

Divorce As Growth: Debunking the Myths of Divorce

There is a major similarity between family law practices and the practice of psychology; many people come to both of us in a desperate marital crisis, full of conflict, doubt, anger, fear and shame. Often the legal and financial implications that our clients must face as they begin a divorce are clouded by so much of what they have heard and read. Questions plague their minds: What will become of me? Can I manage on my own? What's wrong with me? Why couldn't I make this work? Am I going to wake up one morning and really regret this? What will happen to my children? How badly will the divorce affect them? Will their school work suffer? Will my children be unable to form loving, trusting relationships because they come from "broken" homes? Am I starting my children on a path of future divorces of their own?

It is likely that our work is made a little easier when we help our clients to replace their uninformed fears with hope, and educate them as to what they and their children are likely to face.

My intention in this essay is to provide you with information about the effects of divorce and a point of view that I hope you will find worth sharing with your clients. I will discuss some controversial ideas and debunk many of the myths surrounding divorce and its effects, based on current research findings.

It is my conviction that for most people, divorce is a tumultuous but normal developmental process, and that several years after is usually looked back upon with a feeling that many areas of life have improved.

It is not my intention to imply that people who divorce emerge unscathed, nor to advocate divorce. I do, however, accept that fifty to sixty percent of marriages end in divorce and believe that a more objective understanding of the likely effects of divorce on both the adults and the children can be of help to those who must endure it.

There are many myths about divorce. Let us look at some concerning children and adults and compare them with the research results.

Myth #1:

Children of divorce do worse in school and get into more trouble.

In a 1991 study reported in the journal *Science*, Cherlin reports a survey of over 14,000 children interviewed at age seven and again at age eleven. Male children whose parents divorced did no worse than those from intact families in math, reading, behavior or emotional well-being.

Hetherington, in *Setting Priorities* edited by T. Berry Brazelton, M.D., (1981) reports that "two to three years after divorce children who live in one-parent households with a competent mother are doing better, with half as many behavior problems, than children in

conflict-ridden intact. Gately and Schwebel, in the *Journal of Family Psychology* 1991, conclude that children of divorce demonstrate no significant differences when compared on a wide variety of measures with children from intact families, including children from happy intact families. The key qualitative differences they observe, however, are that children of divorce do appear stronger on indices of maturity, empathy, self-esteem, androgyny, and self efficacy.

Kawagoe's study, University of Kansas, 1992, concludes that young adults from divorced families have less difficulty developing trust in relationships than their peers from high-conflict intact families. Kawagoe speculates that divorce may protect children from the damaging effects of growing up in a high-conflict home. Similar results have been consistently reported over the last decade in the work of Cherlin, Zill, Hetherington, Furstenberg, Gottman, and others.

Stone and Hutchinson, *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 1992, demonstrated that 204 college students from divorced homes held no differences in attitudes toward marriage than students from intact families.

Gately, Ohio State University, 1991, studied a sample of 240 college students, half from intact, half from divorced families. Using self-report measures he found little difference between the two groups, but many of the students reported their parents divorce was a positive experience. In fact, an overwhelming majority of young adults from divorced families who participated in this study exhibited outcomes including increased maturity, self-esteem, or empathy when compared with a control group from intact families. As explanation of the changes, Gately postulates the challenge model—i.e., in order to respond to the parental divorce challenges, children and young adults are stimulated to grow in order to reduce their stress, eventually with the result that their functioning is improved.

It is important to understand what appears to be the reason that older research on divorce came to other conclusions about divorce's effects.

In the older research, children of divorce were always compared to children from intact families, a category which includes many happy, intact families. There is little doubt that a happy, intact family is the best place to raise children, but that is not possible for the 60% of families who will ultimately divorce. However, when children of divorce are compared with only the conflict-ridden families—because this is where they would live if their parents didn't divorce—then children of divorce are found to do better on most measures.

“Conflict-ridden” families are defined by researchers as those families in which there is a chronic inability to settle differences, where the couple remains at loggerheads, solutions are not reached, and communications are accompanied by mutual disrespect. Abusive arguing may be a typical part of this, or it may not. In fact, some couples who rarely, if ever, argue openly, nonetheless can be termed “conflict-ridden.” The research stresses that the overwhelming majority of people benefit from ending these conflictual,

dysfunctional marriages. It does not contend that everyone benefits, or that those who benefit emerge unscathed.

One further important factor is pointed out by several researchers: children of divorce benefit from the actual presence of the non-custodial parent (usually the father), and develop a greater likelihood of problems in cases where he is no longer present.

Myth #2:

After divorce men fare better than women, and women fall disproportionately into poverty.

According to Judith Wallerstein, *Second Chances*, 1989, who has done a fifteen-year study of sixty San Francisco Bay Area middle-class families, eighty-percent of women, as compared with sixty-percent of men, express satisfaction with their situations five years after divorce. Satisfaction did not correlate with initiating the move to separate or not. She observes that divorced women experience increases in self-esteem, when compared with self-esteem levels in their dysfunctional marriages. Wallerstein also reports that although approximately twenty-five percent of women initially experience some decline in standards of living, most women recover financially as they respond to the challenge and master new skills and abilities.

Fisher, University of Pennsylvania, 1994, demonstrates in her study that married women who later divorced experienced decreased self-esteem during their marriages. Three to seven years following separation, measures of the women's self-esteem showed significant increases. Fisher concludes that a divorce is a crisis that presents the opportunity to master new developmental tasks. Successful mastery promotes growth and enhanced self-esteem.

Stormoen, University of Wisconsin, 1992, compared forty-three women who were divorced from two to seven years. The results indicated that divorced women with custody of their children showed positive growth on dimensions of autonomy, mastery, personal growth, relations with other, sense of purpose, and self-acceptance. These results reflected a greater positive change than for married women or divorced women without children.

To summarize the research, there are certain themes regarding the effects of divorce which come up over and over. After a transitional period, people of all ages generally experience gains in self-esteem. Most experience growth in their feelings of effectiveness or mastery. Most experience improvements in their relationships through the development of greater empathy. Most children of divorce experience greater gains in maturity, when compared with their peers from intact families, once the conflict levels have declined.

Younger children of divorce, as stated earlier, are generally no worse-off than their peers from intact families, and better off than children from conflict-ridden intact families on math and reading achievement and on measures of behavioral and emotional well-being.

Children of divorce usually appear stronger on indices of empathy, self-esteem, effectiveness, and androgyny (that is, not being rigidly locked in to gender stereotypes). For adult children of divorce a variety of studies indicate gains in self-esteem, empathy, maturity, and trust.

Three to five years after the breakup, women overwhelmingly express satisfaction with the decision to divorce and show gains in self-esteem. There are numerous studies which reveal that the majority of women who have divorced also experience gains in their sense of autonomy, their sense of being able to master elements of their environment that they previously had felt dependent upon men for; and they show improvements in their relationships with others.

For adult men there has been much less research. Wallerstein has found that more than half of adult men express satisfaction with their decision to divorce after five years. Many men in her study married again with somewhat greater success than in their previous marriage. They report finding partners who, to them, seem more fun, more spontaneous, more sexually compatible and more flexible than their previous spouses. Most men also report improvements in self-esteem.

Conclusion

What mechanisms are responsible for all these changes? As stated earlier, responding to the challenges presented by the divorce crisis is part of the answer, but two other factors also seem to be present as well. Many people's positions become frozen during their marriages. They are in a power struggle with each other and become polarized. If one wants certain changes, it is almost reason enough for the other to resist. In all likelihood, what was desired was needed change, but because of the power struggle, there was no budging.

In bad as well as good marriages our spouses usually compliment or cover up for our weaknesses. Once the marriage is over, this mechanism disappears and our flaws are revealed. At this point the individual often looks at the flaws and feels he or she must do something to change them. It is too late for the marriage, but the changes are needed anyway.

Another growth promoting factor in divorce is that it forces us to focus on the present. In dysfunctional marriages, thoughts usually focus on the past or on the future. Fantasies of future divorce are often daily occurrences in bad marriages as well as wishes to regain an idealized past. When a separation occurs, new realities present challenges that must be faced immediately, shifting the focus to the present. Thus growth is stimulated as a response to the stress.

This year, in the United States alone, more than two-and-a-half-million people will divorce, more than in any other year in our or any other nation's history. Next year the number is likely to grow. More than fifty million people have been divorced. Twenty-eight percent of households have at least one adult who has been divorced at least one

time, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Sixty percent of the people who married since 1988 are statistically predicted to divorce and consequently sixty percent of children born since 1988 will at some point reside in a single-parent family for one or more years. A social revolution has been sweeping this country unabated for a generation. Seemingly irreversible factors, such as women's massive entry into the labor market, their reproductive freedom, the break-up of the extended family and the commonplace nature of divorce itself have profoundly influenced the way we think about our roles in marriage. While for millennia marriage has been at the center of adult community, divorce is reshaping the way we think about marriage and emerging as a major social convention itself. Marriage is no longer necessarily "until death do us part."

Matrimonial attorneys help to open a door to a new and usually better life. They are instruments of change. It is not as former Vice President Dan Quayle and former Secretary of Education William Bennet have said that divorce is the greatest scourge facing this country. They don't get it. Divorce is not the problem. Conflict and disrespect within the family is what causes the greatest part of the damage. Divorce is the door through which people exit when the conflict or stagnation becomes unbearable.

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