

THE DIVORCE PROCESS &

# Therapeutic Interventions



The role of divorce in relationships has evolved significantly and is quite different today than any time in the past (Coontz, 2005). Marriage as an institution has moved from being a mechanism for physical and economic survival, to the source of primary emotional support and gratification. Unfortunately, the institution was not originally designed to accommodate a life-long relationship based on love. In fact, marrying for love was frowned upon in the past because love might get in the way of the primary reasons for being paired with an opposite sex partner. Married couples were expected to share in the struggle to survive, reproduce, and insure alliances among families that were necessary to insure a stable society.

By the late 19th and early 20th century, all that changed. As the United States and Western Europe prospered and technology eased the burden of staying alive, young people began to look for a life partner they loved. Arranged marriages gave way to individuals seeking a life partner with limited input from their families. In short, western societies upped the ante for marriage from survival to love and overburdened the traditional structure of marriage. Consequently, the desire to divorce increased as couples realized their desire for love was not satisfied.

The process of divorce begins when one or both partners in a marriage determine that the love relationship they

hoped for has not materialized or has gone away. This period is often referred to as *emotional divorce* and is characterized by feelings of disillusionment, dissatisfaction, alienation, anxiety, and anguish. As these feelings build, the interaction between partners deteriorates. Couples presenting for therapy in this stage will range from being quiet and sullen to argumentative and combative. The common thread is erosion of emotional satisfaction derived from the marriage. The focus of therapy should be the “marital problem” and not individual pathology. It is important for both partners to realize what is going wrong in the marriage.

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The authors recommended that you do not see one partner alone and call it “marital therapy.” Research suggests that seeing one dissatisfied partner alone greatly increases the chance of divorce when that partner focuses on their dissatisfaction. Also, don’t “babysit” the “left” spouse; that is, discourage the leaving spouse from opting out of therapy before the problems leading to the breakup have been processed and acknowledged by both partners. Babysitting occurs when the therapist is left holding the hand of the left spouse who does not understand why the marriage has ended.

One or both partners may exhibit

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signs of loss and mourning. Unlike loss experienced when a spouse dies, individuals headed toward divorce feel a sense of active rejection by a person they have looked to for emotional fulfillment. This rejection compounds their feelings of despair and can motivate extreme and inappropriate behavior.

Typically, one partner is ahead of the other in the divorce adjustment process. The “leaver” or “dumper” is often six months further along than the “leavee” or “dumpee.” The primary emotion felt by the leaver in this stage is guilt; guilt about seeing the leavee suffer. Guilt often motivates the leaver to convey mixed messages to the leavee about their intentions regarding the marriage. Therapists need to assist the leaver in giving clear, unambiguous messages to the leavee.

Typically the leaver has already grieved the loss of the marriage and is ready to move on with his or her life. The leavee usually wants to “bargain” in the hope that the leaver will change his or her mind. When bargaining does not work, the leavee will vacillate between denial, anger, and depression. Anger may be not be externally expressed by the leavee, for fear that expressing anger may drive the leaver away. Anger turned inward can fuel depression.

Therapists can provide support and comfort that society and friends do not. The leaver needs a place to vent frustrations without pressure to “give the marriage another try.” The leavee needs a place to cry and grapple with the anxiety or panic felt when realizing his or her partner is indeed ending the relationship and leaving. Sessions with the couple may be necessary to help the leaver clearly state his or her decision to end the marriage and help the leavee hear that message. Until the reality of divorce is accepted by both partners, the work needed to formally end the marriage cannot be accomplished.

The emotional divorce stage of the divorce process ends when *physical divorce* occurs. Physical divorce begins when the partners begin living separately. The emotional hallmark of this stage

is “separation shock”—the realization at an emotional and physical level that one’s partner is no longer there. This shock manifests itself most frequently at night when the newly separated person has trouble sleeping. Both the leaver and leavee feel this sense of shock. Even though the leaver wants out of the marriage, he or she will still miss the spouse’s physical presence. Even spouses who have been physically abused will miss the presence of their partner. In therapy, it is important to acknowledge and process this sense of physical loss and help the client understand that “your body is in the habit of having your partner near.” Even though we can intellectually understand that physical separation is necessary, it takes time for our bodies to adjust to the change.

Individuals may have difficulty distinguishing separation from divorce. Therapists are advised to have a discussion with clients regarding appropriate and inappropriate behaviors during the physical divorce stage. It is important for clients to begin to develop new friendships. However, it can be disastrous to move into another emotionally intimate, sexual relationship before completing the process of personal reintegration following divorce.

The second stage of the divorce process involves *legal and economic divorce* in addition to physical separation. Structured mediation leading to a divorce settlement is often necessary to move through this stage. Mediation is especially important if the couple has children who still live at home.

A helpful approach during mediation is to see the couple jointly to identify and clarify issues that need to be addressed in the settlement: relevant information is gathered and addressed (e.g., financial disclosures); all options are carefully examined; consequences of each option are discussed; time is allocated for work toward resolution of issues (e.g., time necessary to sell a home, move to a new residence); and impasses are resolved by arbitration.

Arbitration usually involves separating the couple and helping each spouse

determine what they can tolerate as part of the divorce settlement. These individual discussions cannot be allowed to decompensate into emotional venting. If necessary, schedule a separate therapy session to help individual partners work through strong emotional responses to the mediation process. Mediation is the “business end” of divorce, not therapy.

Often the most difficult aspect of mediation is child custody and visitation arrangements. In a study conducted for the State of Iowa (Keoughan, Joanning, & Sudak-Allison, 2001), partners and professionals (e.g., lawyers, judges, social workers, teachers, police officers) were interviewed about issues involved in child custody, access, and visitation following divorce. The most common problem encountered is, “She won’t allow me to see my kids, so I’m not going to pay child support!” coupled with, “I won’t let him see the kids until he starts paying child support!” This Catch 22 situation can be avoided if mediation leads to a settlement that allows both parents access to their children, sets fair and adjustable support payment rates, and provides a mechanism for adjustments in the settlement agreement.

Typically, divorce settlement agreements are difficult to change as children grow older, financial needs and ability to pay change, and former partners move on with their lives. Some states, Arizona and Iowa for example, have moved toward systems for changing divorce settlement agreements outside formal court hearings. Parents in the study reported not liking to work with lawyers because of the adversarial nature of the legal process. Divorce mediation by marital therapists or by lawyers trained to deal carefully with the emotional aspects of divorce increases the chances that the settlement agreement will be tolerable to both partners following divorce. Many lawyers are suspicious of, or opposed to, having marital therapists conduct mediation. This problem can be handled by bringing family law attorneys into the process after a tentative divorce settlement agreement has been arranged with the couple. At some

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point, attorneys must become involved to make the settlement legal.

The longest period of the divorce adjustment process is the time following physical, economic, and legal divorce. This post-divorce is often referred to as *rebuilding* or *reestablishment*. During this period, the individuals involved move from being divorced former spouses to single adults. Until the individuals have reestablished themselves as single adults, the divorce adjustment process is incomplete.

Rebuilding includes completing the process of grieving the loss of the marriage and the former social network. It also includes telling relatives and friends of the change in marital status, finalizing the legal divorce process, finding and establishing a new residence, exploring new interests, possibly changing jobs, resynthesizing personal identity, helping children accept the divorce, seeking a new love object, and developing a new social support system.

Developing a new social support system, including a possible new lover, is probably the most critical component of successful divorce adjustment. As social animals, humans need the company of other humans to thrive. Failure to reestablish a social network following divorce can lead to depression and inability to function adequately.

Old social networks usually change following divorce. Former married friends may not be comfortable with a newly divorced friend because still married friends may not want to “side”

with one former spouse over the other, or may fear that their own marriage could be threatened by the now single friend. Divorced individuals often find that only other divorced individuals can truly understand their experience.

To facilitate rebuilding and reestablishment following divorce, divorce adjustment groups are recommended. Such groups have been well researched and shown to be effective (Joanning, 1985). Divorce adjustment groups are typically structured educational and interactive experiences designed to deal with all relevant aspects of the divorce process. Newly divorced individuals will be involved in discussion groups and allowed to vent their frustrations. This is followed by sessions that examine economic, legal, and child custody issues. Divorced individuals who have successfully dealt with these issues give presentations followed by discussions.

Other sessions focus on psychological and social issues, such as making new friends, dealing with sexual needs, and finding a new lover without repeating the mistakes made in past relationships. The most important psychological issue is self-examination. Group discussions and, for some, individual therapy are necessary to complete this process.

Divorce adjustment groups are often housed in church fellowship halls or on college and university campuses. Church-sponsored groups can be sectarian or ecumenical. Educational campuses typically are secular, with religious issues referred to pastoral counselors, or

covered in group sessions clearly labeled as religious. Divorce adjustment groups have the dual advantages of being inexpensive and a source of social support for all participants.

Though most therapists started working with couples with the goal of saving marriages, that goal is not always possible or appropriate. Working with divorcing individuals can be a rewarding experience for marriage and family therapists. It is rather like working in a maternity ward; people usually recover and are grateful for your help managing the pain.

### Resources for Clients

A self-help book for couples beginning the divorce process is Bruce Fisher’s and Robert Alberti’s *Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends* (2000), Impact Publishers, Inc. Based on Fisher’s study of divorcing and divorced individuals in the late 70s and early 80s, this reference helps individuals understand and cope with the divorce process. ○



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