

## **WHEN YOUR LOVE RELATIONSHIP ENDS**

### **Separation and Divorce Can Be Devastating...But Can Also Provide the Opportunity For Self-Examination and a New Beginning**

There is nothing easy about ending a love relationship. Divorce is never really the ideal resolution to marital problems, but all too often in our society today it happens...despite our best efforts to prevent it. Current statistics indicate that about half of all marriages will end in divorce. That person who was once your best friend, your companion for life, the one with whom you would perhaps raise children and grow old, is now in some ways your worst enemy. You cannot believe that this has happened. How could that love have been destroyed? For many people a divorce is one of the most painful experiences of their lives. The depth of your pain depends not only on how sensitive you are to the meaning of your life experiences, but also on how much you depended on your partner to make your life worthwhile.

Divorce shatters much that you knew and dreamed about before. Your life becomes a jumble of pieces on the floor. The person in divorce must deal with a universe of unpleasant feelings and thoughts: chaos, grieving, unbounded sadness, despair, anger, revenge and retaliation, doubts, hoping, negotiating, emotions which can seem out of control, wretched thoughts, dreaming about a future and not knowing how to get there, fear, hopelessness, helplessness, loneliness...and little of it seems to make sense. (And where is your partner when you need him or her the most?) Most of us never acquire the tools to deal with a loss of this magnitude. When we walked down the aisle and during the years thereafter, we put our energies into building a life with our partner. We put little effort in learning to be alone again. The end of a marriage forces us to jump into an overwhelming, and often dreaded, world of new experiences.

Fortunately, this time of craziness will, in all likelihood, come to a close. The sun will shine again. The pain of the divorce, if it is confronted in an adaptive way, can propel people to confront personal issues, to discover who they are at this stage of life, and to find out what their true strengths and abilities are all about. Many people even look back on the time following their divorce as the best time in their lives. It may be painful, but it is also a time when a person can feel fully alive and impelled to draw on inner resources to experience life fully.

The clue is to learn that the ending of a love relationship follows a predictable set of experiences. Recognize the feelings associated with each stage of a divorce and embrace these feelings. If you refuse to take ownership of the negative feelings which accompany each phase of the divorce process, you end up fragmented and thus less able to cope effectively. If you accept the pain, explore why things are difficult at this time, and learn how to deal with each stage of the divorce process, you become better able, as a more integrated person, to see your way to a happier resolution. Let's look at a few of the predictable stages which those in divorce commonly experience.

#### **Denial**

Denying the truth of the divorce actually helps us to postpone the pain, so denial certainly has a place in our lives. The problem happens when we experience so much denial that we are unable to come to terms with the reality of the task before us. There comes a day when "this is not happening to me" is no longer an effective way of coping. Ending the denial stage involves a major shift in our thinking about who we are, what our partner means to us, and where we must go from here.

## **Fear**

Most divorcing people are forced to come to terms with a number of fears. What will people say? Who can I trust to talk to? How can I handle my partner's anger toward me? How do I deal with my own anger? Am I a complete failure? How can I be a single parent? Will I be able to keep my children? What about money? Can I do the banking and buy groceries and pay bills and fix the car? Can I handle my loneliness? Am I completely unlovable? Will I ever love anyone else again? Do I have the energy for this much change? When we hold on to our fears and refuse to do anything about them, we increase the likelihood that these will be the very areas where we experience trouble.

## **Loneliness**

The loneliness one experiences at the time of divorce can feel immeasurable. The finality of the marriage, the uncertainty about the future, and the knowledge that your partner will no longer be there to comfort you or to spend time with you, can all contribute to an empty feeling that will not go away. The clue is to change loneliness to aloneness, to change the emptiness to a feeling of peace, contentment, and fulfillment. Looking into oneself and liking what one sees is a key to making the shift to aloneness. (Get into being alone. It is a precious but tenuous gift that can disappear far too quickly from one's life.)

## **Friendship**

Divorce is a true test of just who your real friends are. It is important to draw on the emotional support of friends during a divorce. Unfortunately, many of your friends were those who knew you as a couple and they often must choose between you. Even those who try to stay neutral find it difficult. Many may feel that your divorce somehow threatens their own marriages and some friends may now find it difficult to relate to you as a single person. Not only that, but you may find it difficult to trust others during a divorce. Getting out, feeling free, and opening up to others becomes a major goal of a healthy divorce adjustment.

## **Grieving**

It is normal, and even necessary, to experience a period of grieving over the end of the relationship. You may feel depressed for some time and experience changes in your energy levels and sleeping and appetite patterns. As unpleasant as it may feel, comfort yourself with the knowledge that this is how you are saying goodbye so that you can move on to a healthier and happier future.

## **Anger**

People in divorce usually say that they never knew they could have so much anger. The rage seems overwhelming at times. No...you are not going crazy! Think about it: you have just lost one of the most important things in your life and your partner is now in many ways your enemy. You have a lot to be angry about. Use this opportunity to explore your anger and to find out how it helps and hurts you. *One divorce rule: don't engage in any behaviors you will feel sorry about later on!* Anger is helpful in the sense that it helps us end the loyalty and trust we used to feel for our partner, and this allows us to move on.

Think of divorce as a journey which you take one step at a time. And some of those steps are very hard to get through. Not only do we have to confront all of the stages listed above, but we must also deal with making the final break emotionally from our partner, understanding what really went wrong, learning to like ourselves again, seeing ourselves as single people, making new friends, forging new purposes and goals for our lives, and learning again about trust and love. As painful as this journey may seem at first, it can lead to a life which is better...much better.

For further reading see *Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends* (Second Edition) by Dr. Bruce Fisher (1992, San Luis Obispo: Impact Publishers). Many of the ideas in this newsletter are suggested by Dr. Fisher's work.

*Separation and divorce are incredibly difficult experiences for anyone. It often helps to have a trained professional to guide you through the process in an understanding and compassionate way. Please feel free to call for an appointment.*

<Sidebar> HOW LONG DO I WAIT UNTIL I GET INTO ANOTHER RELATIONSHIP?

Expect that it will take at least a year before things begin to feel at all normal again. For most of us, depending on the length and the nature of our previous relationship, it will take two or three years. This may seem like an eternity, but in reality this is a wonderful opportunity to find out who you are at this stage of your life as an unattached individual. A word of warning is in order: *don't expect to reinvolve yourself with someone else immediately!* You are on the rebound. To attach yourself prematurely in a love relationship is unfair to you and to the other person. You are necessarily dealing with tremendously important personal issues when your previous love relationship comes to an end. Living through the transition and exploring these issues can be very painful, and falling in love again may seem like the perfect way to end the pain. But the other person in this case becomes a replacement, an object, and that is not what a healthy relationship is about. You will carry into this replacement relationship the same issues which helped to lead to the demise of your former relationship...and the same things may very well happen again. Your real goal is to discover who you are and to explore what happened. When you are at the point of being able to have a happy and fulfilled life as a single person, then you can choose when, or even if, you should reinvolve yourself again in another love relationship. When you know that you have that choice, you may be ready.

## <Sidebar>DUMPERS AND DUMPEES

Divorce seems to be easiest for couples who decide mutually to end the relationship. In most cases, however, divorce involves a *dumper*, the party who takes the initiative to end the relationship, and a *dumpee*, the definition of which is quite clear. Sometimes, when one analyzes in depth the nature of the relationship (a not uncommon occurrence during a divorce!), it may be difficult to decide just who is the dumper and the dumpee. In general, however, the dumper is the one who says it is all over, and the dumpee is the one in shock who begs the other not to leave. Dumpees often say they were taken completely by surprise by the partner's announcement.

The divorce experience is often very different for each of the two parties. The dumper usually began preparing for the divorce well before the final announcement, and the actual parting often comes as a relief for the dumper. The emotional pain over time during the course of the marriage itself usually lasts much longer for the dumper, although the upheaval at the time of the actual parting is usually not as great. The primary emotion experienced by the dumper is *guilt*. The dumpee, on the other hand, is usually hit by surprise and with a great deal of pain. The turmoil of the divorce itself is usually much more intense for the dumpee, but it is this pain that can motivate more personal growth. The main task of the dumpee is to work through feelings of *rejection*. Both parties usually experience a great deal of pain in a divorce, although the pain of guilt is much different from the pain of rejection. For a healthy divorce adjustment it is important to recognize which role has been assumed, dumper or dumpee, and to work on the issues appropriate to that role.

Dwell as near as possible to the channel in which your life flows.

*Henry David Thoreau*

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Carl Rogers wrote, "The degree to which I can create relationships which facilitate the growth of others as separate persons is a measure of the growth I have achieved in myself." Relationships give us the opportunity to encourage others, to care about them, and to enhance the quality of their lives. In return, they allow us to experience the same.

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No one on his deathbed ever said, "I wish I had spent more time at the office."

*Senator Paul Tsongas*

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Live each day as you would climb a mountain. An occasional glance toward the summit keeps the goal in mind, but many beautiful scenes are to be observed from each new vantage point. So climb slowly, enjoying each passing moment; and then the view from the summit will serve a more rewarding climax for your journey.

*Bishop Fulton J. Sheen*

I expect to pass through life but once. If therefore, there can be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, and not defer nor neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again.

*William Penn*

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Think about the positive benefits of laughing. Laughter changes your attitudes and outlook on life, distracts your attention, creates relaxation and a reduction in tension, and increases the body's natural pain killers. Every time we laugh our stress level is lowered. If modern medicine could find a pill which brings the same benefits without side effects, it would be hailed as revolutionary.

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I like living. I have sometimes been wildly, despairingly, acutely miserable, racked with sorrow, but through it all I still know quite certainly that just to be alive is a grand thing.

*Agatha Christie*

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Advice is what we ask for when we already know the answer but wish we didn't.

*Erica Jong*