

FINISHING THE GRIEVING: A KEY TO LIFE AFTER DIVORCE

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Have you ever encountered people almost passionately anxious to show you how little they were hurting over their divorces? Commonly these people want to spray a lot of rage, and they often get immersed in senseless and destructive battles with their spouses.

But above all, they seem to want to show the world—and themselves—just how much they don't feel hurt. No hurt, no sadness, and no fear—just rage and wrangling.

“I don't care” and “This doesn't matter to me” and “I just want that nightmare out of my life”—these can become the slogans of people stuck in the business of avoiding or camouflaging their hurt. And the more that they remain in this state, the more devastation they bring to themselves and their families.

The greatest weakness of all is
the great fear of appearing weak.

--Jacques Benigne Bossuet

But it doesn't take much examination of the losses of divorce to see that there is more to it than rage and wrangling. Shock, sadness, hurt, and fear are at least as much a part of the experience.

If you are in the midst of a divorce, you are likely losing most, if not all, of the following:

- Your partner in building memories and dreams of growing old together
- Your ally in facing money woes, illness, and even school conferences
- Your companion to parties, weddings, family celebrations, and IRS audits
- Your confederate in lovingly outwitting your children
- Your helpmate who knew just how to unclog the sink, negotiate a car deal, or remember birthdays
- Your roommate in creating a family home
- Your forgiving audience to your feeble jokes
- Your date for Saturday night
- Your bedmate
- Your friend

And as you are losing this person, you are also losing:

- Consistent contact with your children
- Valued rituals
- Inside jokes
- The chance to share family memories
- Your spouse's family and friends
- Most of your financial security
- Friendships of people who related with you as a couple
- Predictability in much of your life
- Your sense of personal competence
- Maybe even faith that you will love and be loved again

Of course you are feeling more than anger—an emotion that is very often a secondary or “cover” emotion for others.

What's more, the feelings of shock, sadness, hurt, and fear do not end when a divorce is concluded legally. The emotional divorce is not a legal event, but a process. For divorcing people, the question is not **whether** they will experience that process and its enormous emotional challenges, but **how**.

What we grieve for is not the loss of a grand vision,
but rather the loss of common things, events, and gestures.
Ordinariness is the most precious thing we struggle for.

--Irena Kelfisz

Professor Robert Emery from the University of Virginia adds a remarkable insight about four complexities to divorce grieving that often make it even more of a challenge than other kinds of grieving processes:

- ⇒ Divorce grief is often disguised by other feelings and even emergencies (for example, financial concerns) to the point that a person can be unaware of the extent of his grief.
- ⇒ Our society offers most divorcing parents no grieving ritual that plays the role of a funeral for the marriage.
- ⇒ The very people a divorcing parent would likely grieve with over any other loss can become unavailable—one's spouse, in-laws, and even valued friends can be part of the losses of divorce.
- ⇒ At least in our minds, divorce is a potentially reconcilable loss, leaving us with the sense it can go ungrieved by avoiding it altogether.

All of a sudden, the self-destructive things many of us do in our divorces don't seem so inexplicable. The depth of our losses, in fact, explains this telling observation from Judge Terry A. Crone: *Couples come to court disputing what? Almost always they say it's over who gets the velvet Elvis painting. I swear, every case has a velvet Elvis painting. But it's never over the painting, it's over their hurt.*

Isn't that the way they say it goes?
Well, let's forget all that
And give me the number if you can find it
So I can call just to tell 'em I'm fine and to show
I've overcome the blow, I've learned to take it well.
I only wish my words could just convince myself
That it just wasn't real--
But that's not the way it feels.

--Jim Croce, "Operator"

Divorce represents the death of a marriage and all the hopes and dreams that went into it. And the death of a marriage, like any death, requires a grieving process for healing. In almost every divorce filled with unending rage, conflict, and injury is at least one spouse, if not two, resisting this process and becoming stuck.

During divorce, an emotionally intelligent person will pass through a grieving process resembling Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grieving death (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). When experienced temporarily as part of the process of grieving, each step has its beneficial purposes. **But**, each stage also holds great risks for anyone who uses it as a final destination.

The better that one can embrace the need to pass through each of the five stages, including depression, the sooner and more fully he (or she) can experience the wonderful promise at the end of the grieving process. What is that promise? It's nothing less than the awareness that:

Divorce is not the end of the world,
it does not mean annihilation,
and it can yield to life, joy, and (yes) love.

Here are some guides on the five stages that may help you in your journey.

1. **Denial:** "She just needs some time," or "He's acting out some midlife crisis," or "This only happens to other people"—these are some of the hallmark phrases of denial. It's a numbing response that often follows a refusal to acknowledge a loss as oceanic as divorce. But like all stages, denial is meant to last only a limited time.

Benefits from denial if experienced as a temporary stage: Appropriately experienced, this protective reaction serves to blunt the initial shock and pain of the breakup. It can give temporary—but only temporary—shelter from the unthinkable until you gather your abilities to face the emotional, physical, and parental tasks at hand. Experienced in a healthy fashion, denial eventually gives way to a mature acknowledgment of the pain of the losses of divorce. That pain can then be a signal to you to take good care of yourself during your losses and recovery.

Risks from denial if experienced as a final destination: Any refusal to acknowledge the necessary end of an intimate relationship interferes with making important decisions—for oneself and the entire family. More important, pain is part of the healing process, and anyone unwilling to feel and acknowledge the pain can't heal or move to better decision-making.

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.
--C. S. Lewis

2. **Anger:** As the numbing effects of the shock wear off, the intense feelings of pain, hurt, and fear rush in to flood your senses. Anger is a mechanism for deflecting these emotions. This is both a normal and necessary reaction to the enormity of the loss you may feel. Although you need to recognize and accept feelings of anger, it is essential that you avoid angry behavior toward your (ex)spouse and your children.

Benefits from anger if experienced as a temporary stage: Anger can serve to energize you and help you begin to make the difficult emotional break from your partner.

Risks from anger if experienced as a final destination: Anyone stuck in anger will likely be making poor judgments, expending unnecessary energy on futile conflict, and devastating the children. Although staying angry may **feel** like being in control, it actually renders one bitter, resentful, and unable to think or act in anything but the most uncontrolled and self-destructive ways.

Character cannot be developed in ease
and quiet. Only through experience of trial
and suffering can the soul be strengthened,
ambition inspired, and success achieved.
--Helen Keller

3. **Bargaining:** In divorce, bargaining is usually an attempt to avoid the end of a relationship by promising to act differently, or by imagining or asking for changes that one hopes could make the marriage work. Bargaining is another attempt to gain control over what may feel like an utterly out-of-control circumstance.

Benefits from bargaining if experienced as a temporary stage: Bargaining is helpful when there is a chance your relationship can be saved. Lay or religious counseling, a period of separation, or relationship renewal groups can help you see if such hopes are realistic. (And, by all means, if your circumstances are not dangerous ones, there is every reason to move slowly and soberly before ending a marriage.)

Risks from bargaining if experienced as a final destination: Staying stuck in the bargaining stage is often acted out by a spouse trying to continue a marital connection. Desperate promises, unrealistic attempts at reconciliation, and inappropriate sexual overtures can be part of the pattern. Sometimes being stuck in bargaining occurs with “negative intimacy” where former partners behave as if they have a right to be “key players” in each others’ lives. They can delude themselves into thinking they should (or can) tell their spouses how to clean their houses, how to spend their money, or how much macaroni and cheese should or should not be served to the kids.

Still it happens every day--
Two lovers turn and twist their love into hate.
But am I so different
From that young girl you used to date?
You used to adore me;
You used to adore me.
Still it happens every day.

--Carly Simon, "It Happens Every Day"

While this kind of entanglement in a spouse’s life can be motivated by an angry urge to criticize and diminish, often it’s the product of a hopeless wish to remain connected, **somehow** or **anyhow**. Being stuck in the bargaining phase prevents achieving the emotional “clean break” necessary for healing, and very often lies at the heart of the expensive, destructive, and outright dangerous legal maneuvering that many couples repeatedly take to court.

Remember, when either partner ends the relationship, neither has the right to be a major part in the other’s life, except as they cooperate as co-parents to their children.

4. **Depression:** This stage can be so dreaded that it keeps some people locked in denial, anger, or bargaining—or some combination of them. But inevitably with the realization of the loss of the marriage comes searing sadness and regret. This is also a normal and necessary part of grieving (and a critical time to be connected to a healthy support system of family and friends). As John Bradshaw reminds his readers, “He who grieves well, lives well.” So know that deep sadness is not necessarily a sign that you are failing, but indeed likely a sign of your healing.

Tears are often the telescope through
which men see into heaven.

--Henry Ward Beecher

Benefits from depression if experienced as a temporary stage: Sadness is necessary to grieving. To be able to grieve, heal, and then move on, you must acknowledge and accept this important but uncomfortable feeling. A wonderful treatment of the essential healthiness of temporary depression can be found in M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled*. Peck speaks of depression as the conflict between our conscious wish for cherished things to be "the way they used to be" and our wiser (but often unconscious) sense that it is time to let go and move on.

It is precisely because the unconscious in its wisdom knows that "the way things used to be" is no longer tenable or constructive that the process of growing and giving up is begun on an unconscious level and depression is experienced. (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1978, pp. 70-71)

If you are stuck in the grieving process, there are few insights we could so heartily recommend as Peck's short chapter in *The Road Less Traveled* called "The Healthiness of Depression."

Risks from depression if experienced as a final destination: Staying stuck in this stage may create a clinical depression in which deep and prolonged sadness interferes with daily living, disrupts sleep or appetite, and causes a loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities. Mental health professionals can help you relieve the depression and move toward acceptance, the last stage of the healing process.

Operator, could you help me place this call?
Well, I can't read the number that you just gave me.
There's something in my eyes, you know it happens every time
I think about a love that I thought would save me.

--Jim Croce, "Operator"

5. **Acceptance:** This stage is not one of joy and great celebration, but of acknowledging the reality of divorce and embracing the readiness to move on. This stage is accompanied by a newfound realization of your resilience, potential, and commitment to forge a new life.

Although the five stages of grieving are necessary for healing, they are not always so clear-cut and concise. Most divorcing persons move through the stages more than once (and not necessarily in precisely the same order), sometimes experiencing more than one at the same time.

However, you can be comforted by knowing the stages and by your ability to recognize what you're feeling and when. You should be heartened to know that with pain comes healing. If you feel yourself stuck, don't hesitate to seek some brief counseling.

But I don't regret that I loved you--
How I loved you I will never forget,
And in time I'll look back and remember
The boy that I knew when we first met.

--Carly Simon, "It Happens Every Day"

Let these stages serve as your guide in divorce, and be assured that after you move courageously through them, however long it takes, you'll find a safe harbor—and a stronger self.

And again, give yourself credit for attending to your children's needs (especially the elimination of destructive conflict) as you finish your grieving. Like the wounded field sergeant who must lead and even carry his troops to safety, you may be demonstrating a measure of true heroism in what you do.

God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us
in our conscience, but shouts in our pains:
it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.
--C. S. Lewis

We hope that these thoughts are of help to you. Please consider doing some work with the three Grieving Guides which follow.

We wish you good healing, good grieving, and good life.

Grieving Guide 1

Consider where you are in your five stages of grieving (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance).

1. Do you sense that you have paid at least a brief visit to each of the first four stages?
2. Do you think there is any additional benefit to your remaining in a stage where you might be now?
3. Would it be helpful for you, either by yourself or with some counseling, to attempt to move to another stage?
4. How totally have you embraced an awareness that even the depression stage (when experienced temporarily) is beneficial, and that awaiting you at the end of this process is great strength and hope?

Grieving Guide 2

Few things are as demanding as bringing the intimate marital relationship to a close and replacing it with a cooperative co-parenting relationship, and probably no one can accomplish this enormous task without helpful contacts.

Make a list here of at least three mature adults (a counselor, family and close friends, and support contacts are excellent possibilities) who have agreed to be available to you to talk through any difficult issue.

Please identify each person's relationship to you and the date on which you asked for and received each person's agreement to be available to you.

	Name	Relationship to you	Date you asked for support
1.			
2.			
3.			

1. How have you used these support contacts thus far?

2. What ways do you think would be useful for you to use them in the future?

Grieving Guide 3

Following are some statements from parents who have achieved wonderful things in their grieving and in their development of a good co-parenting relationship with their ex-spouses.

Read these over and make a note next to the ones that have insights you think would be helpful to you in your journey.

1. “I woke up one day and realized that I had spent almost a year fighting over my hurt and my ‘rights’ in the divorce. Where was this going to get me—or anyone? I made a decision that, whether my spouse would or not, I needed to think about our boys. And it seemed that the more I focused on the kids, the more my husband gradually did too.” 28-year-old mother of two
2. “I think that for a long time I tried to pretend I wasn’t hurt. I just stayed angry. One day I found myself getting angry because my ex was actually early in dropping off the kids (because she knew I wanted them early to go on our company picnic). I realized then that I needed to shake a lot of the anger that had gotten out of control. I think I started to deal with how hurt and sad I was.” 44-year-old father of four
3. “I couldn’t afford to go to court anymore. We were going to court and lawyers over everything. And I mean everything.” 30-year-old father of one
4. “I think I got healthier when I spent a lot of time talking with my friend Marcus, who has a ridiculously good relationship with his ex. Marcus’s ex is married to a man with two children, and when the ex and her new husband go out, Marcus and his girlfriend have the best time taking out the kids from all three families. It looked strange to me at first, but it was good for me to see them getting on, even if I can’t really picture ever being as chummy as they are.” 34-year-old father of three
5. “Counseling. Not even a lot of counseling. I’m not a big believer in it. But the few sessions my insurance company approved made a difference.” 36-year-old mother of four
6. “I did some reading on divorce and was shocked at the dozens and dozens of ways that I would be screwing up the kids if I didn’t stop the blaming and fighting. I used to hate the loneliness and loss when the kids were with Jason. Now I plan ahead so that when the kids are with him, I’ve got my friends and work for support.” 36-year-old mother of three
7. “I stopped listening to my family and friends who ran down my wife. She had an affair that ended the marriage, and I was enraged over that. She’s still with that guy, so I guess I needed the anger of my friends for a while. Finally I realized all the badmouthing wasn’t going to make things better. The kids still need to love their

8. mom. I told my friends and family that they needed to stop it.” 30-year-old father of two
9. “My kids are older, and I apologized to them for ever having shared with them a negative statement about their dad. (I had said a lot.) It surprised me how much they appreciated my apology. After my daughter told me that my statements had really hurt her, I realized how much it meant to them for all of us to get along.” 52-year-old mother of four
10. “It sounds funny, but I think we just got tired of acting like fools. No single magical insight to it.” 49-year-old father of one
11. “I found I had to re-learn (or perhaps learn for the first time) how to lose things. My parents divorced suddenly and violently when I was small, and no one ever told me things would be okay. I think my ‘clinginess’ grew out of that. I was never able to let go and trust that things would be okay. Church and some counseling helped me to see a brighter day could be coming.” 41-year-old mother of one
12. “I think I started to feel better when I stopped resenting the times that the children weren’t with me. I found things to do after work.” 35-year-old father of two
13. “I learned a deeper appreciation of forgiveness. Today I can accept my kids’ mom as she is and not try to change her. Don’t get me wrong, she’s still goofy as hell, but it doesn’t bother me. I can laugh things off, and we can get along better for the kids now.” 36-year-old father of three
14. “I read a column in our local paper. It wasn’t even about divorce. It said the greatest gift a man can give his children is to love their mother. I thought we at least owed our kids the gift of not hating each other and tearing each other up in front of them. I mailed a copy of the column to my ex-wife. I think we both felt guilty.” 41-year-old father of two
15. “Our son is nine, and he started to talk about suicide. We got him a counselor who more or less read us the riot act for not taking it more seriously.” 29-year-old mother of one