

## Coping with Divorce

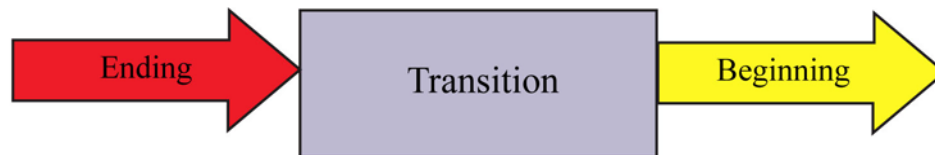
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As an attorney with more than twenty-five years of experience handling family law matters, I have worked with hundreds of people who have made the difficult decision to leave their marriage. I have found that the repercussions of divorce can be devastating regardless of age, race, education level or economic status.

Making the decision to leave a marriage, whether a short-term one, or one of many years duration, is usually one of the most difficult decisions people are faced with in their lives. The consequences of divorce involve legal and financial implications, in addition to unexpected emotional impacts for all parties. Each courtship and marriage has its own rhythms, unique stories, and ups and downs, but the decision to end a marriage is hardly ever an easy one. No matter how you look at it, divorce is a change in your life, and change is difficult.

Change is difficult whether you are the one choosing to end the marriage or whether your spouse has made the decision. Or sometimes, both parties make a mutual decision. The one choosing to leave is usually faced with feelings of guilt... "how can I do this to them?" The one who does not make the decision, but has the decision made for them feel anger and sometime rage, "how can you do this to me/us?" If both parties choose to end a marriage, both are likely to feel a combination of guilt, anger and regret... "why couldn't we make this work?"

Experts in the field of change say that change, as unpredictable and messy as it is, has stages that are predictable. One notable expert, William Bridges, asserts that change has three primary phases. They are:



Most people are clear that change starts when something you have grown comfortable with ends. And, they are aware that their new life is a beginning. But what most people do not prepare for or recognize is that between every ending and beginning is a time of transition. And, in the case of divorce, it is critical to prepare yourself and your family, for this time in order to ensure a better "beginning" for all.

So, what are the things you can do to best get through this transition?

- First, assuming that you and your spouse have done everything you can to resolve difficulties and differences, develop a proactive plan to take care of yourself financially, legally and emotionally.
- Expect this to be an emotional time. Expect to question yourself and your decisions. It is said that it is often better to stay with the devil you know than the one you do not know. It is normal to want to cling to the known, rather than face the error of the unknown. Do not be tempted to attempt a reconciliation that you know will end up the “same old way.” On the other hand, be clear that the grass is not always greener on the other side. It rarely is.
- Find a good attorney, someone who knows and has several years of experience in family law. Also look for someone who listens, cares and is willing to be aggressive on your behalf when necessary.
- Create a realistic financial plan for yourself. Recognize that you may be obligated by court order to provide support for your spouse and family or you may be obligated brush up on old skills or develop new ones in order to support yourself financially.
- Be good to yourself. This means different things to different people. For some, it means allowing yourself time to cry. For others, it means buying yourself flowers. For still others it means going out and listening to good music, seeing a movie, or a play. It might mean getting a massage, getting together with friends, or just curling up and getting lost in a good book.
- Create a support network for yourself. The married couples that you were friends with during your marriage may not feel comfortable being “in the middle.” They may not want to “choose” sides. Find people that you can talk to and who will listen to you and your feelings. You do need emotional support during this time. This emotional support may come in the form of friends and/or in the form of a therapist.
- Prepare your children for what may happen. As bitter and angry as you might feel toward your spouse, remember that your children have a right to a relationship with both parents. Be aware that you may be consciously or unconsciously sending signals to your children that reflect your pain, and which may result in them being alienated from a parent.
- If and only if your spouse has been proven to have sexually, verbally or physically abused your children, you will want to take steps to keep your children safe. In this case, it is a criminal matter, which the courts should handle.
- Allow time for self-reflection before you leap into another relationship. Spend time honestly examining what happened in this relationship. How did you contribute to its demise? It is so easy to blame the other person. Be clear on your role in the relationship.

- Also take time to get to know yourself. What are your emotional and intellectual needs? What are your spiritual needs? As you enter into new relationships, look for compatibility in all of these areas.

My experience is that there is a time during the transition when you just want it to be over and it is not. Often, the time just before things are settled legally is the most difficult. Divorce, like anything else in life, is a process, and it needs to take its course.

If you allow yourself to go through the process, knowing that it is a process, things may not be less painful, but you will get through them a little easier. Understanding “good” transitions make “good” beginnings will stand you in good stead.