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FEATURED TOPIC

DIVORCE: WHAT WENT WRONG?

The “D-Word” strikes at the heart of all married couples. Prenuptial agreements -- agreements made even before marriage -- all have provisions for what happens in the event of a divorce. Recent statistics suggest that 50% of all marriages in the United States will end in divorce. In Southern California the divorce rate is purported to be even higher, somewhere in the neighborhood of 60-75%, depending on which study one reads. In this article I will be exploring some of the reasons that people divorce, some of the consequences of divorce, ways to prevent divorce, and, when all else fails, approaches to divorce that can be less stressful to all of the parties involved.

Changing Expectations

The institution of marriage has changed dramatically over the past 100 years. Many factors played a part in this evolution. In the 1890s marriage was often a matter of convenience. Roles for men and women were clearly defined; each knew what was expected of them. Men were expected to work, with their primary responsibility being the family provider. Women were to take care of the home and bear children for whom they would then be the caretaker. Marriages were for the purpose of raising a family -- breeding children who would grow up to help with the chores, work the fields, or take over the family business.

With the industrial revolution, the second world war, and finally the technological revolution, much of this changed. Each of these revolutions provided greater leisure time, greater freedom from chores, and a reduction in the need for progeny to be junior workers -- in the field or in the home. Thus families had fewer children. W.W.II created a need for women to enter the work force. And when the war was over, they did not want to return to the home. Two-income families became the norm. Today women work for the same reasons men work, not just to provide a second income. They have their own careers, interests, and activities equal to men.

The family changed from “Dad wears the pants in the family” to Mom and Dad are partners in the business of family. The expectations men and women have of one another and subsequently of marriage have changed. Couples expect more of

one another and from their marriage. With increased information, leisure time, mobility, and affluence people have more time to learn about themselves and to experience various life styles. They have more contact with how other people live. They also have increased opportunity to learn about themselves. In less affluent times, when roles were clearly defined along gender lines, peoples’ self-concept remained static. Today, however, after being continuously bombarded with information and the possibility of change, the concept of self has become more dynamic.

When two people are married and over a period of years at least one person, if not both, undergoes a significant change in self-concept, the marriage will also change. The selves that married are no longer the same. If interests, goals, values change along with a changing self, you have a different dynamic set up between the two persons. In some cases this dynamic is such that the marriage no longer seems viable. When we combine this change with the awareness that we will be living longer, it appears more probable that people will seek a second or third partner with whom they feel more compatible.

It is no longer sufficient for a man simply to be a terrific provider and for a woman to be an outstanding homemaker. People expect more. Men and women want intimacy, romance, affection, understanding, commonality of interests, conversation, common values, and exciting sex, to mention a few of the more common requirements. They want an equal partnership with one another, where both parties participate

equally in all of the decisions pertaining to the home and to child-rearing, regardless of who is earning more money.

Increased longevity, increased affluence, and increased opportunity for personal growth, when combined with significantly changing expectations regarding marriage, suggest that people must learn new or different ways of relating to one another if their marriage is going to survive. When this is not possible, either for lack of desire, capacity, or interest on the part of one or both parties, divorce becomes an option.

Mortality

A magazine article I recently read stated that people, particularly women, who are currently age 65 are expected to live until 85. Younger people are expected to live longer, into their 90s. More and more people are reaching the age of 100 and beyond. It is becoming commonplace for people to have more than one career in a lifetime. After all, a youngster of 65 still has another 20 or more years in which to begin a new career. Young people today no longer think about a career that they will be in for the rest of their life; they think more about their "first" career, fully expecting a second or perhaps third career to follow.

These same young people are thinking about marriage in a similar vein. Many of them recognize that the concept of marriage "until death do us part" is more a figurative use of the phrase than a literal use. People currently in their 40s who married while in their 20s are realizing that to have one partner for a lifetime may be highly improbable. When you think about it, it is rather a minor miracle that two people, from different backgrounds, with different histories, and different needs, can find each other and live together for 20 or 30 years. But to live together for 50, 60, or 70 years...! The likelihood of two people growing in similar directions and similar paces would appear to be small. People in their 20s have different values, expectations, needs, and interests than they may have when in their 40s. And people in their 40s may be different than those in their 60s. Priorities and goals change. People change. As friends may grow apart as people grow and change, so may spouses.

Yet, in spite of the odds, many people are able to make marriage at least tolerable for many decades. Some people grow together, while others grow separately but are sufficiently satisfied with one another to remain together.

Negotiation and Compromise

Contemporary marriages have to rely upon different models than in previous generations. The metamorphosis of marriage has been underway since the 1950s. The models represented by "Father Knows Best," "I Love Lucy," and "Leave It To Beaver," where the man was the provider and the woman was the housewife, was the model of the day. In the 1980s we began to see a different model of marriage as represented by

"The Cosby Show," where two professional people were married and raising a family.

In previous generations a woman was taught to accommodate -- to put aside her needs in favor of the needs of the man. She was to accommodate her needs to him. This model of marriage reduced women to the status of wife, while elevating men to the status of husband. The power lay with the husband.

In a marriage of equals, constant accommodation on the part of one person will eventually cause resentment and subsequently conflict. Compromise and negotiation, on the other hand, recognizes the equality of both parties as they seek an equitable and mutually satisfying solution to a problem. In compromise neither party may get exactly what they want at any given time. In these marriages preservation and enhancement of the relationship is more important than getting what one wants. Couples must learn to let go the argument in the service of maintaining an intimate connection. When being right and winning becomes more important than the relationship, the marriage will be in trouble.

One of the most important aspects of contemporary marriage is learning how to negotiate. A successful marriage today has more in common with business negotiations than with "Father Knows Best." The better able a couple is in learning the skills of negotiation, the less conflict they will experience and the greater their satisfaction.

When either party is more interested in winning, not able or not willing to negotiate, and has poor communication skills, the more likely they will have the kinds of difficulties that will lead them to consider divorce.

Divorce: Failure or Change

Many people inappropriately believe that divorce means that they have failed. Not that the marriage failed, but that they personally failed -- hence they are a failure. It is as though they believe that when people marry it is supposed to last forever, as though it were preordained; thus, if the marriage ends they must have done something wrong to make it happen.

As we can see from the forgoing analysis, many factors contribute to the decision to divorce. No one takes the issue of divorce lightly. Endings, however, are a part of life. Everything has a life expectancy. People are finite, imperfect beings, living in an imperfect, constantly evolving, constantly changing world.

Change is the only constant. Hence, marriage is constantly evolving and imperfect. Sometimes two people are able to grow, change, and evolve in similar directions, sometimes not. Sometimes our expectations remain constant, more often they change. Sometimes our expectations are the same as our partners, and sometimes not. The longer we live, the more possi-

bility for change to be in different directions. “‘Til death do us part” is more likely when we live to be 50 than when we live to be 100.

Anger

All too often divorcing couples do so in an atmosphere of hostility. They forget that they once were in love with one another. This is indeed unfortunate. Divorce ranks second only to death of a loved one as the most stressful of life’s experiences. The stress is inevitable. But the strife is not.

Usually there are other variables at play that lead to the acrimony accompanying divorce. Frequently the acrimony covers pain and hurt. This is true regardless of who feels like the injured party. Pain is integral to loss. In a divorce there are many losses. The loss of the fantasy of marriage and the magic of the relationship, the loss of the friendship, the loss of friends, a lifestyle, a home, familiarity, children, loss of love, identity, to name but a few of the losses.

When we are angry we do not have to experience the hurt and the loss. We can cover the pain with anger, at least temporarily. Sometimes our anger is directed toward the other person for not being all that we wanted them to be or expected them to be. Sometimes we are angry because they other person did not change; we think, “if only s/he would change then we would not have to divorce.”

Sometimes we feel angry because we have been victimized by our spouse. We feel like the injured party and we want to fight back. We want to hurt the other person in the same way we feel hurt. So what do we do? We hire a lawyer to help us get back at our spouse. We want to hurt our spouse while we are protecting ourselves.

Sometimes we are angry at ourselves for not being a better spouse, for not knowing better, for not paying attention, for not being all that we might have been. Rather than get angry at ourselves, we get angry at our spouse. Sometimes we fight about who gets the dog or the dishes so we can feel empowered.

Sometimes we get depressed, too. We blame ourselves, we feel guilty. We are ashamed. So we hire a lawyer to help us give everything to our spouse in order to make amends for real or imagined hurts that we have inflicted.

Divorce Counseling and Divorce Mediation

One of the reasons that divorce often takes as long as it does is because many issues just mentioned are being acted out dur-

ing the course of the dissolution. An alternative to the expensive, stressful, and time-consuming approach of a litigated, hotly contested divorce is to try either divorce counseling and/or divorce mediation.

Divorce counseling, when conducted by a licensed mental health practitioner who specializes in working with divorcing couples, can help the couple sort out the emotional from the practical issues of the divorce. As I pointed out earlier, anger over practical issues such as property is usually a product of lingering resentment with regard to the relationship, not the property itself. Once the couple can resolve or at least clarify the cause of the anger, reasonable negotiations can occur. (Unfortunately, many couples have to learn the hard way that the court will, more often than not, come to the same conclusion regarding the property that the couple could have come to had they not been so angry.)

Divorce counseling is concerned with helping the couple gain some sense of closure regarding their relationship. It can help the parties grieve their loss preparing them to move into the future, perhaps not as friends, but at least not as enemies.

Divorce mediation is the healthy alternative to a litigated divorce. The focus of a mediated divorce is on reaching an equitable solution to such issues as spousal support, property division, child custody, visitation, etc. The couple meets with a mediator (or in my practice a mediation team consisting of a lawyer and a psychologist) to resolve each and every item. Without assessing blame or fault, the mediator helps the divorcing parties develop alternative solutions for addressing their specific areas of conflict.

By choosing mediation, the parties talk to each other, rather than through their attorneys. This direct communication resolves conflicts in less time and is less costly than traditional litigation. When children are involved in a dispute, the mediation process encourages parents to focus on their children’s best interests and to maintain a relationship with their children while the parties design a parenting plan.

Each party has control in a mutual, decision-making process. Mutual expression of perceptions, values and emotions are allowed, thereby reducing damage to important family relationships. This enables the parties to tailor a personalized agreement which resolves their individual and unique concerns and reflects the best interests of their children.

An important goal for successful mediation is reaching a fair agreement. The parties decide what is fair, not the attorneys and not a judge.

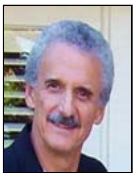
GOINGS ON

I have partnered with family attorney, Deborah A. Aptaker, to form a new entity called **Alternatives: Divorce Mediation**. Divorce mediation is the healthy alternative to a litigated divorce. *Working as a team*, Deborah and I meet with a divorcing couple to work through all of the issues involved in a dissolution -- property, support, custody, and parenting plans. We complete and file all of the necessary documents and, in most instances, the couple never has to enter a courtroom. Divorce Mediation provides a forum for dealing with the emotional issues as well as the practical issues thus reducing the inevitable stress that divorce entails. In addition to being less stressful, Divorce Mediation is far less expensive than a litigated divorce.

I have also added a program designed to help people quit the smoking habit in as little as three weeks. Utilizing a program designed at Duke University Medical School which uses a combination of the most effective techniques for breaking the smoking habit -- three individual consulting sessions, nicotine fading, hypnosis, nicotine patch, and a cigarette substitute.

My practice now includes the following services: individual and group psychotherapy, marital and relationship counseling, sex therapy, vocational and career assessment and counseling, quit smoking instruction, and divorce mediation.

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Dr. Edward A. Dreyfus is a Clinical Psychologist, Marriage, Family, Child Therapist, and Sex Therapist. He received his Doctor of Philosophy in Clinical Psychology from the University of Kansas and his Master's and Bachelor's degrees from the City University of New York. His credentials include: Diplomate in Professional Psychotherapy from the International Academy of Behavioral Medicine, Counseling, and Psychotherapy; Diplomate and Clinical Supervisor of the American Board of Sexology; Fellow of the International Council of Sex Education and Parenthood of the American University; Certified Sex Therapist of the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, & Therapists; Clinical Fellow, American Academy of Clinical Sexologists; and Fellow of the American Psychological Association. He is listed in the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology and the National Registry of Certified Group Psychotherapists.

Dr. Dreyfus has been providing high quality psychological services in the Los Angeles-Santa Monica area for over 30 years. He provides psychological services to individuals, couples, families, groups, and businesses. His concern for the health of individual extends to applying principles of health psychology to facilitate adjustment to illness, surgery, and disability. He offers workshops in quitting smoking, consultation to businesses in conflict resolution, out-placement counseling, and executive consultation services. In addition to providing individual psychotherapy to adolescents and adults, he offers group therapy, divorce mediation, couples counseling, group therapy, and career and vocational counseling and assessment.

His other professional interests include working with the homeless and underprivileged, conflict resolution, and training of professionals. He is an active member of the national, state and local professional associations and has published extensively in professional journals. He has published three books; his most recent book, **Someone Right For You** (TAB/McGraw-Hill), a guide for finding an appropriate mate, is currently available in book stores.

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