



IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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CREATING A SATISFYING LIFE AFTER DIVORCE

The breakdown of a marriage is one of the most traumatic events that can happen in your life. Divorce can cause profound feelings of loss, failure, regret, abandonment, emptiness, fear of the future, and powerlessness – especially if you didn’t initiate the split.

There is no quick fix for your anger and grief, but there is a journey toward a more satisfying and fulfilling life that you can start right now. The transition begins with your determination not to be a victim of your circumstances; happiness doesn’t depend so much on what happens to you, but on how you deal with what happens to you. Change your way of thinking: Decide that you’re not going to let divorce take control of your life, and you’ll be taking the first step toward creating a satisfying life. If you are determined to wallow in defeat and sorrow, then the divorce has already won.

FEEL THE PAIN, THEN LET IT GO

Allow yourself to grieve, clinical psychologists advise. Recognize that divorce is a loss. Our society has rituals to encourage people to grieve after a death. We have no such rituals for divorce. Many people don’t realize that the end of a marriage is the psychological equivalent of a death.

Denying that you’re in pain won’t work. If you have a wall in your house that’s scarred with peeling paint, would you just slop a new coat of paint over the cracks? Of course not. You have to strip the wall down and sand the old paint off

before applying a new coat. To fully participate in life, you have to strip away the emotional damage – regardless of whose fault it is – down to the heart of the matter. Covering up your pain never has a positive conclusion; unresolved grief usually results in bad decisions. Allow the hurt to run its course. The more you allow yourself to feel the pain, the more it comes, and the quicker it goes.

Rebuilding after a divorce is a process, and it takes time. How long you take to heal will depend on many factors, including the length of your marriage, whether you were abused, and the support you receive from family and friends. “You must take the process of recovery seriously,” urges Micki McWade, who has developed a 12-step divorce-recovery program in her book *Getting Up, Getting Over, Getting On* (Championship Press, 1999). “People have high expectations of themselves; they think they should be getting over it quickly and immediately. But for every five years married, it takes about one year to get over it. Don’t suppress your feelings or act as if it never happened, but give the process respect. If you bypass the process, it sets you up for a fall.”

ERASE REVENGE, BLAME, AND GUILT

Even when the divorce is over, anger, blame, and guilt may dominate your thoughts. If you want to feel better, you have to work through and release these feelings. It’s unlikely that either you or your spouse is 100% responsible for the end of your marriage; perhaps both of you should have put more effort into it, or maybe you were simply not a compatible couple. Whatever your situation, you have nothing to gain and a lot to lose by lashing out at yourself or at your ex-

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spouse. Beware of getting stuck in patterns of anger, fighting, or blame. Even if such feelings are justified, they tend to keep you from recognizing your sadness. They also prevent you from moving forward toward better times.

“When you’re depressed and angry, you really don’t feel you have anything to give,” says Barbara Sher, the best-selling author of such motivational books as *Wishcraft: How to Get What You Really Want; Live the Life You Love; and I Could Do Anything If I Only Knew What It Was*. “Often you can’t see why you should give at all, since you’re the one who has been robbed and mistreated. Doing anything at all is hard when you’re in the dumps.” But once you let go of thoughts that depress and anger you and prepare to start giving of yourself again, “the energy inside you rises to meet the challenge.”

Most definitely do not resort to revenge. It’s a dish best not served at all, even if your ex has hurt you without shame. Vengeance doesn’t make the hurt go away; it sets a horrible example of social behavior for children, and it stalls you from moving on. Revenge never fulfills its intended purpose: it doesn’t “teach a lesson” to the person who hurt you, but rather provokes that person to get back at you in turn – starting a cycle of vengeance that causes unnecessary anguish on both sides. Revenge is extremely harmful at worst and a waste of time at best.

After all you’ve gone through, it may be tempting to see yourself as the eternal victim of your former spouse. But adopting this role prevents you from embracing responsibility for your own actions, whether or not you really have been a victim. On the other hand, it isn’t constructive to blame yourself for everything. Immersing yourself in guilt – or playing the “if only” game – will keep you stuck in the past and afraid to make a decision in case it’s the wrong one. Let go of the non-empowering emotions. When you stay angry at someone, you are letting them live rent-free inside your head.

LOOK FOR THE HIDDEN GIFT

In the long run, dealing with problems can open up unexpected opportunities – or at least make you stronger. Sometimes, good can come from bad – although your current distress, anger, or fear may pre-

vent you from seeing it. If you change your way of thinking to consciously look for the positive effects of any negative event, you may experience a radical change in your emotions and your outlook on life.

Looking for the hidden “gift” is admittedly not an easy thing to do, especially during periods when life seems to be throwing you disappointments and crises without mercy. It takes patience, clarity, and objectivity to spot the gift in an unhappy event. For example, your divorce may turn out to be a blessing in disguise: You have been released from a marriage that wasn’t working; you are now free to make your own decisions about your future; and, eventually, you may find a much more compatible partner to share your life. It’s true that you are losing the benefits of a committed relationship, but you’ll also be shedding the adversity and unhappy compromises, in addition to regaining some of the perks of singlehood.

Sometimes, the most beneficial thing to come out of bad times is what you’ve learned from them – and you should acknowledge that to yourself. You need to look at the situation and say, “What’s the lesson here? What have I learned from this experience?” The benefits of doing this include a sense of empowerment from having used your experience to grow wiser and a new-found wisdom that will enable you to avoid the same pitfall if it comes up again.

The gift that comes out of suffering isn’t always immediately apparent. This is when you need to develop the ability to “turn a lemon into lemonade,” as the old saying goes. It takes courage, character, imagination, and perspective to accept the inevitable and even use it as the basis to create something positive.

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