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Thomas W. Merrill

Columbia Law School, tmerri@law.columbia.edu

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The Nuttiness of Divorce

Your thoughts and feelings may reflect where you are in the process

BY
GEOFFREY HAMILTON
AND
THOMAS MERRILL

The erratic, emotional "nuttiness" of divorce is predictable. Rest assured, however, you are not crazy. You are merely responding to the temporary emotional upheaval in your life. To help you better understand what you are experiencing, we have put together a brief explanation of the psychological stages or phases that accompany the legal process of divorce.

Deliberation Phase: This is the period between which the idea of divorce surfaces and the divorce is implemented. This is a stressful time. During this phase, you may feel a great sense of loss, as if you had just lost a great job or recently discovered serious health or money problems. The more stress you feel, the more likely your stress will impact the marriage. During this phase, individuals rarely understand what's going on.

Typically, the parties have not talked directly about the problems in the relationship. Rather, one or both parties is engaging in indirect,

covert, destructive behavior. Often, the person who initiates the divorce (the Initiator) begins "rewriting" the history of the marriage or the image of the other spouse to justify the eventual split. Rewriting simply involves selecting, coloring, and emphasizing the "bad stuff": unresolved hurts from the past or behavior that does not currently work. By glossing over or ignoring the "good stuff," he or she can conclude that the divorce is appropriate.

This process is a matter of deliberate, subjective choice. Its purpose is to *justify* a decision that has already been made. During this period, the couple (often unknowingly) approaches the marital point of no return. From this point on, without positive intervention, the parties' behaviors and actions propel them toward divorce. Generally, confrontation regarding divorce and separation mark the end of this stage.

As a rule of thumb, the issues that fuel the deliberation process (the Initiator's perception of serious problems in the marriage) are not fly by night. A Gallup poll of divorcing

couples indicates that more than 70 percent were aware—from the beginning of the marriage or at some point during the marriage—of marital problems that ultimately led to the divorce. Only 22 percent discovered the source of the problem just before the breakup.

In hindsight, people appear to have remarkably few regrets about the decision to separate and divorce. In a Gallup poll, only 12 percent felt "they should have stayed together," whereas 82 percent felt that separating and divorcing was the right decision. Seventy percent felt that the problems that led to the separation and divorce were "too difficult to solve" as opposed to problems that "might have been solved had the parties stayed together."

These statistics are all the more remarkable in light of the fact that in roughly 85 percent of divorces, one party is a clear-cut initiator and the other party, to a greater or lesser degree, does not want the divorce. In retrospect, this may be another example of "rewriting history": subjectively justifying the divorce. Or, it

Children often carry the "baggage" of their parents' divorce into their own adult courtships and marriage. They tend to view relationships and marriage as temporary, unstable, and threatening

may simply be that a substantial majority of the divorced population feels that, in hindsight, their divorce was the right thing.

Decision Phase: Communication of the intent to divorce ends the deliberation phase. Often, there is a brief, but intense decision-making phase during which the intent to divorce is openly communicated, but the outcome remains in doubt. Such communication frequently opens a Pandora's box.

Family members and friends get involved, offering unsolicited advice, opinions, and their own "spin" on what could or should have been done (the classical "I told you so!") and what could or should happen now.

The "Non-Initiator," now stung and fully awakened from a period of denial or simply oblivious to his or her spouse's discontent, enters the fray and retaliates in some fashion to deflect the pain of rejection or to punish the Initiator or derail the decision to divorce. Often the Initiator, wounded by guilt or outcry from family or friends, loses motivation and reconsiders. If he or she proceeds with the divorce, the parties move to the Transition Phase.

Transition Phase: ("Crazy Time"): This period is fraught with the potential for a wide range of crazy behavior. It most likely will be a time of nuttiness as one or both partners face head-on the need to let go. Although the partners may have separated at the end of the previous stage, this period requires emotional or psychological separation.

As Dr. Judith Wallerstein describes, sexual acting out is common during this phase. Men often become "hip, hirsute, and horny." Both men and women may become obsessed with sexual fantasies. Terminating a period of attachment that may span many years is difficult and may, in some

cases, be impossible. Viewing one's life as inextricably interwoven with an ex-partner's may leave some spouses feeling as if life itself will end with the divorce.

No-fault divorce does not make things easier. As Dr. Wallerstein found in her studies, many people inevitably see one party as more responsible than the other for the divorce. Fault lives on—at least beneath the legal surface.

Litigation Phase: Although litigation is not an emotional stage, it is superimposed on the emotional process of divorce. Generally, a contested divorce takes about one year. The process is considerably shorter if the parties can reach an amicable agreement.

Once the legal process begins in earnest, each partner's role is redefined. This can be a period of tremendous growth or stagnation and despair. Often it is a combination of both.

Healing Phase: This period is marked by a commitment to the future and the promise of a new life. In the absence of the other partner, individuals begin to refine their "Self." This period of moving on fosters a new stability that often continues indefinitely.

Three important caveats

It is important to realize that these psychological stages can overlap. You or your spouse can be in one or more stages simultaneously and can regress to a previous stage at any time. In addition, the Initiator experiences the divorce differently than the Non-Initiator.

Coupled with the predictable stages of divorce are predictable emotions, fears, or feelings. *Rejection* is the most basic, universal feeling for the Non-Initiator—along with anger; loneliness; confusion; self-

doubt; depression; a fear of making mistakes, of being inadequate, of going over the "edge;" anxiety over the unknown; self-pity; and, believe it or not, euphoria.

Gender Differences: Research suggests that after separation, women generally need more time than men to get their lives back on track. This is somewhat surprising, given that women more often than not initiate the divorce. Men seem to undergo less psychological changes following a divorce.

What Happens to the Children?: At least, one-third of all American children will spend at least part of their childhood and youth in a "broken" family. As Dr. Judith Wallerstein and Dr. Joan Kelly point out, children respond to divorce differently than their parents:

We were surprised at first to find that many marriages that had been unhappy for adults had been reasonably comfortable, even gratifying, for the children, and that very few of the children concurred in their parents' decision or experienced relief at the time of separation. Five years after the separation, most of the adults approved the divorce decision and only one-fifth of them felt strongly that the divorce had been ill-advised. Among the children, however, over one-half did not regard the divorced family as an improvement over their pre-divorced family. Many of these youngsters, some of whom were doing well, would have preferred to turn back the clock and return to the pre-divorced family, despite its remembered failings.

Furthermore, most of the adults, especially the women, were feeling better, despite the greater economic pressures and

many stresses of their lives in the post-divorced family. Their self-esteem was higher and their overall psychological adjustment was considerably improved. And, ... many of their somatic symptoms and their psychological dysfunctions disappeared during the post-divorce years.

Unlike the adults who felt considerably improved after the divorce, the children and adolescents did not, as a group, show an improvement in their psychological health during the years following the separation period. Only those children who were physically separated by divorce from a rejecting or demeaning or a psychiatrically disturbed father showed improvement compared to that of adults.

Wallerstein & Kelly, *Surviving the Breakup*, 1980, pages 305-306.

Children of divorcing parents often have a difficult time. Parents generally have a diminished capacity to parent effectively just when their children need them the most. In addition, children blame themselves for the divorce and undertake inappropriate personal responsibility for one or both parents.

Children going through a divorce need three things from their parents:

1. The best possible relationship with each parent, regardless of the level of hostility or distance between the parents.

2. Protection from parental disputes. In other words, don't fight in front of or around your children (covertly or overtly), and don't try to convince the children of the right-

3. A supportive parenting environment in which each parent encourages the other to have a positive, ongoing relationship with the children.

In the long-term, children of divorce are reluctant to end up like their parents. They want to protect their own children from the trauma they have experienced. They tend to be more conservative about "conventional morality," emphasizing the importance of "a good marriage, commitment, romantic love that lasts, and faithfulness."

In addition, these children often carry the "baggage" of their parents' divorce into their own adult courtships and marriage. They tend to view relationships and marriage as temporary, unstable, and threatening. They often are waiting for betrayal and rejection by a partner or spouse. Because of these fears, they seek to avoid a permanent relationship and end up living alone or going through a series of uncommitted, shallow relationships.

The process is predictable but prolonged pain and suffering needn't be a part of it. Parents can help their children and themselves survive the divorce by understanding and processing their feelings in a constructive way and talking with their children about their fears and feelings about the divorce. ■

Geoffrey Hamilton is a cofounder and director of Char Hamilton Campbell & Thom in Honolulu, and a fellow in the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers. Thomas Merrill is a psychologist and past president of the Hawaii Psychological Association and the Hawaii State Board of Psychology. This article was adapted from an earlier version published in the *Hawaii Bar Journal*.