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### **THE POSTDIVORCE PHASE**

After divorce the former spouses may still suffer from feelings of hurt, self-pity, despair, anxiety, anger, self-blame, guilt, or remorse. Some have to deal with an acute sense of shame and failure, feel isolated and alienated, suffer from depression and sharp mood swings. Many fear not having the strength to cope with single life or single parenthood, are disoriented, feel helpless and insecure. Often their emotional state leads to lack of concentration and fatigue, with a resulting negative impact on their work performance. Some try to avoid facing the pain of family breakup by turning to alcohol and drugs. In the course of the postdivorce phase, however, negative feelings decrease in intensity and in many cases disappear totally. This development is facilitated by the growing acceptance of divorce: "Increased social approval of personal decisions based on need for individual fulfillment and growth has provided an ideology which allows a quick recovery from feelings of guilt and inadequacy when

the marriage fails. The reduced concern with guilt and blame, both self-assumed and defensively projected, reduces some of the trauma associated with divorce" (Rosenthal and Keshet 1981, p. 97). However, many divorced individuals still experience social discrimination (Spanier and Thompson 1984).

Most former spouses work through the experiences of separation and divorce on a cognitive and emotional level. They mourn the end of their marriage and the loss of all the time and energy invested in their partnership. They also deal with memories, the ghost of the ex-spouse and their feelings (love, hate, hostility, and the like) for him or her. In the course of time, however, they accept the divorce and stop analyzing their marriage. According to a study of 210 divorced individuals (Spanier and Thompson 1984) more than 90 percent had accepted the end of their marriage within two years after separation. Only 9 percent were still angry with their former spouses. In general, it is more difficult to accept the divorce if the marriage was calm in the final months, if the spouse was highly committed to it, if the individual still loves his or her ex-partner, or if he or she has been deserted. The process of psychic divorce usually is more difficult and takes longer. It encompasses purging the former spouse from one's inner self. In order to get some help in achieving the psychic divorce and in dealing with all the feelings resulting from separation, many divorcees consult mental health professionals.

During the postdivorce phase the process of establishing two separate households and of developing a new life-style is continued: "The tempo which characterizes extricating from the former marriage and becoming involved differently in parenting, work, recreation and/or social activities, is an individual matter" (Kaslow 1984, p. 36). The former spouses develop new daily routines and new coping skills, set different goals and priorities. Men become proficient in domestic tasks, while newly employed women gain job experience and a network of colleagues; both invest less in traditional role aspects and thus become more androgynous. In a study of 30 divorced custodial parents (Wedemeyer and Johnson 1982), for example, twice as many women than men mentioned their pleasure in their achievements at work, feeling that they have demonstrated their independence and survival skills. The former spouses develop a new identity as single individuals and get accustomed to their new role at work, in the social sphere, and in relating to the other sex. They become aware of the advantages and problems of being single, integrate new experiences, and become confident in their ability to cope with their new status.

Many former spouses focus inwardly, try to learn about them-

selves, and discover new sides of their personality. Other divorcees try to achieve personal transformation and growth not by self-examination but by experimenting with new life-styles: "Some persons redefine themselves . . . through hairstyle, new wardrobe, type of leisure and social activity selected, new hobbies, and new ways of relating sexually" (Turner 1980, p. 163). They may change jobs, return to college, travel, or engage in creative pursuits. Some live through several different patterns out of curiosity, the realization of new choices, and a sense of freedom and autonomy.

In general, it may take from six months to four years to recover from the divorce experience, to return to normalcy, and to settle down in a new life-style. According to a study of 210 divorced individuals (Spanier and Thompson 1984), roughly 20 percent did not have a sense of well-being after two years. They had a dim view of themselves, their health, and their current life. Many of them were still attached to the former spouse, harbored strong feelings for him or her, were lonely, and had financial problems (cp. Pett and Vaughan-Cole 1986). Often an individual decides by himself or herself that the transitional period is over. After having interviewed 34 middle-aged divorcees, Cauhapé (1983) reports: "I found that passage termination appears to occur by choice. That is, termination is controlled by a person's decision that a goal is reached, and hence, no more time in passage is necessary" (p. 7).

### *Network Changes*

After divorce the split of the family's network into two relatively unconnected subsystems continues. Usually the members of each subsystem exonerate the respective spouse from blame and join him or her in faultfinding. They create their own version of the divorce and the motives for separation. If the spouses had children, the other half of the network may interfere with visits, make threatening gestures, or try to alienate the children from their second parent. Especially in these cases the children suffer great loyalty conflicts and feel torn between the two subsystems. Quite often they become the only connecting link between both sides. Tolsdorf (1981) observes: "Communication between the subsystems, and sometimes between the parents, became all but non-existent, in which case the children became the only means of passing information from one subsystem of the network to the other" (p. 277). Sometimes the grandparents on the side of the nonresidential parent make strenuous efforts to maintain contact with their grandchildren. Via them the children may meet uncles, aunts, and cousins. In some cases the split between the two

subsystems is less marked. A few spouses who do not understand the end of their marriage may even turn to their in-laws for insight into their partner's actions and motives.

Support needed during the postdivorce phase is usually mobilized within one's own subsystem of the family's network. The family of origin rallies around the divorced spouse and helps, even if family members did not approve of the separation. In general, women and divorced parents with children receive more moral and financial support, as well as more services from relatives, friends, and former in-laws than do men and divorced individuals without children (Spanier and Thompson 1984). Services needed by them are assistance in finding permanent housing, baby-sitting, advice, and help with errands, housework, repairs, or moving the household. In general, divorced spouses with a strong support network fare better. Thus Daniels-Mohring and Berger (1984) report after having studied 42 divorced individuals: "More relational needs are being met by fewer persons within the high adjustment group of subjects. In addition, the high adjustment group reports more than twice as many relationships in which emotional integration and reassurance of worth needs are being met" (p. 27). Moreover, less change in the social network was related to a more positive self-concept and a higher sense of well-being.

As most former spouses lose friends after separation and divorce, they often feel lonely. According to a study of 210 divorced individuals (Spanier and Thompson 1984) 30 percent experienced severe loneliness and 55 percent felt somewhat lonely during the two years since separation. They longed for opposite- or same-sex friends, for their former spouse and their children. Although many of them had found new friends (men reported a greater number of them than women), almost half expressed a desire for more friends two years after separation. In general, divorced individuals find more friends among singles than among couples. Some make acquaintances in self-help groups (for example, Parents Without Partners) or in church-related groups, which also offer emotional support.

### *Dating*

The majority of former spouses start dating within six months of their final separation (Spanier and Thompson 1984). Many feel insecure about where to meet others and how to approach them, are uncertain regarding their attractiveness, are concerned about rejection, and do not want to be hurt again. These are especially problems for older divorcees and middle-aged women. In general, dating

helps one to adjust to divorce, reaffirms one's worth, remedies loneliness, and facilitates role reconstruction and identity formation. Sometimes it also allows them to deny the pain of divorce.

Several different dating patterns can be observed (cp. Cauhapé 1983, Kessler 1975, Rosenthal and Keshet 1981, Spanier and Thompson 1984, Turner 1980). For some individuals the postdivorce phase is a time of transitional sexual contacts and of sexual experimentation ("second adolescence"). They sometimes cohabit with changing partners or even date more than one person at a time; they try to prove their sexual appeal and prowess (men may also date considerably younger women). They may get emotionally involved if one of these dating relationships continues for a longer time. However, they may also terminate it because they do not feel ready for new commitments and dependencies. If they have children, they often do not want any interference by the new partner with the parent-child relationship.

In other cases the former spouses become overinvolved in one very close, warm, and compassionate relationship in which they seek nurturance and understanding. Some divorcees start to look for a new spouse at once after separation. This is often the case if they do not manage well alone, that is, if they lack skills or resources, have financial problems, or need someone to take care of the children. Single parents look for a partner who gets along well with their children and try to integrate him or her slowly and carefully into their family. In a few cases the former spouses remarry directly after divorce. They frequently have found a new partner before choosing to separate and may have kept him or her secret. However, most extramarital relationships do not lead to marriage and usually do not last long. A few divorcees do not date because they are afraid of the risks involved, are self-absorbed, or do not want to disturb the relationship with their children.

### *Relationship between Former Spouses*

"The partnership between husband and wife does not end with separation. The partnership continues in memory or hope, if not in actuality" (Spanier and Thompson 1984, p. 161). Usually there is still some contact between the former spouses for long periods of time. Spanier and Thompson (1984) asked 210 individuals separated for approximately two years about any contact with their ex-partners in the past few weeks. They found out that many had spoken to their former spouses by phone (59.5 percent) or in person (49.8 percent), had heard from him or her by letter (10.2 percent), had written to him or

her (7.3 percent), had gone out together (10.2 percent), or even had sex together (4.4 percent). A quarter of the respondents remained close, half tolerated some contact, and the rest preferred to have nothing to do with the ex-spouse. Many still experienced some feelings of attachment and would have liked to have more contact. Usually the relationship between the former spouses became less tense. However, 30 percent reported no change or an increase of tension during the two years since divorce. According to another study of 80 divorced couples (Ahrns and Wallisch 1987) 80 percent of the respondents reported little or no involvement in each other's life one year after divorce. Only five percent still were much involved. After another two years there was even less involvement. About 30 percent of the divorcees reported some love or feelings of friendship for the former spouse. Roughly half of them were indifferent, and a quarter experienced negative feelings (one and three years after divorce). Those who were left by the spouse were more likely to maintain strong emotions of love or hate. In general, the current relations between former partners are dependent on the quality of the final months of marriage and the circumstances of the separation.

Usually there is more contact between the former spouses if they have children. According to the aforementioned study, 21 percent of the couples had a relatively high degree of parental interaction one year after divorce; 59 percent reported a moderate amount and 21 percent a low amount. Two years later only nine percent mentioned a high degree of parental interaction. "At one year following the divorce, about 45 percent of the parents reported spending time together with their children. Two years later, only about 30 percent reported spending time together as a binuclear family. The most frequently mentioned activities participated in together were holidays and celebrations (58 percent), eating together (42 percent), and school activities (29 percent). Only about 10 percent said that they visited grandparents and other relatives together" (Ahrns and Wallisch 1987, p. 280). In these cases the nuclear family had reorganized itself in a "binuclear" structure with two households as one family unit.

Those in contact with their former spouses mostly talk about major decisions regarding the children, about their children's accomplishments and problems, about child support, daily happenings, and practical or personal problems. They avoid topics like the former marriage, causes of divorce, reconciliation, new relationships, or the children's divorce adjustment (Ahrns and Wallisch 1987, Spanier and Thompson 1984). In general, there is a higher amount of interaction in joint custody cases or if the frequency of visitation is high. Ac-

According to the aforementioned study of Ahrons and Wallisch (1987), about half of the 80 former couples reported conflicts and tensions with respect to parenting issues one and three years after divorce. Often mentioned problems are unclear visitation rights, lack of flexibility in scheduling visits, lack of separation between child-rearing and partnership issues, and financial tensions.

Several relationship patterns between former spouses can be observed. A few become friends and relate in constructive ways, although they lack adequate role models and are not supported by the community. Some develop a cooperative relationship but are emotionally detached. They do not share intimate details and rarely meet socially. If they have children, they stay in regular contact with each other, with both sides initiating contact. Usually there are some coparenting and mutual support (low level of conflict). Other cases display considerable enmeshment, emotional entanglement, confusion, and conflict. The former spouses are still involved in each other's life; they may use every "reason" to contact each other, may spend some time together, and may meet each other socially. Sometimes there are conflicts on child-rearing issues. In other cases, the ex-spouses become lifelong enemies. Usually patterns of continuing conflict, unfriendliness, blaming, and little communication as established in the divorce phase are maintained and may even lead to chronic litigation. If they have children, there may be new disputes about parenting, access, and the like. Sometimes intermediaries are used for communication. Another group of former spouses disengage and have nearly no contact with each other. If members of this group have children, the noncustodial parents remove themselves from their lives or keep minimum contact.

### *Child-rearing Issues*

Parents often have great difficulties in handling their children after divorce, as the latter may show disturbed behaviors and may be symptomatic as a result of suffering from the family transitions. Usually this situation improves with time. The parent-child relationship is normalized, and the amount of communication with children increases. Parents with sole custody acquire a new range of skills, because the single-parent role incorporates all characteristics of distinct traditional roles. They have to be providers, child nurturers and disciplinarians, homemakers, and decision makers. All these responsibilities and the need to spend more time for their children contribute to many feeling overburdened, exhausted, and stressed. They have little time for themselves, are more likely to feel

lonely and isolated, and frequently experience conflicts between their child-care obligations and their career or their relationship with new partners. However, children may also be a major source of support. Sometimes the parents confide their personal problems to them and ask for advice. They may expect too much of their children and dilute generational boundaries thereby disturbing their children's development (overinvolvement). Similar problems can result from transferring the love for the lost partner to a child.

Today there is a growing number of single-parent fathers; in 1980 there were already more than one million of such households (Gladding and Huber 1984). Men usually become single-parent fathers involuntarily; that is, the mothers may have deserted their families, may abuse substances, may be sick or mentally unstable, and the like. If fathers become single parents by choice, they can often afford to employ someone to look after their children. At the beginning they usually experience stress and role strain: "The role of the single-parent father is unclear. Men who take on this responsibility undergo a major shift in their life-style and priorities. They must now try to balance their roles as provider and care giver. They are no guidelines" (Gladding and Huber 1984, p. 16). Moreover, they know less about child development. Thus they experience many problems of child guidance at the beginning. Single-parent fathers usually have a strong motivation to succeed and may define child care just as another job: "When this happens, the rewards of doing that job well and feeling competent in it begins to compete with work satisfaction, thus reducing the salience of occupational role for the men" (Rosenthal and Keshet 1981, p. 121). Many such fathers give parenting a new importance. They are willing to forego promotions or accept a drop in income by working at reduced hours, in order to have more time for their children. With time they first gain experience in meeting the practical needs of their children and then in meeting their emotional needs, too. They overcome their initial feelings of inadequacy and gain positive self-regard.

Single-parent fathers usually receive little help from their former wives, with whom they have little contact. They often see their former wives negatively and may be angry with them because their children are hurt by their mother's lack of involvement. Many single-parent fathers are anxious to remarry. They are concerned with the compatibility of woman friends with their children and may involve them in child care from the beginning. Like all single parents, they experience conflicts between work and child-care obligations and would like to have more time for their children and their social life.

The more parents are in accord about their child-rearing styles,



approve of each other as parents, and are able to separate marital and parenting roles, the more likely they are to share parenting after divorce (Rosenthal and Keshet 1981). Messinger and Walker (1981) observed the following nontraditional parenting arrangements: "Some parents have reported that they take turns occupying the family household, while each retains an alternate residence. Another arrangement reported by separated parents has been to include many of the child's belongings in each parental household to enable the child to move freely between the two" (p. 434). According to a study of 181 divorced individuals (Furstenberg and Spanier 1987), however, only a tiny fraction of the parents reported that their children regularly resided in two households or had daily contact with both parents four years after separation. Moreover, the number of these rare cases declined with time. Such arrangements often are informal. They tend to be more successful if they are routinized and predictable. Some of them are based on joint custody. In most cases, however, one parent has sole custody, so the other spouse is dependent on his or her good will in sharing the parenting functions.

Two forms of nontraditional parenting arrangements can be found (Durst et al. 1985, Rosenthal and Keshet 1981): "Timesharing" parents spend equal time with their children and experience child care as a routine. They are highly committed to parenting, respect the parental rights of their former spouse, and think positively about his or her parenting skills. They usually live in close proximity and have set up their homes to include everything needed by their children, who meet there with friends, play by themselves, do their homework, watch TV, and so on. However, both parents continue to feel negatively about each other. Interactions are rare, guarded, and sometimes outright hostile. Often they avoid meeting each other by picking the children up from day-care institutions or schools. There is little discussion of child-related issues and nearly no shared activity (cp. Lyon et al. 1985). In "coparenting" the former spouses are full partners in parenting and have high regard for each other's performance as parents. They are able to separate their feelings for each other from their parenting functions, can resolve conflicts, and usually arrive at joint decisions with respect to their children. In all these cases both parents develop independent relationships with their children. Most coparenting fathers were already actively involved in child rearing before separation and divorce.

### *Relationship between Child and Noncustodial Parent*

"For the children, the patterns of access immediately after separation clearly set the pattern for the future. . . . The sooner and the

more frequently that children had access, the more likely were they to continue to keep in touch with the absent parent. Those who had no access in the beginning found difficulties first in restoring broken relationships and then in maintaining them" (Mitchell 1985, p. 141). Some children lose contact with the noncustodial parent immediately after separation. A few of them meet him or her again after divorce. According to a nationwide longitudinal study (Furstenberg et al. 1983) starting in 1976 with 1747 households (2279 children aged 7 to 11) and ending in 1981 with a remaining 1047 households (1377 children), 16.4 percent of the children from disrupted families had contact with their nonresidential fathers at least once a week, 16.7 percent between 12 and 51 times during last year, and 15.2 percent between one time and 11 times during last year. Sixteen and three-tenths percent had the last contact one to five years ago, and 35.5 percent had no contact in the last five years or did not know. Contact with nonresidential mothers was more frequent; the sample, however, encompassed only 25 cases in which the children lived with their fathers after separation and divorce.

Usually the level of contact with the nonresidential parent drops with time. According to the aforementioned study 45 percent of the parents saw their children at least once a week within the first two years after separation. After 10 years this was the case for only 10 percent; 64 percent had had no more contact with their children for at least one year. The drop in the level of contact was especially sharp after the second year and after the remarriage of one or both parents (mother's marital status had a greater effect). Moreover, there was less contact if the parents were black, if the nonresidential parent lived far away, if he or she did not provide financial support, or if there was continued conflict between the former spouses. These results show little evidence of couples who make use of nontraditional parenting patterns like timesharing and coparenting (see above). It has to be added that according to another study mentioned before (Spanier and Thompson 1984), greater contact between nonresidential parents and children was connected with more frequent disagreements about child-rearing issues between the former spouses. Four in five noncustodial fathers (interviewed two years after separation) would like to spend more time with their children. Many of them were not satisfied with the custody arrangements. They felt that the closeness to their children had dwindled since separation and experienced feelings of loss, sadness, and emptiness.

Besides timesharing and coparenting, two patterns of relationships between noncustodial parents and children can be observed (Durst et al. 1985, Rosenthal and Keshet 1981): (1) Some parents visit their children regularly, infrequently, or according to a court-

ordered visitation schedule (often being unsatisfied with its rigidity). They usually act like entertainers or visitors and treat their children to an endless round of outings, trips, restaurant meals, and special treats. Their residence is not set up for children; therefore, they rarely stay at home to play with their children. (2) Some nonresidential parents who tend to see their children regularly have fitted their residence with whatever makes children feel comfortable and often involve them in typical home routines. They act like friends, offer their children a meaningful, caring, and supportive relationship, and frequently feel closer to them than they were before separation.

Usually a new type of relationship develops between nonresidential parents and their children. As the former have no responsibility for child-rearing, they may be permissive, may surrender the disciplinarian role, and may offer little socialization. They rarely help with schoolwork or projects. At the beginning noncustodial parents (fathers) may not know what to do with their children during visitation, because they lack experience in dealing with them on their own. Some rely heavily on their own parents for child-care assistance (who stay in touch with their grandchildren this way) or ask their dates for help. In other cases they reduce the contact with their children as they notice that the latter are discontented with the visits or because they feel inadequate as parents. Many noncustodial parents, however, slowly learn parenting behaviors and become self-reliant and competent in child-related issues with time. Some may also use their children as a source of reassurance and support. In general, the quality of visits is more important for the children's welfare than is their frequency.

The participation of noncustodial parents in their children's life is not clearly defined and is partly determined by the custodial parents and their attitudes. If the latter have accepted the end of their marriage, no longer harbor negative feelings for their former spouses, and recognize their parental rights, they may support the relationship between their children and the noncustodial parents. Many are even frustrated with the latter's low level of involvement in child-rearing. Moreover, access time may relieve them and give them the opportunity to relax, meet friends, have sexual relations, and so on. In other cases custodial parents see the nonresidential ones as having an unfair emotional advantage, because they are able to treat parenthood as all play. Many try to close the boundaries of their family in order to exclude the other parent from their children's affections and loyalties. McNamara and Morrison (1982) write: "A custodial parent can obstruct access because of . . . bitterness and resent-

ment. While this may have gains for that parent in the short term, when the children are older they are likely to be critical and angry with their custodial parent for refusing to allow their contact with the other parent" (p. 117). Custodial parents may also resent access because it reminds them of their former spouse, is seen as an intrusion, or is used as a venue for having arguments. Sometimes parents compete with each other, criticize each other vis-à-vis the children, or question the children about intimate details of their former spouse's present life.

According to a study of 74 divorced custodial parents separated for an average of four years (Kurdek and Siesky 1979), children exhibited discipline problems (23.5 percent), relief (12.6 percent), withdrawal (6.7 percent), or resentment (4.2 percent) after visits with their noncustodial parents. Only 37.8 percent of the 126 children in the sample showed no reactions. Many problems result from children's experiencing different rules, values, life-styles, attitudes, and the like in both households. However, children may develop a great capacity to accommodate differences between the "binuclear" families.

### *Children's Reactions*

At the beginning of the postdivorce phase many children still suffer from anger, self-blame, sorrow, and a sense of rejection, unlovability, neediness, and powerlessness. They mourn the multiple losses of divorce and yearn for the departed parent. The loss is especially great for children who had been in a coalition with the nonresidential parent and who may now be made scapegoats of compared with the ex-spouse, or punished by receiving less help and support. If there is still some conflict between the former spouses, their children may have to hide positive feelings for the nonresidential parent, may act as go-betweens, and may experience loyalty conflicts; they may show their distress by being hard to manage, by withdrawing or clinginess. As many residential parents still suffer from divorce, their children may fear that they will commit suicide, and therefore may stay at home to offer emotional support. Some children, especially in (early) adolescence, also have problems in coping with their parents' dating and sexual exploration. Dlugokinski (1977) summarizes the situation of children after divorce: "Their relationship with their custodial parent also changes as they share the spotlight for their parent's attention with adult suitors and new parental interests. Changing family economic status may force a change in schools, residential settings, and peer groups. Daily patterns shift as children more frequently attend

child care centers because their parents are forced to work, and more frequently are asked to assume new responsibilities around the house" (p. 28). According to a study of 126 children whose parents separated roughly four years ago (Kurdek and Siesky 1979), 71.8 percent had responsibilities that children whose parents are living together do not have.

At the beginning of the postdivorce phase many children still suffer from symptoms, present regressive or antisocial behaviors, abuse substances, or are prematurely involved with the other sex. At school they are unable to concentrate, are daydreaming, preoccupied, restless, aggressive, or withdrawn. Their teachers complain about tardiness, absences, and a decline in academic achievement. All these problems, however, usually disappear with time. Wallerstein (1983) reports as a result of her ten-year study of 60 disrupted families: "By the end of the first year or year-and-a-half following the separation, most youngsters in our study were able to reestablish their earlier levels of learning and to reinvest in their other activities. They were able to regain relationships with friends whom they had driven away by their moodiness and their irritability during the period immediately following the marital separation" (p. 237). With time these children also disengage from parental conflict and distress, develop some psychological distance from their parents, remove the family crisis from the center of their inner world, and master feelings like anxiety, depression, and anger. For many years, however, they may still hope for their parents' reunion. It is especially hard for them to give up these fantasies if one parent continues to hope for reconciliation. According to a study of 126 children (Kurdek and Siesky 1979), only 88.6 percent had accepted the finality of the parents' divorce roughly four years after separation. Even five to ten years after separation the divorce may remain the central event in a child's life (Wallerstein 1983). Moreover, this issue may be reawakened in adolescence and lead to fears that loving relationships will fail.

Children's adjustment to divorce is highly related to their parents' adjustment and their own predivorce adjustment (Rohrlich et al. 1977). It is usually easier if the children understand their parents and their reasons for divorce, if they can somehow approve of their conduct, if they stay in contact with nonresidential parents, and if they are supported by siblings. Children may even become more self-reliant, independent, compassionate, patient, and mature. According to Kurdek and Siesky (1979), for example, 84 percent of 74 custodial parents thought that their children had acquired strengths as a result of divorce, had developed new competencies, and had become more confident. In some cases, however, the absence of the second

socializing agent (role model) and the resulting fantasies, the disappointment because of the unreliability and disinterest of the nonresidential parent, the shattering of the kinship system, the loss of emotional support, and the like lead to continuing and new problems.

## **THE REMARRIAGE PHASE**

Weiter unter: [http://people.freenet.de/Textor/Divorce\\_Transition2.pdf](http://people.freenet.de/Textor/Divorce_Transition2.pdf)