

# The Mental Health News



*A little more than half of marriages end in divorce*

The statistics pertaining to divorce are alarming: 1) Currently, more than 50% of marriages in this country end in divorce. 2) Most divorces occur two to five years into the marriage. 3) Approximately two million adults experience a divorce each year. 4) The divorce rate for second marriages is 65%. 5) Roughly only 50% of the children in this country reach age 18 living with both biological parents. Statistics like these make it clear that millions of people begin the process of divorce recovery each year. The purpose of this newsletter is to describe components of the recovery process.

The divorce recovery process usually proceeds in stages that are similar to the stages of grief recovery. These stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. In the denial stage, a person may

## Recovering from Divorce

by

D. J. Palmiter, Jr., Ph.D., ABPP

not emotionally accept the fact of the divorce and/or the emotional pain that is felt because of the divorce. In the anger stage the divorce person feels rage towards the ex-spouse; the divorce person feels damaged, attacked, crushed, etc. by the ex-spouse (sometimes this anger may be displaced onto others, such as the ex-spouse's parents or the ex-spouse's new partner). In the bargaining stage, the divorce person may attempt to barter, emotionally or otherwise, to undo the divorce and/or the emotional pain associated with the divorce. In the depression stage, the divorce person feels the pain of the loss. Even when divorce is uncontested and mutual, it represents a devastating loss--a loss of a partner, a loss of self-esteem, a loss of children, a loss of years of one's life, on and on it goes.

More specifically, the following tasks and issues usually surface in divorce recovery:

- *Communicating with one's former spouse, particularly if there are children involved.*

- *Letting go of one's former spouse.*

*Complete recovery may take a couple of years*

- *Teaching friends and family to deal appropriately with the divorce.*
- *Resolving anger at the former spouse.*
- *Giving up guilty feelings.*
- *Confronting false assumptions and myths about divorce.*



## Adjustment to divorce is facilitated by avoiding common traps

- *Reviewing personal values about marriage, divorce, children and work.*
- *Helping children to adjust to the divorce.*
- *Coping with overwhelming emotions.*
- *Recognizing needs for the next intimate relationship.*
- *Setting new goals, including vocational goals.*
- *Resurrecting rusty dating skills.*

Baring significant obstacles, full divorce recovery may take years. Unfortunately, obstacles surface that may prolong the recovery process. For instance, post-divorce wars may go on indefinitely, with the children suffering the most. (Incidentally, the best predictor of child adjustment to divorce is the degree of parental post-divorce harmony.) Additional common obstacles to divorce recovery are as follows:

- *Not understanding one's own contribution to the divorce. Those who don't understand painful, interpersonal history are doomed to repeat it.*
- *Staying trapped in feelings of anger, hurt and guilt.*
- *Dating too soon after the divorce.*

- *Engaging in unhealthy pacing in new relationships (e.g. rushing to find a new commitment or not allowing others to get close).*
- *Not making time for friends and new relationships.*
- *Engaging in substance abuse.*
- *Suffering from a clinical depression.*
- *Allowing self-worth to be determined by the approval of others.*
- *Believing that divorced people are damaged goods.*
- *Trying to punish the former spouse.*

Avoiding common obstacles facilitates divorce recovery. In addition, it is often helpful to find companions to help one through the stages of recovery. Individuals' needs in this regard differ. Any of the following, in isolation or in combination, may be helpful:

- *Grieving the loss of the marriage, and reviewing the divorce, with a trustworthy friend or adult family member (choosing to do this with a child will likely burden the child unduly and may cause emotional damage)*

- *Praying and consulting with a clergy person.*
- *Entering therapy to help manage the adjustment.*
- *Joining a support group.*
- *Taking care to practice good health habits; it is hard to engage in emotional recovery if one's body is being taxed.*

The journey to recovery lies along many different paths, however, there are features that mark the fully recovered person. The more a person manifests the following, the more a person can be considered recovered:

- *There is minimal anger, guilt or hurt pertaining to the fact of the divorce.*
- *Kids are not placed in the middle between parents.*
- *New relationships may be formed which do not repeat painful patterns.*
- *There is no active participation in an ongoing war against the ex-spouse.*
- *There is minimal belief that one is damaged goods.*

As millions can attest, it is possible to fully recover from a divorce.

