

Divorce: Individual and Communal Responses to a Difficult Problem **By Michael Milgraum**

(This article is a modification of an article published in the *Where, What When*, February 2000)

When one member of a couple announces that he or she wants to divorce, there is usually already a high level of conflict within the marriage. If the divorce is handled poorly, this conflict expands and grows like a cancer, so that many innocent victims can be consumed in its wake. Children, the other spouse, extended family, and friends may be targeted in a cycle of blame, attack and revenge. The psychological research indicates that pronounced conflict between parents is a more powerful predictor of children's adjustment than whether the parents are married or divorced. Although divorce is invariably a painful process, it is not necessarily destructive of the children's wellbeing, as long as the parents are able to focus on compromise and conflict resolution, rather than mutual revenge. Below I present a very condensed psychological primer on the divorce process, as well as some suggestions for how to minimize the suffering for all involved.

Psychological Processes Present in Divorce

Many divorced couples never actually face the reality of their divorced status. They still maintain strong feelings for their ex-spouse, the only difference is that hatred and anger supplants the love that was there previously. This hatred against the ex-spouse actually usually arises from an inability to let go of the centrality of the "ex" in the "hater's" emotional world. If the "hater" begins to emotionally distance from the "ex," interactions with the "ex" become less explosive and there is less tendency to seek reprisal for any perceived slight.

As long as the couple is locked into a relationship of mutual hate and anger, there is a very strong psychological pull for everyone involved to "take sides." The legal system unfortunately may facilitate this destructive process, as the dissolution of the marriage becomes a contest for who can "get more," rather than a process of familial healing. When the ex-spouses get sucked into this process, usually the "more" that the wife tries to get is money and the "more" the husband tries to get is time with the children. But actually there is a deeper contest, which is often at play, and this contest involves winning the favor of the children. The contest for children's favor can be direct, e.g., "You tell your bum of a father that I hope he's sorry for running out on me and ruining my life" or more indirect, e.g. "Even though your father is lazy and a liar, try not to dwell on it, because it's important for a child to have a relationship with his father." These messages can become unremitting and oppressive for the child, as mutual insults are traded between the parents. Some children deal with this situation by turning off and deciding not to believe their parents about anything. This attitude can grow into a general mistrust and opposition to authority figures. Other children deal with this problem in a more sophisticated way, by mouthing the beliefs of the parent they happen to be with. In other words, when they are with Mom, Dad is bad and visa versa. Still other children, because of either their age or their personality, find it too difficult to utilize the above strategies. Rather, they end up choosing to side with either the mother or the father, usually choosing to side with the parent who has primary custody. Once they choose a side, the rejection of the non-preferred parent can be severe. This non-preferred parent is usually called an *alienated parent*, in the mental health field. When faced with the prospect of seeing the alienated parent, the child can exhibit extreme anxiety and resistance. Further, the child may even refer to having negative personal experiences with the alienated parent, experiences which may have never occurred, but were merely told to the child by the preferred parent. The preferred parent's "reality" of hatred can corrupt the child's view so much that the child can no longer remember positive experiences with the alienated parent. Often

extended family members (grandparents, uncles, aunts) can encourage this alienating process, to further reinforce the child's alienation of the targeted parent.

Parallel to the powerful conflict and rejection that occurs in divorce is another process that can occur between a parent and child. That process involves and loss of proper "intergenerational boundaries," and can also have seriously negative effects. The concept of intergenerational boundaries is simple. In a healthy family structure, the parent's role is that of an authority and caretaker for the child. The child is not the parent's confidant and not a support system for the parent. Unfortunately, many children, even relatively young children, are pushed into this role, as the marital conflict, and eventually divorce, proceed. People under extreme stress tend to regress, meaning that they tend to act at a lower developmental level than their age. Thus a parent, who feels abandoned and/or hurt, may start to view their child more as an equal and confide in that child about information that properly should be kept from the child. Often the information that is shared is either none of the child's business and way beyond what the child can emotionally deal with at that time. Some children respond to their parents' "neediness" by supporting the parent emotionally or materially, such as cooking meals and cleaning the house. The child's many responsibilities may leave no time for socialization/recreation. When the child shifts into a role that is primarily support of a parent, this is known as parentification, and it is a great emotional burden for the children involved. One of the conflicts that a child experiences in this role is a feeling of guilt for maintaining peer relationships, because these relationships draw him/her away from spending time with the needy and lonely parent.

Another psychological process to note in divorce is the disruption of normal life on multiple levels. Both friends and family on the respective sides often feel uncomfortable interacting with one of the spouses and therefore may withdraw from that spouse. Routines are changed as one spouse may have to start working, or change schedule, because of changing childcare needs. Financial resources may suddenly be stretched to the limit. The nature of one's residence and physical surroundings can change drastically. Self-image is also challenged, as one transitions from being a wife or husband to being an independent entity, and, if visitation is resisted, one's self-image as a parent can be greatly altered. All of these changes are tremendously stressful to the spouses and require great emotional adjustments.

Strategies to Cope with Divorce

Both the divorcing couple and the community may react to the divorce with a sense of shame and embarrassment. Consequently, a divorcing individual and the community may be prompted to withdraw for each other in order to avoid discomfort. Under such circumstances the divorcing family is left to fend for itself, often at a time that it is very ill-equipped, emotionally, financially or otherwise, to do so.

Thus, I make the following recommendations for communal responses to divorce:

- It is incumbent on community leaders, professionals, and, to some extent, all community members, to make themselves familiar with the psychological processes involved in divorce. They need to know of warning signs for serious problems and to have referral sources, when a family is in need of more intensive help. The present article is only an introduction to the topic, and I encourage all community members to seek additional information.
- The spouses' management of the divorce needs to be viewed as a skill with which people can have varying degrees of proficiency. In recent years, parenting classes for divorcing

parents have arisen throughout the nation, and courts often require divorcing parents to attend these courses. These courses sometimes have an added therapeutic component, which allows the attendees to share their experiences with other divorcing individuals and emotionally process the changes and challenges in their lives. We need to have courses in place that are based on sound psychological research and practice.

- Community leaders should encourage community members to reach out to divorcing families that are in need. Community members should be educated as to the many needs that divorcing families have. For example, the children in divorcing families are often especially in need of added adult attention, which the parents, for a variety of reasons, have trouble giving.

In regard to recommendations for divorcing couples, I make the following suggestions:

- Don't rely on your child to emotionally support you through the divorce process. Your child is going through a lot of emotional pain and needs support himself, not additional demands or expectations. Make sure that your children have a place, in therapy or otherwise, to express their anxiety and frustration. Make sure your own emotional needs are met; reach out to friends or enter therapy if needed, so you don't end up leaning on your child for support. As mentioned above, attend a parenting course, to help sensitize you to potential problems and give you strategies to address them.
- Don't push the children to take sides. Do not fight with your "ex" in front of the children. Avoid defending your actions to your children, and don't complain to your children about your spouse. Lots of "dirty laundry" just never needs to be shared with the child. The child needs parents that he can continue to look up to in the present and in the future, as he tries to navigate his own adult life. Assure your children that Mom and Dad love them, and will work things out so that the children's needs are met.
- Don't act like an accountant, when it comes to visitation and parenting of the child. The goal *is not* perfect equality in parental contact with the child. The goal should be a parenting schedule that is tailored to best address the needs of the child, based on the age and personality of the child and other practical considerations. For example, if a mother has been a primary caregiver of a two-year old child, it would simply be cruel for the father to insist on equal sharing between the mother's and father's house. At the same time, recognize your importance in your child's life, even if you do not have primary custody. Children do better when *both* parents remain involved in their children's lives.
- Understand that your relationship with your "ex" is shifting from that of a spouse to that of a co-parent. Find a way that you can communicate with the co-parent so that the parenting can be properly coordinated. Email is often helpful, if fights arise from direct communication.
- Realize that one of your primary emotional tasks will be to accept the finality of the divorce and to *emotionally* separate from your "ex." See the stirring of anger within you as a difficulty *letting go* of your spouse and moving on. Be especially alert for ways your children's behavior or appearance may remind you of your "ex." Be

careful not to overreact to your children's misbehavior. Such an overreaction may be a displacement of your anger against your spouse onto your children.

- Be aware of professional resources that are available to help you successfully rebuild your life. In addition to therapy for the parents and children, there are a number of newer legal processes that are designed to make the divorce procedures much saner and less contentious. In this regard, it is important to know the meaning of the following three terms: *Mediation, parenting coordination and collaborative law*. Each of these processes is designed to make the marital dissolution less adversarial. In *mediation* the divorcing couple is assisted by a trained neutral facilitator to help them discuss various options and arrive at a marital settlement document that is acceptable to each spouse. No rights are given up unless an agreement is signed, and either party can elect to terminate the mediation at any point. *Parenting coordinators* (PC's) are appointed by a court, after the court has issued a parenting plan or ratified a settlement agreement signed by the parents. The PC is a trained mental health professional with expertise in relationships, communication, divorce and child rearing. The PC works with the couple as an educator and a facilitator of communication, to help the parents address problems that may arise in their mutual attempts to parent the children and interpret the court order (as it relates to parenting). In many cases, the PC can establish ground rules of behavior and help the couple iron out problems, so that an untenable situation becomes workable. Finally, *collaborative law* is a process whereby all the parties and their attorneys sign an agreement that the attorneys are representing them *for the purpose of arriving at a settlement agreement*. In collaborative law, all involved individuals agree that if either of the parties seek to subject their conflict to litigation, the attorneys will resign from the case and other legal counsel will be sought. Thus, from the outset, it is made clear that the attorneys' goal is not to fight, but to assist their clients in arriving at a workable, mutually-acceptable solution. For anyone who is interested in finding professionals who engage in the above legal processes, a good starting point would be to contact their state's Bar Association or Psychological Association.

Divorce has robbed many children of their childhoods and many adults of their sense of dignity and security. But it does not have to be this way. Although a well-managed divorce will still be a difficult time in one's life, it does not have to feel like the end of one's life. It is my hope that the above suggestions will help set divorcing couples and their effected communities on the path of healing.