

A THERAPIST'S GUIDE TO **SURVIVING DIVORCE**



The emotional stages of divorce

Ending your marriage is not just a legal technicality; there are also the emotional stages of divorce to work through. While not everyone experiences them to the same degree, there are predictable emotions that need to be recognized and worked through. Ignoring your emotional reactions can add unnecessary pain and inhibit your ability to move on.

The important thing to remember is that all of these emotions are normal, but while some are readily acknowledged by the people experiencing them, others are so uncomfortable that it's difficult even to admit they exist.

Being sad when a marriage ends is natural. Although it's painful, grief is a healthy emotional response to the loss of an important relationship. We are hardwired to feel it, and it wouldn't be reasonable to expect otherwise. While sorrow and grief can be very hard to handle, most people do understand and accept the inevitability of these feelings.

The wide array of emotional states that many people experience during the early stages of the divorce process can diminish their capacity to think clearly, impair their judgment, and make rational decision-making difficult or impossible.

Through the emotional impact of a divorce can be severe, the recovery process does have a beginning, middle and end, and the pain and confusion will gradually lighten and finally go away. However, the better equipped you are to handle the transition, the easier it will be.

DENIAL

„This is not happening to me. It's all a misunderstanding. It's just a midlife crisis. We can work it out.“

ANGER

How can you do this to me? What did I ever do to deserve this? This is not fair!“

BARGAINING

„If you'll stay, I'll change. If I agree to do it your way, can we get back together?“

DEPRESSION

„This is really happening, I can't do anything about it, and I don't think I can bear it.“

ACCEPTANCE

„Okay, this is how it is, and I'd rather accept it and move on than wallow in the past.“

TRANSFORMING THE TURBULENCE OF CHANGE INTO OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE



The end of a bad marriage can feel like a much needed relief, but can also be painful, stressful and overwhelming. While many assume that divorce is a process of closure, if you are not prepared to let go and move on, you can be stuck in your unhealthy relationship long after it has ended. If you are divorced, something wasn't the way you intended or wanted it to be, but without taking the right steps to uncovering what went wrong, you will likely end up making the same mistakes all over again. This process is not about shame or guilt, but about openness for self-discovery.

1. RECOGNIZE WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

Life is a constant cycle of things coming together and falling apart. Healing within this process comes from allowing space for all this to happen, which means making room for grief, relief, misery or joy, without trying to *understand it*. When we think that something is going to bring us either happiness or pain, we actually have no way of really knowing. Understanding that we don't know is an important step in this process. When there's a big life disappointment, it can feel like the tragic end of a story, but it might just be the beginning of a great adventure.

2. NOTHING MORE THAN FEELINGS

Humans have a broad range of emotions for a reason, so allow yourself to feel them. It is important to recognize what you are feeling, and natural to feel sad, angry, frustrated and hurt following a divorce. It is equally important, though, not to attach a story or judgment to that feeling, or react and lash out from that place. Simply feel.

3. CHALLENGE YOUR THOUGHTS

The thoughts we have play a powerful role in our lives- triggering our emotions, forming our beliefs and directing our actions. When life doesn't go the way we want or expect, negative thoughts can take over, which only leads to more suffering. Try to notice your thoughts and question: How true is that? Then look for evidence that disproves that thought.

4. GIVE UP THE VICTIM CARD

It seems counterintuitive, but playing the victim is a method of self-protection, trapping us in pain in order to excuse us from accountability and taking action. Being the victim means someone or something else has control over you. Make an empowered choice, and take responsibility for your life and your life choices.

5. DATE YOURSELF

It is tempting to rush right out of an ending relationship and into the arms of a new one. Don't. Take some time for yourself, rediscovering what you find fun and exciting. Look for interesting things happening in your community and take yourself out. Truly learning to enjoy being alone by focusing on yourself will help you build positive and healthy relationships in the future that aren't based on dependency.

6. LEARN YOUR LOVE LANGUAGE

In his book, *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman introduced the revolutionary concept of love languages. We each speak a main love language, giving and receiving in ways that we know and understand. If your partner didn't speak the same language, no wonder things broke down. The five love languages are: words of affirmation, acts of service, gifts, physical touch and quality time. Learn yours.

7. KNOW YOUR FEARS

We all have fears, usually triggered by events in our childhood, and they are often at the root of our relationship issues. We may fear abandonment, rejection or loneliness, and then make subconscious and destructive choices that ensure our fears won't play out. Review your relationship, looking for trigger points, and see if you can identify the fears that may be responsible. Knowing your fears can help you successfully navigate future relationships.

8. CHANGE IT UP

Challenge yourself to do things that are new, different and out of your comfort zone. The power of doing, as opposed to thinking, can rewire unhelpful habits and patterns, and new behavioral experiences lead to new thoughts. A divorce is a clear sign that something didn't go right, so break out of old patterns by doing something different and differently.

9. COCOON

Surround yourself with people who love you and treat you well. Now is a great time to take stock of your social circle to ensure that you have people in your life who not only support you, but encourage your growth. Be on the lookout for people who are happy, positive and proactive.

10. CREATE

One of the best ways to connect to your feelings is to tap into the power of creative expression. Find a medium that speaks to you- art, music, dance, writing- and allow yourself to get absorbed by the process. You'll be amazed by what comes out. Using painful experiences as a platform for art is a great way to *experience* memories instead of trying to bury them, which is a large part of the process of healing.

THE HEALING POWER OF CREATIVITY

DOODLE

Drawing spontaneously without an agenda can help express and release negative emotions, bridge the gap between the conscious and unconscious mind and illuminate areas that are blocked, inhibited and stuck. *Find your own way of expression with markers, pencil crayons, pastels or even a ballpoint pen.*



JOURNAL

Try journal or free flow writing to get to know yourself better, have a safe place to express your voice and practice honest self-expression. Writing down intensely charged thoughts helps to release stressful and painful emotions. *As thoughts arise, write them down spontaneously without worrying about whether they make sense.*



MEDITATE

Even if you don't have a spare hour to sit and meditate, you can reap the benefits of meditation by practicing for a few minutes at a time. Learning how to quiet our minds can increase focus, calm, and an attitude of acceptance. *Look for spare moments in your life when you can close your eyes, breath deeply and turn off the voices in your head.*



MOVE

Emotions get stuck and stored in our bodies and movement breaks up that stagnation of stored emotional patterning, opening up fresh ways of thinking. *Find what works for you- dancing in your living room to music, yoga, exercise or a local dance class, to let go of unwanted stored negativity.*



LUXURIATE

During times of stress we tend to overlook taking care of ourselves, causing a ripple effect of harm. The negative effects of stress are well documented, so do what you can to de-stress, find calm and feel good. *It doesn't have to be extravagant - take a bubble bath, get a massage, listen to music, or buy some flowers.*



LETTING GO OF GUILT

BY CHANGING YOUR LIMITING BELIEFS



1. YOU CANNOT SHIELD YOUR CHILDREN FROM PAIN. All children have problems and challenges, not just children of divorce. That is a standard part of human growth and development.

2. NOTHING YOU CAN SAY OR DO WILL CHANGE THE REALITY OF YOUR DIVORCE.

Although I can love and support my child through this process, I can't change reality. The only path forward is to accept the divorce for what it is.

3. IT'S OK TO SAY NO. Don't let your guilt convince you that you can never say no to your child. Learning how to gracefully deal with "no" is an important part of growing up.

4. IT'S OK TO TAKE SHORTCUTS. You don't have to be a perfect parent, but you should strive to be an attentive one. Look for the areas in your life that you can simplify and don't feel guilty about doing it.

5. YOU'LL BE A BETTER PARENT IF YOU TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF. You cannot be fully present for your children if you are overwhelmed, stressed-out and falling apart. Take care of yourself!

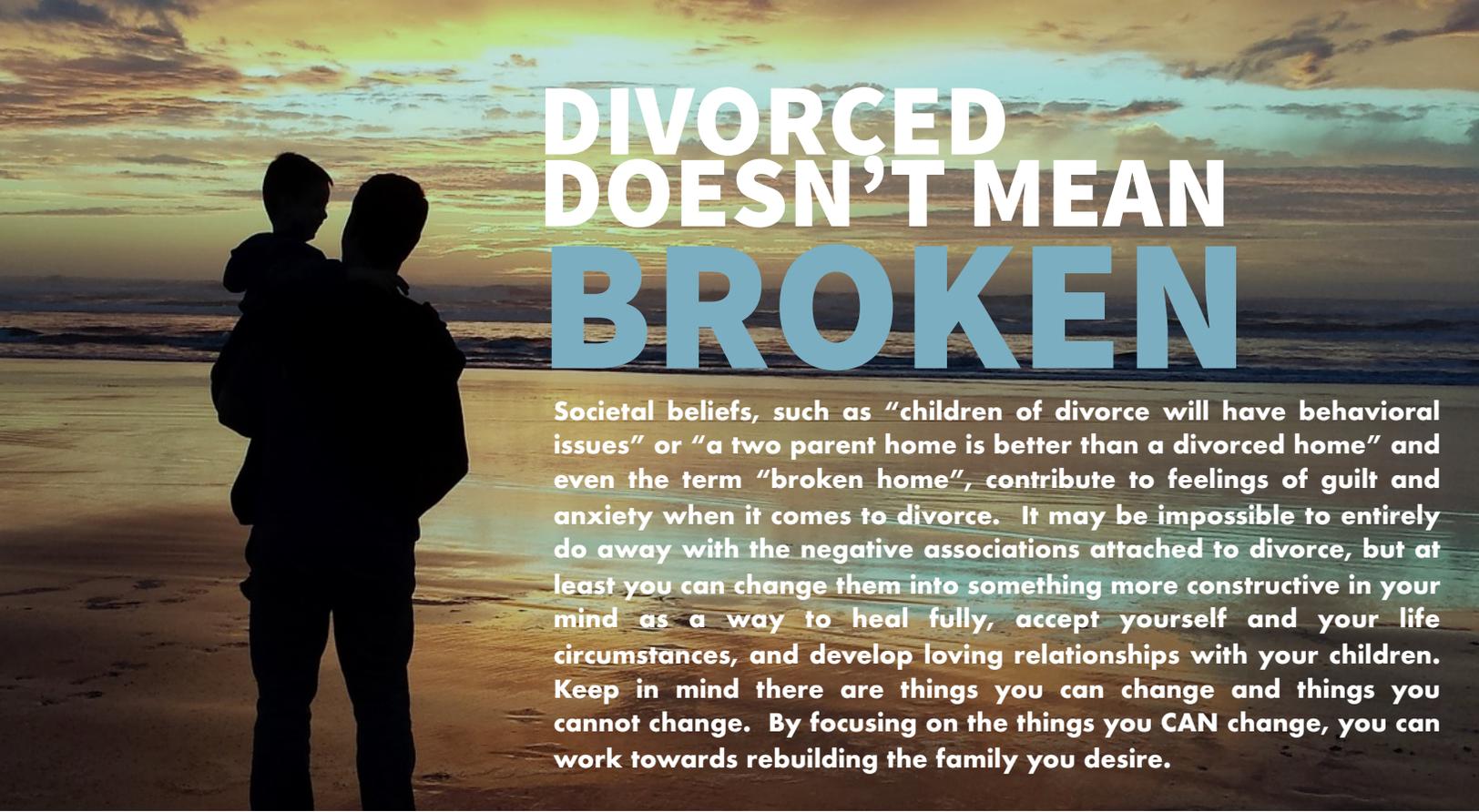
6. YOU AND YOUR CO-PARENT HAVE SPARED YOUR CHILDREN THE PAIN OF WITNESSING CONFLICT. Do everything in your power to build a workable relationship with your co-parent, so that you're not still married to the conflict.

7. THERE ARE MANY HAPPY, HEALTHY, SUCCESSFUL ADULTS WHO ARE CHILDREN OF DIVORCE. Don't make assumptions on how your children will turn out because of the divorce. Every challenge is an opportunity for growth. Let your children discover that.

8. DIVORCE IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO TEACH YOUR CHILDREN THE VALUES OF RESPECT, HONOR, LOVE AND TRUST. Every relationship needs work and attention to flourish, including the one between you and your child. Find the teachable moments.

9. YOUR FAILED MARRIAGE IS NOT A REFLECTION OF YOUR ABILITY TO BE LOVING. It is important to self-reflect and do the inner work required to understand why your divorce happened, but don't lose sight of the fact that you are a loving parent.

10. FAMILIES COME IN ALL DIFFERENT SHAPES. When a divorce happens, a *new* family arrangement takes place. Not a broken one. Create the family you want, without getting caught up in the pain of what no longer exists.



DIVORCED DOESN'T MEAN BROKEN

Societal beliefs, such as “children of divorce will have behavioral issues” or “a two parent home is better than a divorced home” and even the term “broken home”, contribute to feelings of guilt and anxiety when it comes to divorce. It may be impossible to entirely do away with the negative associations attached to divorce, but at least you can change them into something more constructive in your mind as a way to heal fully, accept yourself and your life circumstances, and develop loving relationships with your children. Keep in mind there are things you can change and things you cannot change. By focusing on the things you CAN change, you can work towards rebuilding the family you desire.

HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE

- If possible, be sure your child has frequent and regular contact with your co-parent.
- Never criticize your co-parent in front of your child.
- Maintain a calm, positive attitude in your child’s presence.
- Create as much consistency as possible, establishing and sticking to a normal daily routine.
- Encourage your child to talk about his/her feelings.
- Anticipate signs of stress and work together to build coping skills.

LET YOUR CHILD KNOW...

- They are not at fault
- It is ok to wish that parents would get back together
- They will always be loved and safe
- It is not bad or wrong to feel sad or upset, but there are positive ways of expressing and dealing with these feelings

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

The words we use have tremendous power over how we think. Using the term “ex” can continue to reinforce in your mind the negative relationship you had.

Try substituting for “co-parent” for “ex” to gently remind yourself of the new parameters of your relationship: working together to do what’s best for your child.

RESOURCES

CONSIDERING THERAPY

Divorce can be an incredibly difficult transition, and parents going through it might be drained of the emotional resources necessary to help their children, who are also experiencing pain, loss and grief.

Turning to therapy does not mean that you are a “bad” parent, that there is something “wrong” with your child, or that you have in some way failed them. Consider that seeking professional help can help ease this process for you and your family, providing you and your child(ren) with the tools necessary to let go of pain and find happiness.

Interested in
WORKSHOPS + COURSES
geared specifically to
address the challenges of
single parenting?

Find more info here!