



DIVORCE AND STRESS

Going through a divorce is one of the most stressful life changes we can ever experience. Many people feel that divorce is even more painful than the death of a spouse. The impact begins with two adults terminating their marriage or commitment, but quickly ripples out to their children, families, work environment, legal and social communities.

THE PROCESS IS LONG

The task of disentangling the threads of a couple's life together is an enormous one that may extend over a period of years. Progression through divorce can be divided into three broad stages, each with its own emotions: (1) pre-separation, (2) transition-restructuring, and (3) recovery.

For some people, the time before they make the decision to separate and file for divorce is a period of mutual indifference. For some, it is a time of sinking disillusionment and hopelessness. For others, it is a volatile period of acrimony and anger.

The shock of physical separation usually begins with a period of numbness and denial. The greatest danger of this stage is remaining stuck in it. Numbness is a refuge from the scalding bouts of pain, but the retreat, when severe, can cause you to forget to pay your bills or file your motions.

The period of transition and restructuring after a divorce lasts two to five years, depending on the length of the marriage. During this stage, divorcing partners usually experience far more trauma and disorientation than they had anticipated. Despite the fact that the battle has ended, this is a time of turbulent and conflicting emotions, when people are assaulted with loss, change, and practical problems. One author refers to this period as "the roller coaster" phase.

THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

Stress studies have found:

- (1) Divorced people are more frequent users of mental health services, most commonly for anxiety, depression, anger, and feelings of rejection.
- (2) Separated people have an increased susceptibility to viruses and other illnesses.
- (3) Auto accident rates *double* for people during the six months before and after a separation.
- (4) Separated and divorced people have higher rates of alcohol abuse, suicide, and involvement with homicides.

These results emphasize the importance of learning about the effects of stress. For example, it is important to understand that increased susceptibility to illness is likely because the body has to provide energy for worry, sadness, and anger. Stress depletes the body's reserves and makes us susceptible to infection. A person in question can fall apart in a matter of seconds. All it takes is a poignant memory or an innocent remark to push a sensitive emotional button.

Many things change during divorce, including self-perception. High-functioning adults become listless, tense, and overwhelmed with feelings of failure, inadequacy, poor self-esteem, and lack of belonging. Often they feel out of control and experience intense emotions. Depression leaves many wondering if they will ever return to normal. Bitterness, anger, and resentment fuel fantasies of revenge. Guilt, fear, and panic cause some to question their sanity. They think something is wrong with them if they feel such pain.

A surgeon in his forties describes his experiences: "I thought I was crazy. I was in turmoil for months and thought I was completely losing it. It never occurred to me that others had the same sleep-

lessness, the same inability to concentrate, the same loss of control over their emotions.”

The “roller coaster” phase usually includes periods of loneliness. Sometimes a loneliness spiral develops, causing the person to feel too depressed to keep up social contacts. The isolation causes more depression, and it, in turn, leads to more isolation. This spiral produces a professional risk factor for lawyers, who may feel too weary to ask for help on cases.

People express their anxiety and distress in different ways. Some withdraw into the sanctuary of their homes, while others engage in a frenzy of activity to escape. Some attempt to bury themselves in work, while others can't concentrate. Some are apathetic, others irritable. Some turn to friends, some to alcohol, tranquilizers, violence, religion, sex, food, or professional therapy. Eventually, most begin to be on a more even keel emotionally. As less energy is needed for survival, more can be devoted to the task of restructuring their lives and attending more closely to the needs of others. However, productive periods of restructuring will be followed by setbacks, periods of discouragement, and apathy. It is amazing that people going through a divorce are able to function as well as they do.

MINIMIZING THE DAMAGE

Is there any way to minimize personal and professional damage during this painful transition? As usual, knowledge is power. By learning about the impact of divorce, we can be better prepared to recognize and manage its effects.

There are many good books on divorce. One is Judith Wallerstein's, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce, a 25 Year Landmark Study*. This moving report helps us understand not only what our own children might need, but what we are experiencing as adults if our own parents were divorced. Another good resource is Constance Ahrons' *The Good Divorce, Keeping Your Family Together When Your Marriage Comes Apart*, which advocates redesigning outmoded and damaging divorce attitudes and practices.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

To make an accurate assessment of the impact divorce is having on your own life, both personal and professional, you must seek input from others. Their caring, warmth, and reassurance can serve as a cushion that softens the impact of divorce-related stress. When personal and professional support are lacking, depression and anxiety commonly soar. Support provides an anchor in a safe harbor for those who would otherwise be lost at sea. We need time to grieve and some tenderness along the way.

Mourning and mending are critical to the process of healing and emerging healthy and whole. In addition to appropriate support from colleagues, friends, or relatives, a professionally facilitated therapy group or a self-help support group can make a difference. If you are experiencing a divorce and would like to minimize the damage, consider attending the OAAP's Divorce Survival Support Group. For information call Shari R. Pearlman at the OAAP 503-226-1057 or Virginia Terhaar 503-274-1945.

Virginia Terhaar, L.P.C.
Chinook Counseling Center

Virginia Terhaar is a licensed professional counselor in Portland.