that other parent is.

Often a separated parent will make an effort to spend quality time with the children and pay attention to their desires (Disneyland, small gifts, phone calls, etc.). And you can imagine that some children might find some benefit in celebrating two Christmases and birthdays each year. If both parents remarry, they may have twice as many supportive adults/nurturers. At the very least, when parents can control their conflict, the children can experience freedom from daily household tension between parents.

# Emotional Stages of Divorce

The decision to end a relationship can be traumatic, chaotic, and filled with contradictory emotions. There are also specific feelings, attitudes, and dynamics associated with whether one is in the role of the initiator or the receiver of the decision to breakup. For example, it is not unusual for the initiator to experience fear, relief, distance, impatience, resentment, doubt, and guilt. Likewise, when a party has not initiated the divorce, they may feel shock, betrayal, loss of control, victimization, decreased self esteem, insecurity, anger, a desire to "get even," and wishes to reconcile.

To normalize your experiences during this time, it may be helpful to know that typical emotional stages have been identified in ending a relationship. It may also help to understand that marriages do not breakdown overnight. The breakup is not the result of one incident; nor is the breakup the entire fault of one party. The emotional breaking up process typically extends over several years and is compounded by each party being at different stages in the emotional process while in the same stage of the physical (or legal) process.

It is also quite normal to do different things to try to create distance from the former partner while divorcing. Unfortunately, this distancing often takes the form of fault finding. Not to be disrespectful, but it's like the process one goes through in deciding to buy a new car; somehow every flaw in that favorite old car needs to be noticed and exaggerated in order to feel okay about selling it. Also, if the other person is portrayed as really awful, one can escape any responsibility for the end of the marriage.

A common response to divorce is to seek vengeance. When parties put their focus on getting even, there is an equal amount of energy expended on being blameless. What's true is that blaming and fault finding are not necessary or really helpful. Psychologist Jeffrey Kottler has written a very helpful book on this subject entitled "Beyond Blame: A New Way of Resolving Conflicts in Relationships," published by Jossey-Bass.

Another normal rationalization is that the marriage was a wholly unpleasant experience and escaping it is good. Or the marriage was unpleasant and now the other partner must make this up in the divorce. Thinking that the marriage was wholly unpleasant is unfair to both parties and can hinder emotional healing. Both stayed in the marriage for as long as they did because there were some good things about it. There were also some things that did not work for them and these are why they are divorcing.

Much of your healing will involve acceptance, focusing on the future, taking responsibility for your own actions (now and during the marriage), and acting with integrity. Focusing on the future you would like to create may require an acknowledgment of each other's differing emotional stages and a compassionate willingness to work together to balance the emotional comfort of both parties.

Following are the emotional stages of ending a relationship. This information is provided to help you through the emotional quagmire of ending a relationship and assisting in your personal healing.

## **I. Disillusionment of One Party**

(sometimes 1-2 years before verbalized)

1. Vague feelings of discontentment, arguments, stored resentments, breaches of trust
2. Problems are real but unacknowledged
3. Greater distance; lack of mutuality
4. Confidential, fantasy, consideration of pros and cons of divorce
5. Development of strategy for separation

6. Feelings: fear, denial, anxiety, guilt, love, anger, depression, grief

## **II. Expressing Dissatisfaction**

(8-12 months before invoking legal process)

1. Expressing discontent or ambivalence to the other party
2. Marital counseling, or
3. Possible honeymoon phase or one last try
4. Feelings: relief that it's out in the open, tension, emotional roller coaster, guilt, anguish, doubt, grief

## **III. Deciding to Divorce**

(6-12 months before invoking legal process)

1. Creating emotional distance (i.e., disparaging the other person/situation in order to leave it)
2. Seldom reversible because it's been considered for awhile
3. Likely for an affair to occur
4. Other person just begins Stage I (considering divorce) and feels denial, depressed, rejected, low self-esteem, anger
5. Both parties feel victimized by the other
6. Feelings: anger, resentment, sadness, guilt, anxiety for the family, the future, impatience with other, needy

## **IV. Acting on Decision**

(beginning the legal process)

1. Physical separation
2. Emotional separation (complicated by emotional flare-ups)
3. Creating redefinition (self orientation)
4. Going public with the decision
5. Setting the tone for the divorce process (getting legal advice and setting legal precedent: children, support, home)
6. Choosing sides and divided loyalties of friends and families
7. Usually when the children find out (they may feel responsible, behave in ways to make parents interact)
8. Feelings: traumatized, panic, fear, shame, guilt, blame, histrionics

## **V. Growing Acceptance**

(during the legal process or after)

1. Adjustments: physical, emotional
2. Accepting that the marriage wasn't happy or fulfilling
3. Regaining a sense of power and control, creating a plan for the future, creating a new identity, discovering new talents and resources
4. This is the best time to be in mediation: parties can look forward and plan for the future; moods can be more elevated (thrill of a second chance at life)

## **VI. New Beginnings**

(completing the legal process to four years after)

1. Parties have moved beyond the blame and anger to forgiveness, new respect, new roles
2. Experiences: insight, acceptance, integrity.

# Typical Reactions of Children to Divorce

Much of children's post-divorce adjustment is dependent on (1) the quality of their relationship with each parent before the divorce, (2) the intensity and duration of the parental conflict, and (3) the parents' ability to focus on the needs of the children in the divorce. Typically, children whose parents are going through a rough divorce engage in behaviors which are designed to help them feel secure. What follows are some typical experiences of children to divorce and separation.

## Denial

This especially occurs in young children and surfaces as story telling (Mommy and Daddy and me going to Disneyland; we're moving into a duplex and Daddy will live next door; they will also have reconciliation fantasies).

## Abandonment

When parents separate, children worry who will take care of them. They are afraid they too are divorceable and will be abandoned by one or both of their parents. This problem is worsened by one or both parents taking the children into their confidence, talking about the other parent in front of the children, using language like "Daddy is divorcing us," being late for pick-up, or abducting the children. Children who are feeling insecure will say things to a parent which is intended to evoke a mama bear/papa bear response (a demonstration of protectiveness). If children do not have "permission" to have a good relationship with the other parent, or if they think they need to "take care of" one of their parents in the divorce, they are likely to end up having feelings of divided loyalties between their parents or, in the extreme, they may become triangulated with one parent against the other parent.

## Preoccupation with Information

Children will want details of what is happening and how it affects them. Communication from the parents needs to be unified and age appropriate.

## Anger and Hostility

Children may express anger and hostility with peers, siblings, or parents. School performance may be impaired. Hostility of children toward parents is often directed at the parent perceived to be at fault. Hostility turned inward looks like depression in children.

## Depression

Lethargy, sleep and eating disturbances, acting out, social withdrawal, physical injury (more common in adolescents).

## Immaturity/Hypermaturity

Children may regress to an earlier developmental stage when they felt assured of both parents' love. They may do some "baby-talk" or wet their beds. Children may become "parentified" by what they perceive to be the emotional and physical needs of their parents ("Someone needs to be in charge here.")

## Preoccupation with Reconciliation

The more conflict there is between the parents, the longer children hold onto the notion of their parents' reconciliation. It is clear that the parents are not "getting on" with their lives. Children will often act out in ways which force their parents to interact (negatively or positively). Children whose parents

were very conflictual during the marriage often mistake the strong emotions of conflict with intimacy. They see the parents as engaged in an intimate relationship.

## **Blame and Guilt**

Because so much marital conflict may be related to the stress of parenting, children often feel responsible for their parents' divorce--they feel that somehow their behavior contributed to it. This is especially true when parents fight during exchanges of the children or in negotiating schedules: children see that parents are fighting over them. They may try to bargain their parents back together by promises of good behavior; they may have difficulty with transitions or refuse to go with the other parent.

## **Acting Out**

Children will often act out their own and their parents' anger. In an attempt to survive in a hostile environment, children will often take the side of the parent they are presently with. This may manifest in refusals to talk to the other parent on the phone or reluctance to share time with the other parent. Adolescents will typically act out in ways similar to how the parents are acting out.

In summary, expect that children will test a parent's loyalty, experience loyalty binds, not want to hurt either parent, force parents to interact because they don't want the divorce, try to exert some power in the situation, express anger over the divorce, occasionally refuse to go with the other parent (normal divorce stress, loyalty conflict/triangulation, or they may simply not want to stop doing what they're doing at the moment--similar to the reaction we've all gotten when we pick our children up from child care, or we want to go home from the park).

The most common problem which arise tend to stem from triangulation, divided loyalties, and projection. Some indicators of each are:

1. **Triangulation:** Child refuses to have time with the other parent or talk to the other parent on the phone, child badmouths the other parent.
2. **Divided Loyalties:** When a child tells each parent different and opposing things about what they want it is a good indication that the child is trying to please both parents and is experiencing divided loyalties.
3. **Projection:** Children are barometers of a parent's emotional well-being. Usually a parent reporting the stress of a child can not see that the child is acting on the parent's anxiety. Parents should ask themselves how they are feeling about the divorce, the other parent, and the time sharing arrangements before assuming the child is having difficulty adjusting or assuming the problem is with the other household.

# Signs of Stress in Children

Sometimes parents need help identifying stress in children, especially little ones. What follows are some typical experiences and signs of stress in children of different ages.

## Signs of Stress in Infants and Toddlers

1. Regression in terms of sleeping, toilet training or eating; slowing down in the mastery of new skills
2. Sleep disturbances (difficulty going to sleep; frequent waking)
3. Difficulty leaving parent; clinginess
4. General crankiness, temper tantrums, crying.

## Signs of Stress in Children Three to Five Years Old

1. Regression: returning to security blankets and discarded toys, lapses in toilet training, thumb sucking
2. Immature grasp of what has happened; bewildered; making up fantasy stories
3. Blaming themselves and feeling guilty
4. Bedtime anxiety; fitful/fretful sleep; frequent waking
5. Fear of being abandoned by both parents; clinginess
6. Greater irritability, aggression, temper tantrums.

## Signs of Stress in Children Six to Eight Years Old

1. Pervasive sadness; feeling abandoned and rejected
2. Crying and sobbing
3. Afraid of their worst fears coming true
4. Reconciliation fantasies
5. Loyalty conflicts; feeling physically torn apart
6. Problems with impulse control; disorganized behavior.

## Signs of Stress in Children Nine to Twelve Years Old

1. Able to see family disruption clearly; try to bring order to situation
2. Fear of loneliness
3. Intense anger at the parent they blame for causing the divorce
4. Physical complaints; headaches and stomach aches
5. May become overactive to avoid thinking about the divorce
6. Feel ashamed of what's happening in their family; feel they are different from other children.

## Signs of Stress in Adolescents

1. Fear of being isolated and lonely
2. Experience parents as leaving them; feel parents are not available to them
3. Feel hurried to achieve independence
4. Feel in competition with parents
5. Worry about their own future loves and marriage; preoccupied with the survival of relationships
6. Discomfort with a parent's dating and sexuality
7. Chronic fatigue; difficulty concentrating
8. Mourn the loss of the family of their childhood.

# Comparing Mediation and Litigation

Why is mediation a compassionate and appropriate venue for helping people in divorce? On the average, it takes family members approximately four to eight years to recover from the emotional and financial expense of a bitter adversarial divorce. In an adversarial divorce, there is no possible resolution of the emotional issues, only decreased trust and increased resentment.

A litigated divorce can cost each party \$5,000 to \$35,000. The focus is on assigning blame and fault and skirmishing for the most powerful position (changing locks, freezing bank accounts, getting temporary custody of the children). Communications between parties break down. Negotiations proceed through attorneys and are strategic and positioned. Attorneys have an ethical responsibility to zealously advocate for the best interest of their client. Often there is no consideration of the best interests of the children or recognition for the need for parties to have an ongoing relationship because they have children, friends, extended family, and community together. Going to court is an expensive risk; someone who does not know you makes decisions for you that will affect your whole life.

Mediators can save clients thousands of dollars in immediate and future legal and counseling fees. Mediators can focus parties on creating their best possible future and help parties resolve their emotional issues for the best interests of their children and their own psychological well being. Mediators can help parties feel understood, accept responsibility for the failure of the marriage and, when there are children, begin to reshape their relationship from one of partners to co-parents.

Mediators can empower clients by helping them be at their best (rather than their worst) during a challenging time in their lives, enable them to have an active role in their separating (creative choice vs. court imposition), create a clear and understandable road map for the future, make informed decisions, and to look back at their behavior in the mediation of their divorce with integrity and self respect.

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## About the Author

Kathleen O'Connell Corcoran, Ph.D., died at the age of 50 of cancer on September 19, 1998. Kathleen was a nationally recognized mediation practitioner and trainer, providing basic and advanced mediation, conflict resolution, and facilitation training as well as supervision, consultation, and internships. She was a Practitioner Member of the Academy of Family Mediators. Kathleen encouraged all whom she worked with in mediation to "do the right thing." She appealed to all of us to be our best and to give our children the love and support they need.