

Everything You Need to Know About Life After Divorce

A Compilation of Published Articles

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Divorce Recovery: Acceptance Of What Was and What Is

The clients who come to me for help in letting go and moving on after their divorces discover that acceptance, a mandatory step in divorce recovery, comes in two stages. First we work to be in acceptance of the end of our marriage and then we move on to accept what our life is now, in the present. This second step in the acceptance process seems to be the more difficult hurdle to overcome but it can be overcome successfully.

Acceptance of the undeniable fact that our marriage is over must be fully integrated into our psyche for us to be able to create a new life. We need to look back over our marriage and see exactly where we have confused what actually happened with our own personal interpretation. All too often our interpretations of the events of our marriage are simply not true, not factual. Our deep hurts have a tendency to cloud our thinking and limit our perspective.

Separating the facts from our biased interpretations will allow us to stop blaming our ex as well as ease our resentments. We also learn how to see that any marriage, no matter what may have occurred, is a product of two people, a mutual creation. Even if one of the partners was unfaithful or deceptive, we must begin to see our part in the collapse of our marriage because only when we can stop blaming and take responsibility for our part, do we take back our power and our ability to move forward. If we are honest with ourselves, we know where we could have done things differently.

Now comes the even more challenging step in acceptance: acceptance of our new life. Once the fact that we are divorced sinks in, reality rears its so-called ugly head. We start to really understand what our life is now that we do not have a partner. All too often, we react with fear, anger and resentment.

There are many common issues that arise amongst my clients. The number one item seems to be the day-to-day responsibilities for the children. Why am I the one who has to handle everything and he gets to play with them every other weekend? I have to do it all: school, homework, discipline, doctors, dentists, conferences, carpooling, groceries, cooking, cleaning...you name it! Then Dad shows up once a week and every other weekend and it seems like its all fun and games. This is unfair.

The list goes on and on and on. No more regular outings on Saturday nights. There is no one to share household maintenance. Your finances now are solely under your control and for many of us that seems daunting. No more extended family. The holidays loom before us and we are lost. Mutual friends fall by the wayside. Need I go on?

This is where the real challenges arise and this is where we learn about our hidden reserves of strength and how much we have learned and grown from the entire experience. There is no doubt that it is hard and seemingly unfair. But guess what? That is the true nature of life. Life is not always a bowl of cherries, quite the opposite. Life is chaotic and there is constant change, oftentimes not to our liking. Life is not always fair. Life just is and we simply

cannot control what life throws out way...we can only control how we choose to handle it. This is a fact of life that we must accept in the depths of our very being.

What to do? There are real choices in front of you. You can continue to fight against reality, a reality that you cannot change. You can resist what is for what you think should be and suffer immeasurably. You can remain rooted in your past, a past that no longer exists, and within that past you will continue to be in pain, blame and resentment. Just envision banging your head against a brick wall because that is exactly what you will be doing.

Either you resist what is or you accept this new landscape. You can surrender to the flow of your life's direction instead of swimming against the current. You can let go of all the things that keep you stuck and chained to your past. You can choose acceptance and with that choice, new possibilities will begin to open for you. You can choose to look for what might be right and what might be opportunities in this new world.

Take for instance the overwhelming responsibilities you now have. Perhaps you are one of the women out there who work and have kids. As an aside, I know that in most cases, you had the bulk of the responsibility during your marriage so things are not that much different. But that being said, start to prioritize. The house is no longer going to be sparkling clean. The kids may have to learn to do their own laundry. There won't be home cooked meals every night and guess what? Everyone will still survive and thrive. What is really important? The love and closeness of this new family unit.

The opportunities abound although it might be hard to see them. I know that when I divorced my kids took on more responsibility around the house and they not only rose to the occasion but they are the better for it. I marvel at how they adjusted and simply went on with their lives. Mind you, my ex and I made a pact to get along and do whatever we had to for the kid's benefit.

Our meals together were chances to bond. I learned to not sweat all the small stuff: I let go of my to do list and learned what was really important, which turned out to be one of the greatest gifts of my divorce. Our vacations together were wonderful and I have phenomenal relationships with my kids. I found a new career. I discovered whom my true friends are and have made many new ones. I discovered reservoirs of strength that I did not know existed.

Of course, it isn't a bed of roses but neither is life in general, no matter whether you are married or divorced. I could go on about all the things within this new life that I am still wrestling with but hey, I wrestled with life when I was married! Life changes and you either go with the flow or drown in self-pity. It remains a matter of choice. It may take years, tons of effort and struggle but anything worthwhile in life takes time and effort.

You must drop unrealistic expectations that life should be a certain way and go with the way that life is. You must learn to change your perspective, embrace what is and choose to look at what the possibilities and opportunities are in this new world of yours. Remember that your perspective will not only change the way you think but it will actually change your reality.

The Real Divorce: Cutting the Emotional Ties that Bind

Your divorce decree is only step one in moving into a new life after divorce. The real divorce is the cutting of the emotional, mental and physical ties that still bind you to your ex-husband. This is the real work of divorce recovery: becoming a single woman possessed of confidence, self-esteem, an enthusiasm for life and most important, a complete break from the emotional turmoil that led to your divorce in the first place.

All too often, women experience the same conflicts with their ex that originally led to divorce: constant arguments, reactive behavior leading to emotional upsets, old patterns of reliance, the barrage of destructive barbs aimed at your self-esteem and deep hurts. To truly be divorced you must put forth great effort and inner work that will sever your ties to your ex and you must build a structure that will facilitate that work.

Let me give you examples: You and your ex have children together therefore you must be in contact with one another on a regular basis. Unfortunately, your discussions with him always end in an argument. Nothing happens easily. The deep resentments and hurts suffered in your marriage and actual divorce remain intact. You each know each other's hot buttons and continue to push those buttons resulting in upsets. It's the old marriage still running the game. You continually get sucked into this abyss.

If this is the case for you know that you have not divorced on an emotional level. You are an ex-wife versus a divorced woman. Somewhere inside of you there is still an attachment of some sort to either your marriage or your ex. You need to look inside to determine where you are still tied to him.

Acceptance of your new place in life is mandatory. Acceptance comes from acknowledging that your marriage is over with no hope or wish for it to continue. Acceptance allows you to living in a way that reveals a freedom from the past. It means living in the present and the future. It takes work but before you can do this work, you must put in place new rules that will lay the groundwork for a completely new relationship with your former husband. These rules are there to protect you from any further hurts or upsets.

You must build a new structure that empowers you versus disempowering you. Take the analogy of going on a diet to lose weight. You need to create an environment that will both motivate and move you towards your goal. To do so you remove all of the temptations that lead to over-eating or eating the wrong foods. You clean out all the junk food from the cupboards and replace them with healthy and non-fattening foods. You create a support system with a friend who you can call when you feel yourself slipping into your old eating habits. You take on a partner in your exercise program. In other words, you do everything that you can to surround yourself with ways to achieve your goal.

You must do the same thing when you are working at disentangling yourself from your ex. Create an environment that will help, not hinder your progress towards true

independence. Remove all the temptations to stay connected to your ex. Within this framework you are free to do the inner work of healing.

My ex and I had a fairly amiable divorce and we have managed to move out of each other's lives albeit for the children. Or so I thought. In reading the book, *Leaving Him Behind* by Sandra Kahn, she mentioned something that set off a light for me. My ex has spent a good deal of time around my new home, as his condo has taken much longer to complete as was predicted. In order for the children to see him more often I have been extremely accommodating and have allowed him to be in my home with the kids. He knows the code to my house lock and oftentimes enters on his own. He has the tendency to walk into the house, open the refrigerator door and grabs something to eat, which is exactly what he always did when we were married. Not such a big deal you might say. But Ms. Kahn says otherwise.

Although we have a very friendly relationship for the most part, he is not my husband anymore. I have been far too accommodating to him. I should have created a scenario where it was incumbent upon him to get into his new place in order to have a place for him and the kids.

This is my house and I should have laid down the ground rules that said he is to knock on the front door just like any other houseguest. Houseguests do not help themselves to the food in my refrigerator. This is him living by the old rules as if this were his home, which it is not.

These ground rules are meant to protect you and prevent any kind of situations that could lead to an upset. Obviously the less you have to do with your ex the better. That is not to say that you cannot have a relationship with your ex but it has to be radically different from the one you had while married. There are those women who cannot have their ex in their lives for any reason other than the children. Their emotional ties to their ex are still strong and they need to isolate themselves in order to break those ties.

Set ground rules that determines the nature of this new relationship. These rules might include:

- 1) Communicate with your ex via writing and/or brief phone calls. Keep all communication limited to only what is necessary for the kids or legal matters.
- 2) When an upset is looming or when your ex starts to speak to you in inappropriate ways, stop the conversation and hang up or walk away. Let your ex know this new ground rule: you will speak to another in respectful ways and will not tolerate anything else or the conversation is over.
- 3) Ensure that your home is just that: your home. It is not a place to hang out with the kids. It is not his home. When he is in your house make certain he realizes that he is a houseguest like any other.

- 4) Keep your conversations highly impersonal and to the point. Protect your privacy. Do not discuss your fears, concerns or personal issues because that only maintains the emotional tie between the two of you. Don't talk about anything that opens the door to more connections or emotional entanglements. Keep it business-like.
- 5) Do not involve the children in any communication between the two of you. Don't send messages through the kids. Keep them protected.
- 6) Stay out of each other's lives. You don't need to know where he goes, what he does, what he is thinking or whom he is seeing...and he doesn't need to know those things about you as well.
- 7) Don't look to your ex for advise or support. This might be the hardest tie to break. I remember in the early part of my separation, I continued to treat him as my husband when I called upon him for assistance with the kids. Wrong. Handle it yourself by getting support from friends or family. You aren't married anymore and you will only be left disappointed.
- 8) Consider your child support or your alimony as your money and not a gift from him or an obligation. Your money, no matter how it is acquired, is your money. The courts determined that support and it doesn't give him the right to comment upon or berate you about finances. If you are experiencing any problems with support checks, take it to your lawyer. Never beg or put yourself in an inferior position. Keep your true financial position to yourself.
- 9) Be careful of maintaining relationships with his family. Blood is thicker than water. If you have developed a friendship with your sister-in-law, make certain it is because you two are friends, not family members. Always insist that the subject of your ex is forbidden.
- 10) You are not a wife anymore and do not exhibit any behavior that mimics that role. All too often women continue to do things or relate in ways to their ex that were part of their former marriage. If he needs support or someone to talk to about personal matters, he needs to call a friend and not you. You are not there to assist him as you did when you were his wife. You are not his wife anymore and not his friend either, at least not right now.

Perhaps in the future, when you have cut all of the psychological ties to your ex that held you back from creating a new life for yourself, you might be able to ease these rules. I doubt it. What's done is done and what is past is past. Let go of anything that does not serve you well.

You will be much more successful in healing yourself and moving on if you have adopted rules and created an environment that keep you physically and mentally separate from your ex. The work of healing your emotional wounds and of learning acceptance

and forgiveness for yourself and him demands all your attention. Don't squander your time and effort on him. It's all about you now, you as a single woman with an exciting and wonderful future in front of you.

Moving Beyond Your Divorce: Acceptance

There is no single more powerful stumbling block to moving beyond our divorce into a new life than the inability to accept our new reality. Acceptance is the hardest part of the divorce recovery process. Acceptance requires total honesty, courage and the willingness to let go of the life that we had...a life that no longer exists. Without that acceptance, we cannot move forward and create a new life.

How does one learn acceptance? Although it takes time and a good deal of inner work, it can be done. Here is a step-by-step guide to move you towards acceptance:

1) It's about you, not them.

One of the most powerful lessons in life is the knowledge that we have control over one person and one person only...ourselves. If you are looking outside of yourself to move forward, you won't. We can't change anyone but ourselves. We have power over no one except ourselves. It is when we turn inward and do the work on ourselves that we will be able to effect dramatic and positive changes in our lives.

Being a victim means giving away all control and power. If I blame someone else for my situation, then I am powerless to do anything about it as I have chosen to absolve myself of any responsibility.

We can create changes that will make our lives better but not until we stop trying to change our ex or our current reality and we realize that it's about us, not them.

2) Get support.

If you think you can do this all by yourself you may be in for a big surprise. Research consistently shows that getting support in any challenging endeavor leads to more success. Whether you choose a divorce support group, a therapist, a member of the clergy or a Life Coach, just do it.

If you are one of the those people who think that you have to handle life's challenges on your own because somehow you equate support with weakness, get over it! Getting support is a sign of intelligence as far as I'm concerned as well as an indication that you really are serious about moving onward in life.

3) First, you must get through the initial stages of loss that includes denial, grief, anger, depression and whatever else you might be feeling early in the divorce process.

These emotions are all natural and necessary states that we need to experience. They are the norm versus the exception. Each one of these

feelings needs to be embraced and experienced fully. There must be an ending before a new beginning.

There is a difference between fully experiencing an emotional stage and getting stuck in it. Beware excessive self-pity and real depression. Here is where support becomes important to your well-being and improvement.

4) Distinguish between facts and interpretations.

I cannot stress the importance of this step enough. People get stuck when they cannot face the facts and prefer to believe that their personal interpretations are reality.

You might be familiar with the exercise of the picture that has a hidden image within it. Ten people may come up with ten different interpretations of the picture. Some people will see the hidden image immediately and others will never see it until it is pointed out to them. Either way, the hidden picture exists. It is a fact.

You may feel that you have been mentally abused and yet your partner may feel that you are the one that is abusive. He said, she said. Probably a counselor will see a totally different picture altogether. You know, there's your side, his side and then the truth.

Once you are truthful with yourself and can see the facts versus the drama or story of your divorce, you will be on your way to acceptance.

5) Be brutally honest and take responsibility for your marriage, divorce and life.

Those of us who can be totally honest with ourselves will receive the gift of a deep awareness of who and what we are along with the ability to accept our lives as they are without looking to blame someone else. Being honest allows us to see things that hadn't existed for us before. The truth will indeed set you free. By setting aside our egos, we can look at our life for what it actually is versus a story about our divorce.

Once we have been honest and have embraced all the facts about our divorce, we are free to accept full responsibility for our lives.

Responsibility is power and the freedom to choose what we want next in life. If we cannot take responsibility, we remain victims and victims absolve themselves of both their responsibility and therefore the power to control their own lives.

6) Learn the difference between what is and what you think should be.

If we are living in a netherland of what we think should be, we are completely cut off from reality or 'what is'. If you think that you should not have to be experiencing divorce, then you cannot accept what is...that you are indeed getting divorced. You live in a world of your own.

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