

# Divorce and Adults

**A**lthough it might 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 five marriages in Missouri end in divorce; just over half involve children.

Divorce is among the most stressful life events a person can experience. This is true regardless of whether you sought the divorce (the leaver) or were confronted with it (the left).

The leaver often feels heightened remorse and guilt, whereas the left might be unprepared for the marriage to end. The more sudden and unexpected the announcement, the more stressful the initial emotional reaction.

Divorce is a difficult step typically made with ambivalence, uncertainty and confusion. The family identity changes, as do the identities of the individuals involved. For example, if your family was a close-knit group, that identity is going to change. Your personal identity changes, in that you are no longer a spouse to someone. If these identities or roles were important to you, you might grieve the loss.

Grief over the loss or death of a marriage is somewhat like the grief process described by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying*. You might experience feelings of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, though there is likely to be no order or pattern to your feelings of grief.

For example, you might 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 pursuing the divorce. Even if you no longer love your partner, you might still mourn the loss of the dream of living happily ever after. If you have children, you might grieve because you see less of them, or you might feel guilty about the changes in their lives 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 might be helpful and appropriate.

## FOCUS on Kids

*This guide is part of a series aimed at helping families in which parents are separated or divorcing and who share parenting responsibilities for children.*

*We will use the terms divorce and separation interchangeably to describe parents who are separated from each other.*

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

### The stages of a divorce

According to Paul Bohannon, the divorce process consists of several

overlapping stages or experiences:

- Legal divorce — The dissolution or ending of the marriage by the courts
- Emotional divorce — The chain of events and feelings that lead up to and continue through the divorce process; the emotional separation or disengagement from your partner
- Economic divorce — The division of money and property, requiring individuals who once functioned as a couple to learn to function independently
- Co-parental divorce — The negotiation of parenting following separation
- Community divorce — The changes in relationships with friends and community during divorce
- 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 remarry. The divorce decree has no legal value beyond that. It is not a problem solver, though it often forces a 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 cases in which there are no children involved.

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

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

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Unfortunately, rather than bringing closure, the adversarial process related to legal divorce might cause or increase anger, hurt and bitterness. You might grapple with feeling helpless and out of control as 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 might want to consider using mediation rather than the traditional adversarial approach to dividing your property and developing a parenting plan.

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

Mediation includes the development of a parenting plan to be presented to your individual lawyers and the judge for approval.

### ***The emotional divorce***

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

For some, this occurs long before the legal divorce. Others might struggle with emotional issues related to the divorce for years.

Joseph Hopper 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 need to discuss plans for the future, including how you tell the children, how you work together as parents, how responsibilities are divided and how to inform your family and friends. Bitterness and conflict might arise or worsen as you begin to make plans.

### ***Separating***

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

### ***The economic divorce***

Two households are more expensive to maintain than one, so you might 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 and is often the mother, women are more likely to suffer financial hardships. Mothers are often forced to take on more hours at work. This might necessitate a change in child-care arrangements and greater reliance on children to contribute to household duties.

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

Keep in mind several important things 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 might be seeking extra support and stability.
- Figure out your financial needs and available resources. Make a list detailing income and expenses. Budgets can be powerful tools for easing financial stress.
- Monitor your expenses. This is especially necessary in the initial months after divorce.
- Make plans for improving your financial situation. You might need to seek additional education or training to increase your income.
- Look into retirement plans and insurance policies. Try 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. Set aside money for this now, if possible. Begin an educational savings fund even for young children, if possible.

### ***The co-parental divorce***

Most parents are concerned about how divorce affects their children. However, some evidence indicates children do better in supportive, single-parent households than in two-parent households with high levels of conflict. If the divorce does not stop the children's exposure to conflict between their parents, they will likely not do better.

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*After divorce, you must learn to continue your role as parent while letting go of your role as spouse.*

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This requires you to accept that you can no longer control the actions of your ex-spouse, which can be very difficult. There are certain tasks that 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 regularly scheduling a brief meeting works to maintain lines of communication 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, this 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 childrearing tasks. It is not unusual for that parent to experience greater stress as they take on more responsibilities. These experiences and feelings are typical in 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 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 often have a different experience. They might be frustrated about the loss of time with their children and might feel they need some control over their relationship with them. As with residential parents, some feelings and experiences 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 your children's lives.
- Feeling frustrated that your ex-spouse has control over the time you have with your children.

### ***The community divorce***

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

You might no longer feel comfortable around your married friends. The group of friends you developed as a married couple might feel torn about the divorce. Because they might not be comfortable taking sides, they might not be an active support group for you.

Divorce might also alter a person's feelings about relationships. Fear of relationships and feelings of

vulnerability are common among divorcing people and might lead you to avoid social involvement. Dating might be particularly difficult if you have not dated in years.

If you are dealing with feelings like these, there are things you can do to help rebuild your support network. Consider joining support groups such as Parents Without Partners. Groups like these can help keep you involved, and you meet people who can relate to your situation.

Many divorcing people find themselves making new friends following divorce. In the long run, this might 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 seek counseling or join a support group to help with self-esteem problems.

### ***The psychic divorce***

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

The psychic divorce should also include developing some insight into why you married and why you divorced. Paul Bohannon suggests that marriage should not be an act of desperation or 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, often for the same poor reasons they married the first time.

People tend to divorce for many reasons. Essentially, they divorce because they were unable to establish a good marriage or were unwilling to settle for a bad one. Determining who is to blame for the divorce is not a healthy way to spend your time. Instead, spend your time adapting to your new situation. 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 successfully adapt to divorce. You will experience a great sense of achievement when you master the six stages of divorce presented in this guide.

### ***Additional information***

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

- Parents Without Partners (PWP), 561-391-8833

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This guide was originally written by Marilyn Coleman and Marni Morgan.

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