



Transitioning Through Divorce: Five Steps to a 'Good' Divorce

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Nearly half of all first marriages and almost two-thirds of remarriages in the U.S. end in divorce. Divorce rates have remained about the same for more than 10 years.

As you and your spouse join approximately one million couples in the U.S. who go through divorce each year, it may be a challenging period for you emotionally. This series, *Transitioning Through Divorce*, is not intended to encourage divorce but to help individuals who have made that choice to have a "good divorce"—where you maintain at least the same level of emotional well-being as before the divorce.

This publication provides information about the five steps that you will take as you go through divorce. Divorce can bring major life changes that cause stress, crisis, and anxiety. You may find that your usual coping methods are no longer helpful. By understanding the stress associated with each stage of divorce, you can be better prepared to deal with the stress, adapt to changes, and move on to the next step.

There is a five-step progression that most individuals experience through the divorce process. One step usually overlaps the next, involving a change in social roles and tasks. Each step seems to begin with heightened stress. This stress usually decreases toward the end of a step as you prepare to move on to the next.

Step One: The Decision

The first step toward divorce is rarely mutual. It begins when one partner feels unhappy and dissatisfied in the marriage. These feelings may continue for a few months or even years. As you question your feelings toward your spouse, you may become emotionally distant from your partner. Your spouse's habits may become annoying to you, and eventually you may decide that such behaviors are intolerable. You may be collecting these behaviors as evidence to justify your decision to leave. During this period, many individuals seek emotional support from others in both negative and positive ways.

Denial of the marital problem is a frequent coping strategy for individuals during the decision stage. By blaming your spouse for marital strife, you may feel less personal responsibility for the problems. Therefore, through denial, you reduce your own stress level. As marital conflict increases between you and your spouse, so will your efforts to find fault in your partner. Children, aware of the marital conflict, may begin to develop physical or emotional problems because of the stress.

Usually one person in the marriage has the secret desire to leave. This person is called the "initiator" or "leaver." The

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other spouse is usually unaware of such desires. This person is called the "opposer" or the "left." The leaver begins dealing with his or her own emotions early in the process. As a leaver, an individual starts grieving the loss of the marriage immediately and emotionally separates himself or herself from the relationship.

The spouse being left is sometimes seen as the victim. As the opposer, one's first reaction may vary from shock and disbelief to outrage and despair. Opposers tend to be more vulnerable and more likely to be in a crisis mode than leavers. Also, opposers often have less power than leavers.

Women initiate about 75% of all divorces in the U.S. Because women have more economic and social opportunities in today's society than in the past, it has become somewhat easier for women to choose a single-divorced lifestyle. Many women leave the marriage because of abuse, betrayal, or abandonment.

Step Two: The Announcement

It is not easy to tell your partner that you want a divorce. This announcement may give you a chance to improve your marriage. It can mark the beginning of a series of conflicts and reconciliations, or it may result in separation and divorce.

A leaver may feel ambivalent about the announcement. The leaver may experience a long and painful process of leave-taking. Those who have had an affair may drop hints in the hopes of being discovered. The discovery of signs of an affair creates a crisis, making it possible for one partner to shift the blame for the distressed marriage onto the other. Issues of betrayal and blame are common.

The left partner may have feelings of rejection. In trying to figure out what is happening, an opposer may experience feelings of rage, depression, and impulsive desires to get back at the leaver.

Individuals going through divorce experience the loss of the "ideal marriage." Each individual needs to resolve his or her grief before beginning a healthy adaptation to the divorce. This transition is key to the rest of the steps. You and your partner may consider family therapy to help plan the divorce process. Professional assistance can help you deal with your anger. By planning for a timely separation, couples will decrease the likelihood of experiencing crises. This is especially true if children are involved.

Step Three: Dismantling the Nuclear Family

Most people remember the day they separated as the day their divorce began. Some feel relief because the separation has finally occurred. Others are overwhelmed with anxiety and fear. Still others feel it is the worst crisis point in their life.

This is a time of major disorganization. Your family's routines are completely different. The roles you held previously in the marriage are gone, and you start to develop new ones. You may grieve over the loss of your role as a spouse. You may experience more stress over this role loss if you identify closely with the wife/mother role. If your identity is husband/father, you may throw yourself into your work to numb the pain of the separation. Separation involves major life changes and requires careful planning. If you have children, you will be defining a new parental relationship with your children's other parent. You will need to master the challenge of "letting go while holding on."

An *orderly separation* is the least self-destructive. Take time with your partner to plan the separation. If children are involved, they have the right to hear about your decision in a clear, age-appropriate manner. They especially need to know how they will be affected personally. Tell the children together or decide on the same message to explain the reasons for the divorce. They need time to process the separation and divorce with both parents. Even adult children and grandchildren need to know. They also require adequate time to prepare for the divorce of their parents/grandparents.

Set up firm relationship boundaries with your children's other parent. Establish clear rules regarding how you will interact with your former spouse. Decide on the best ways to handle holidays, family gatherings, and other special occasions—and plan ahead!

A *disorderly separation* occurs when you have not resolved earlier crises. An abrupt departure usually creates severe crises. The spouse left behind feels abandoned and helpless. Abandoned children can also become negatively affected and may show signs of depression or rebellion. The rejection is too great and too sudden to cope with. The level of conflict between adults affects the emotional adjustment of the children: the lower the conflict, the better kids usually do. For the sake of your children, separate in an orderly fashion.

During step three, decisions are made regarding legal and financial issues. Mediation can help couples reach a friendly solution about property and spousal/child support. Women often have less income following a divorce. Men may also experience changes in their income, especially if required to pay child support regularly. The court system will decide issues of co-parenting and child support if children are involved.

These first three steps make up the *emotional divorce process*. You are ready to explore your future as a single person. Step four explains some of the challenges divorced parents may encounter in the divorce process.

Step Four: The Binuclear Family

A binuclear family consists of two households, each household headed by one parent. Your challenge is to reorganize yourself and your children within this new family setting. How you do this will determine the future health and well-being of your family.

Your children will adjust more easily to the new binuclear family if you:

- Meet their basic economic and psychological needs.
- Help them maintain family relationships they had prior to the divorce (i.e., extended family, grandparents, etc.).
- Work cooperatively with the other parent.

Remember that you are still a part of a family. The nature of the co-parenting relationship you establish with your former spouse is very important. There are five types of co-parenting relationships:

1. Perfect pals:

- Remain close friends.
- Share custody of the children and child-rearing responsibilities.
- Solve problems together.
- Engage in minimal conflict with each other.

2. Cooperative colleagues:

- Manage to have a friendly relationship but are not close friends.
- Are child-focused with shared- or primary-parent custody.
- Are able to separate marital and parental roles.
- May have personal conflicts but are likely to use mediation or therapy to help solve problems.

3. Angry associates:

- Manage a working relationship.
- Are child-focused.
- Are unable to separate marital and parental roles.
- Argue over issues that quickly lead into unresolved marital fights.
- Frequently engage in power struggles over custody and finances.
- Have children who are usually caught in loyalty conflicts.
- Have children who don't maintain relationships with extended family members.

4. Fiery foes:

- Exhibit frequent hostility toward one another.
- View each other as a mortal enemy.
- Lack co-parenting skills.
- Remain very emotionally attached to each other but deny it.
- Have children who are usually caught in loyalty conflicts.
- Have children who don't maintain relationships with extended family members.

5. Dissolved duos:

- Have no further contact with one another.
- Have one parent who assumes total responsibility for the children.
- Are the only truly "single parent" form.

Divorced people in this situation often feel stressed as they develop firm boundaries between households, parent-child relationships, and them and the former spouse. It may be helpful to set up a contract, referred to as a "limited partner-

ship agreement.” This agreement establishes guidelines and expected roles within the new binuclear family. It also may be helpful to decide which parenting relationship you and your former spouse fit:

- **Perfect Pals:** can have a fairly flexible and unwritten type of contract because they are able to negotiate easily.
- **Cooperative Colleagues:** may need a more structured agreement outlining roles and responsibilities.
- **Angry Associates:** require a more structured agreement that states specifics about what each parent can and can not do with the children.
- **Fiery Foes:** should have all matters written into a legal contract because they are most likely to violate it.

Perfect pals and cooperative colleagues communicate openly and frequently. They often spend holidays and share in their children’s events together.

“Parallel parenting” is the norm for angry associates and fiery foes. They operate independently as parents. They don’t share information with each other or participate together in family events.

Co-parenting can be challenging even when adult children are involved. You may have to discuss family matters with your former spouse. For example, you may have to decide who will attend your children’s weddings or holiday gatherings or how to handle grandparent privileges. Set up clear boundaries at the time of the divorce to reduce future stress and conflict. Usually the conflict for many divorced couples subsides within two years.

Step Five: The Aftermath

The binuclear family will change again if either former spouse decides to remarry. The remarriage may introduce stepchildren and stepparents into the family dynamics. You will need to establish new roles and rules for the relationships between stepparents and parents. It is also helpful to try to maintain important relationships within the existing binuclear family.

The first two years following divorce is an important time for your children. Cooperation with your children’s other parent in co-parenting is critical. This will help your children adjust to the divorce more successfully.

Summary

This publication describes the five steps to a good divorce. If you understand these steps you are more likely to:

- Maintain family-oriented relationships.

- Minimize negative effects on your children.
- Integrate the divorce into your life in a healthy way.

By being informed of the normal transitions of divorce, you can be better prepared to move through the process and make the best decisions for yourself, your former spouse, and your children.

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