



Transitioning Through Divorce: Grieving the Lost Marriage

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Divorce rates in the U.S. have dropped slightly over the past 15 years. For couples who married the first time in 2002, the probability of divorce is 20% within the first five years of marriage, 33% within 10 years, and 43% within 15 years. About two-thirds of remarriages in the U.S. end in divorce. One-half of all divorces involve children. Oklahoma's divorce rate has been among the highest in the nation.

This may be the beginning of a challenging period for you emotionally. This series, *Transitioning Through Divorce*, is not intended to encourage divorce but to help individuals who have made that choice to have a "good divorce"—where you maintain at least the same level of emotional well-being as before the divorce.

Marriages usually begin with high expectations. Divorce marks the end not only of a marital relationship but of a dream. If you do not have children, the decision to divorce may end all relations with your spouse. If you do have children, your relationship will continue in a completely new form. Divorce can cause great stress on individuals. This is true for both the "leaver," the person seeking the divorce, and for the person who has been "left."

____ The new events and emotions you likely will encounter can catch you off guard. You might feel that you are not "normal." This publication describes typical phases of grief that may be associated with the loss of an "ideal marriage" or "ideal family." Having this information can help you know what you might expect, and you may be able to move through each phase more successfully.

Grieving the Loss of the Marriage

The loss of the "ideal marriage" is a crisis similar to that of losing a spouse by death. You may feel alone, unloved, and rejected. You may experience deep pain as you try to understand the reasons for the divorce. You may also experience:

- Physical symptoms or illness.
- Sleep-related problems—too much or not enough sleep.
- Appetite change—loss of appetite or overeating.
- Mood swings—anger, sadness, clinical depression.
- Substance abuse of alcohol, drugs, and/or tobacco.
- Thoughts of suicide. (*Seek counseling immediately.*)

Individuals may go through several stages of mourning or grief. The emotional intensity of this period usually reaches a peak within the first six months of separation. However, the

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grieving process may take as long as two years. Although you are likely to experience all of the grieving stages at some point, they may not occur in the same order for each person. It is normal to have the feelings described below, and they may return at sentimental times of the year, such as a wedding anniversary or holidays.

Shock and Disorganization

During this period you may:

- Feel numb.
- Find your routines have changed.
- Go through daily routines without really seeing, hearing, or experiencing events.
- Find that activities which usually have significance for you seem meaningless.
- Experience life without a sense of satisfaction.

Denial

The denial period offers a temporary retreat from reality and may help individuals to regroup. Denial acts as an emotional "shock absorber" so individuals can face reality in small steps. You may:

- Have dreams of reuniting with your spouse.
- Be unwilling to make decisions about property or children.
- Be unwilling to consider what your future life will be like.
- Deny that marital conflict existed in the relationship.
- Deny that the former spouse is in pain or distress.

Anger

Anger is a normal response to loss. During this phase, you may:

- Feel angry toward the leaver.
- Want to hurt the leaver.
- Remember problems that were not resolved during the marriage.
- Use anger in a destructive way toward others or yourself.
- Experience physical ailments or depression.

Loneliness

During this period, you may feel:

- A void in your existence.
- A loss of emotional support from your spouse.

- A sense of loss of friendships.
- A sense that no one else is experiencing these same emotions and pain.

Guilt and shame

This is the period where you:

- “Bargain” with yourself and review what would have happened if you had only done
- May blame yourself and decide the divorce was “all your fault.”
- May blame your spouse and decide it was all his/her fault.
- Eventually recognize that both of you made mistakes during the marriage.
- Recognize that your best efforts in your marriage weren’t enough to prevent the divorce.

Evaluation

You are ready now to:

- Assess your marriage to evaluate what may have gone wrong.
- Consider how each partner may have changed throughout the marriage.
- Consider how such changes may have contributed to an unhappy marriage.

Acceptance

You are ready to:

- Let go of the past and look forward to a new phase in your life.
- Let go of resentful feelings.
- Spend time developing relationships with new friends and acquaintances.
- Spend energy planning for the future rather than recounting the past.

You can help this healing process by:

- Accepting the feelings that come with the divorce process.
- Allowing others to express their feelings.
- Being realistic about the dissolved marriage.
- Preventing stress overload by minimizing other life changes.

If you feel like you are not making progress during any of these phases, please seek counseling from a trained professional.

Summary

This publication describes the grieving process that is related to divorce. Additional publications from the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service are available that may provide helpful information regarding other divorce issues. Individuals are encouraged to use materials from the local library and/or contact professionals who deal with divorce issues, such as counselors, ministers, lawyers, or mental health clinicians. Support groups and growth-oriented counseling may also provide beneficial guidance through this process.

Resources

- Lawler, M. (2000). “Transitioning Through Divorce: The Six Types of Divorce.” (T-2234). Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service.
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