

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DIVORCE: PUTTING THE PIECES BACK TOGETHER

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by Grier Raggio

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YOU SHOULD LOVE YOURSELF

START WITH FRIENDS, NOT LOVERS

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FREEDOM

This psychological divorce chapter is different from the other chapters in the book which are about things like property division, child support, and cohabitation, which law school gives one tools to handle. Law school does not train one to be a psychologist. I respect the generalizations that mental health professionals make about marriage and divorce, and frequently use their materials in advising clients and often send them to mental health professionals. But I limited this chapter instead to what I could say was true from my own experiences and left the rest to the mental health professionals.

One downside of this approach is that after twenty five years of practicing family law, there are only a few things about the psychological aspects of marriage and divorce that I'm confident I know and yet are applicable generally to couples. Here they are:

WHAT MAKES A MARRIAGE SUCCESSFUL

FRIENDSHIP IS IMPORTANT

The best indicator of a good marriage is that the partners are best friends. I have seen such couples in real life, but nothing close has ever come through my office door as a divorce lawyer. My clients often say they respect their partner, or feel affection, loyalty, guilt, and a range of other emotions, but they almost never say they're good friends. Many, on the other hand, have come in and said they really don't like their spouse or enjoy being together. The realization that you and your spouse have not been good friends for a long time, if that is true, should make attempting the marriage's end easier. Maybe you are not losing so much after all.

SEX IS IMPORTANT

Clients often report that sex in the marriage died a year ago, two years ago, four years ago, even though the parties have continued to live together. One year I had several female clients, each of whom complained that her husband had lost interest in sex shortly after marrying, even though the sexual relationship had been fine before and for the first few months or years after the wedding. The couples were mostly in their forties, with no physical problems that would explain lack of interest and no suspected sexual involvements by the men outside the marriage. Feeling that an important part of her emotional life was missing, each of the women insisted that her marriage end, even though each husband wanted the marriage to continue.

The sexually uninterested spouse is sometimes the woman. Men have told me that the sexual relationship ended years before, when their wives suggested that their husbands sleep in another room because their snoring bothered them or some such reason. The wife then rejects the husband's sexual requests for one or another plausible reason, and the discouraged husband makes the request less and less frequently. The parties continue sharing the same house for months or years before either does anything to end the legal marriage. I once told a husband that he had been committing emotional suicide by staying in such a relationship.

In any event, when a new client reports that sex in the marriage stopped or became very infrequent years ago, my experience tells me that the marriage is over and counseling is not going to save the relationship. But when sex is alive, even though there are lots of problems, I strongly recommend that the couple can see an appropriate counselor together and try to work things out.

Here again, the fact that a significant part of a healthy marriage has been missing should make accepting divorce easier for both spouses.

MANY PEOPLE STAY TOO LONG IN BAD MARRIAGES

Despite the repeats, I continue to be amazed at the answers to my question about when the marriage went bad. The couple has been married for twenty-odd years, and my client tells me that he or she has been unhappy in the relationship since the first year. The reasons for staying married vary, and I think much boils down to embarrassment and fear. There is a joke about a couple in their nineties appearing in court for a divorce. They tell the judge they've been married for seventy-five years and have been unhappy with each other from year one. The judge asks why they're getting divorced at such an advanced age. "Judge, we were waiting for the children to die."

I believe that people should work hard to make their marriages mutually satisfying, that we should do the nice things that Reader's Digest, women's magazines, and the professional literature say are needed to make a relationship grow. But I see in my practice so many years spent in relationships that were, at least in retrospect, failures almost from the beginning. Many of my clients who have endured poor marriages experience surges of joy, along with the usual depression, anger, and fear, when the divorce is at last done.

One lawyer's experience does not mean that marriages that have been bad for years do not get saved and become vibrant, satisfying relationships. Mental health professionals report such successful outcomes when the underlying psychological issues that prevent one or both spouses from having a good marriage are treated in therapy. As it happens, I have not seen them in my law practice.

DIVORCE IS ALMOST ALWAYS EMOTIONALLY DIFFICULT

Even if a marriage is very poor, it gives a certain structure to life that is upset by divorce. The stress varies, depending on many factors, including whether you are the one making the call that the marriage is over. In my experience, about two out of three marriages that end do so after the wife first makes that decision. Often she has thought about divorce for a year or two before taking a firm position, and the prospect of divorce is a shock to the husband, who has ignored the many signals of discontent his wife gave during that year or two. The initiating spouse may predominantly experience guilt, the other may be shaken to the core by the rejection, and both may be depressed, angry, afraid, and so forth. As in life itself, everyone has some pain during the exiting process.

IT IS UNWISE TO USE DIVORCE LITIGATION TO VENT NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

I believe that it is usually unwise, destructive, and self-destructive to use divorce legal procedures as weapons to punish one's spouse for his or her failings. There are lawyers who disagree. I had a discussion with a partner in a large law firm shortly after my earlier divorce book came out who criticized my emphasis on settlement, arguing that divorcing couples needed the "catharsis" of adversary litigation to really get over their marriages.

My experience is that everyone, including the couple's children, is better off if the divorce is completed without going to court except to get an uncontested divorce after a separation agreement is signed. In my practice the parties and the attorneys are almost always able to reach satisfactory agreements on the custody, support, and property division issues that should be settled before there is a divorce. When I do go to trial, which is usually once or twice a year, it is often because there is a fundamental, good faith difference of opinion and interests that cannot be compromised, such as whether the parties' children should live primarily with one parent on the East Coast or the other parent on the West Coast.

There are, of course, cases where one or the other spouse is so entangled with negative emotions that he or she cannot reach a reasonable settlement, one that would allow the parties and their children to get on with their lives with a minimum of handicaps. I try to let some time pass in hopes that the anger, hurt, or whatever will dissipate and allow a fair settlement. But if those emotions remain dominant, the legal force embodied in your state's divorce court is available to impose a solution to the couple's custody, support, and property issues. That has a price for each spouse in money, stress, lost time, and possible emotional damage to themselves and their children.

THERE ARE LOTS OF CHANGES AT A MARRIAGE'S END

The psychological reality of ending a marital relationship is complicated by the fact that numerous concrete problems, many of which seem overwhelming, often arise. Money that previously was devoted to maintaining one household will now have to be split between two. One or both of the parties may have to abruptly alter their standard of living or adjust their living patterns in order to meet their expenses. Disputes concerning the allocation of limited funds are likely to arise.

Separation and divorce usually require an adjustment in social relationship as the breakup sends a shock wave through the couple's network of family and friends. Although friends and family will offer comfort and support, the parties may have to recognize that their new single status distances them from this social circle. It is important to remind yourself that adjusting your life simultaneously to familial, financial, and social change requires a lot of energy, and you should pat yourself on the back occasionally simply for being able to deal with these changes.

If you seek the advice of an attorney you have entered the unfamiliar world of lawyers and the law. People turn to lawyers because they feel they need an expert who can protect their interests, who knows legal rules and procedures, and who can draft an enforceable settlement agreement and the other papers necessary for divorce. Depending on the lawyer you choose, you may feel even less control over the course of events than you did before. Not all lawyers are the same, and your choice of one, as discussed in chapter three, is very important.

YOU OWE YOUR KIDS A LOT

Parents will need to deal with their children and often to reestablish relationships with them. This will be a difficult hurdle for you to face and may produce the most guilt. Children seek explanations of what went wrong, and you, often unsure yourself about the answers, will have difficulty providing sufficient answers for them. Children often feel alienated and confused during and after a divorce, and it is crucial that both parents reassure them that they love them and will stand by them. Keep in mind that love and security in childhood are building blocks to healthy, happy individuals and are the best gifts you can give your children.

Both parents should maintain an active, ongoing relationship with their children and should encourage each other to spend time with the children. When negotiating the specifics to accomplish this, the children's best interests should be paramount. The children should not be used as a bargaining tool to manipulate your ex-spouse into accepting your financial terms on a settlement. While this warning may seem self-evident, in the midst of the myriad shocks of divorce, even the best of parents can lose sight of their children's pain and confusion.

MENTAL HEALTH BASICS FOR DEALING WITH DIVORCE

The following are some basic principles on which most mental health professionals dealing with divorce, in my analysis, seem to agree.

YOU'RE NO ANGEL, BUT YOU'RE NOT SO BAD, EITHER

Altering your family status can be a serious threat to your perception of who you are in the world. Many spouses define themselves by their marriage and thus are devastated by the prospect of divorce: "If my marriage is a failure, then so am I." Besides seeing yourself generally as a failure, often you may see vividly where your spouse is at fault in the breakup of your relationship. Many people who are going through this process, whether they initiated the divorce or not, tend to see themselves as victims. It is important to remember that a relationship is a two-way street, and just as both parties contribute to the success of a relationship, so do both parties contribute, to a greater or lesser degree, to its failure. You should consider trying to change your frame of mind by seeing a counselor and reading self-help books. These sources can help you to deal with the negative emotions you are feeling, build a positive outlook, and boost your self-esteem so that you no longer see yourself as a victim.

ACCEPT THE PAST, DEAL WITH IT, AND GET ON WITH YOUR LIFE

The changes you are facing unleash an overwhelming, and at times a seemingly endless, stream of emotions. Amid the feelings of anger, fear, betrayal, failure, and disillusionment is the terrible feeling that what is happening is happening to you alone. It takes most people several months or years to come to terms with these feelings, but the process is worth the struggle.

Often the first stage that divorced couples experience, particularly the party who did not want the divorce and has not prepared himself or herself for it, is shock and denial. You may question whether the time you spent married was wasted. However, you must realize that you cannot completely obliterate the past or cut it out of your life. In order to deal with your past you must salvage something positive from it and integrate it into your new life.

This process of self-discovery will not be easy. It requires letting go of the feelings of hurt and anger that you have been clinging to and coming to terms with the reality of your marriage. It is crucial that you do not let these destructive feelings control you, as they will create a whirlpool effect, leading you deeper and deeper into depression. Letting go of these very painful and destructive feelings can be accomplished by accepting the reality of your past, learning something from it, and bringing those lessons with you as you build a healthier and more confident image of yourself. You must redirect your emotional investments from maintaining the relationship to maintaining yourself. When you finally do let go, you may have the urge to act on your emotional freedom. Some clients report scouring the entire house to purge it of anything that reminds them of their ex-partner. Others completely rearrange the furniture.

In the process of looking back you will learn how to look forward and move on with your life. This can be a very exciting stage. After coming through it most people arrive at a point where they can feel good about themselves, their bodies, and their capacities as creative and autonomous adults to deal with whatever life throws their way.

One danger is letting resentment toward your former spouse take too much of your energies. One psychologist I know, Dr. Pat Otis, warns against carrying "so much hatred that, like acid, it eats holes in your capacity to love."

HELP IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER

As mentioned above, one of the most painful feelings you are experiencing probably is the loneliness that results from separation or divorce. You need to learn to grow through loneliness to the state of aloneness, in which you are comfortable doing things by yourself and for yourself. This process often begins with a "hiding in the sand" period during which you may dive into your apartment or your work for weeks at a time. Each is an equally effective avoidance that is healthy over a short term, but it is dangerous over a long term.

One option that many people use to deal with the feeling of loneliness is joining a support group of similarly situated people. These groups can be very helpful, not only in helping people better understand the feelings they are experiencing but also in helping them counteract their natural tendency to feel that they are all alone.

Whether you choose to join an organized support group, or individual therapy, do further reading, or rely on your own network of family and friends, the best advice you can receive is to accept your situation, deal with your feelings, and build a stronger you. If your support group tends to place blame on the other party or encourage your self-pity, do yourself a favor and find another group. Their advice, while it may be tempting to accept, will retard your progress and will not help you move on with your life.

YOU SHOULD LOVE YOURSELF

Some divorced people find it easy to love others and quite difficult to love themselves. They are basically "half-people" attempting to find wholeness through loving another. A love based on a fear-filled flight from emptiness and loneliness is unlikely to last. Realizing your self-love is basic to all productive, vital, growing relationships. Self-love means that you accept yourself for who you are. We must each appreciate and understand our strengths and our weaknesses.

Self-love does not mean that you love only yourself, but rather that your capacity to love and accept others is founded on your love and acceptance of yourself. After a divorce it's typical to feel that you have no capacity to love either yourself or others. This is a self-esteem issue, and there are many exercises to improve the situation. For example, you could list five adjectives that describe yourself and then put a plus sign after each worked that you think is positive and a minus sign after each negative. After you have done this, look at the negative adjectives and see if you can find anything positive about that particular aspect of your personality. The harder you work at this, the more positive things you're likely to find. Those who received scant love as children often have a great deal of difficulty loving themselves as adults. For some people, turning to (or returning to) their church or a particular clergy person can be supportive and strengthening in this period.

Self-love is a particularly important issue for children involved in divorce. Many children feel that they have been shown to be unlovable, since one of their parents has left the home. They fear that the remaining parent will leave as well. This is critical time for parents to do their best to reassure their children that they are cared for and deeply loved. This is very difficult for parents because children are often in need of the greatest love when their parents are least capable of providing it. Parents should make special efforts to explain to their children that even though they are having doubts about the love they feel for their children.

Those who have passed through the self-love trial often report that they emerge feeling securely lovable and that they no longer are afraid of being loved or of loving another.

START WITH FRIENDS, NOT LOVERS

Some recently divorced people complain that members of the opposite sex simply cannot be trusted. Trusting again is a difficult task for some, and it must be accomplished cautiously. The key to this stage is to make friends, not lovers.

Too often a divorced person plunges into a new romance too early, and the result is a relationship that is either dominating or desperate and often smothering. We must learn to trust before we can love safely.

Our incapacity to trust may be related to the wounds created by our divorce, or it may stem from childhood experiences. Some who have been deeply wounded find themselves either avoiding relationships or indulging in brief, exploitative relationships where the other party has little or no power. Others feel that they must make every relationship into a lifelong love relationship. Trying to make a lifelong relationship often does nothing more than prolong the adjustment process.

Trust is a two-way street: trust in yourself allows trust in others. Trust demands openness and openness exposes you to the risk of disappointment or rejection. Start slowly and cautiously. Using caution you can develop a healthier relationship style founded on your new sense of self-esteem. Clearly the rewards are worth the risks.

Trust is an issue for the children of divorce. As we have emphasized, children often will blame themselves for one parent's leaving unless the reason for the departure is clearly explained to them. The more trust you place in your children now, the more trust they are likely to place in you in the future.

SEX IS STILL IMPORTANT

Recently divorced people can be traumatized by the thought of dating. They feel they are old, unattractive, awkward, and no longer know the rules. Worse, they often have their parents' morality holding them back with the admonition to be "good." Furthermore, their own teenagers may be dictating their dating behavior by less-than-subtle suggestions. No wonder dating is confusing and uncertain and sexual hangups are so common.

Sexuality can be a major problem because it has been made such a big issue in Western culture. It is difficult to have a "normal" sexual relationship in a society where sex is used to sell everything from toothpaste to toenail clippers. Then, too, there is considerable confusions to the role each gender should play in this era of feminism. Can a man still pay the check without making the woman feel dependent? Can a woman call up a man and ask him out without seeming forward? These and many other questions make the resumption of sexual relationships both frightening and fascinating.

During the early stages of divorce recovery it is common for the divorced person to be totally uninterested in sex. Often this is followed by a period of deep longing for sexual contact that can be very difficult to deal with. Some cannot accept the idea of sex without marriage, while others are unable to accept their sexual feelings at all. One way to deal with this problem is to recognize that our bodies need to be touched and held and that sexual contact is not necessarily the whole or the only answer to this need. Affection shown by and to friends and children can be a warm and reassuring way to maintain human contact until life can broaden out once more.

But as more personal -- and potentially sexual -- possibilities come into view, the key is to be both honest and cautious. Do not go beyond your comfort range, but do feel free to admit discomfort to your new social contacts. The fact that there are no clear rules for courting today can be frustrating but it also provides you with the opportunity to set your own rules and create the best possible intimate relationship.

The sexuality stage is important for children because they need adult role models of both sexes. Children often are confused, frustrated, or intimidated by a parent's involvement in a new love relationship. Your attention, along with thoughtful and affectionate communication, is critical at this point. You must make a clear, sincere effort to talk frankly about sex and relationships. Remember that your child's strong reaction may be less of a response to your new relationship than to the fact that the child is just beginning to struggle with the whole notion of his or her own sexuality and independence.

It is very important to deal thoroughly with the issues raised here before proceeding to the next state. Some indications that you have passed this stage are: you are comfortable going out with potential love partners; you know and can explain your present moral attitudes and values; you feel capable of having a deep and meaningful sexual relationship; your sexual behavior is consistent with your morality; and you are behaving morally -- the way you would like your children to behave.

FREEDOM

Freedom in this sense is simply the freedom to fulfill your own potential in the present. This does not mean that your life will be blissful or that you will not run into any more problem relationships. Instead it means that you have loosened the bonds of negative patterns that have controlled you. The fundamental enemies of divorce recovery are not the other spouse or the legal process; rather they are the enemies that we all carry within us -- such enemies as guilt, self-doubt, perceived inadequacy, and fear of relationships. With recovery, we no longer focus so much on the past, and are freer to live in the present, which is the only place we can really be anyway.

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