

**Section I****THE STAGES OF DIVORCE**

There are two exercises in this section. This section describes the process of divorce, as well as the emotional nature of divorce work or the working through of the emotional issues connected to the divorce. This chapter provides a four-stage model for understanding the emotional divorce work process and describes each stage in some detail. The primary goals of this section are to provide information to clients and to help clients figure out where they are in the emotional and practical process of separation and divorce.

**PURPOSE**

The information provided gives clients a means for understanding the separation/divorce continuum and assessing their own place along this continuum. The four-stage model was briefly described previously, but is explained to clients in more detail in the "Setting Perspective" subsection.

**TYPES OF SITUATIONS FOR WHICH THIS INFORMATION  
MAY BE MOST USEFUL**

- Helping clients to understand the concept and process of divorce work
- Helping clients to think about and explore a framework by which to understand the divorce process and its impact upon their lives as a whole
- Helping clients to think about their own emotional condition, with respect to separation and divorce
- Helping clients to understand the work that may lie ahead, as well as any divorce work they've already completed
- Helping clients to think about their own place along the divorce continuum

## THE STAGES OF DIVORCE

The hallmark of a marriage is the expectation at the outset that this is to be a permanent relationship, one in which the partners commit their lives to one another. Accordingly, the breakup of such a relationship can be devastating and life disrupting, regardless of whether those involved are legally married or living together in a committed relationship.

In addition to the emotional consequences, a divorce, like a legal marriage, represents a technical and legal process. Many of the features of a legal marriage that need to be *legally* undone through the divorce process don't need to be undone when a common-law marriage breaks apart. However, with increasing litigation in general and an increasing recognition of the rights of both partners in unwedded relationships, there can be as many legal issues involved in the separation of the unwedded as in the divorce of the wedded. Where there are children, custody issues are just as relevant, important, draining, and critical in the lives of the parents and children. And the emotional issues in the separation of an unwedded couple are just as penetrating and devastating.

### UNDERSTANDING DIVORCE

Although your divorce is highly personal and unique, it can help to know that you're not alone in your confusion and despair, and that things improve over time. It can help to understand what's typical in the divorce process, what to expect from your emotions and your life as your divorce progresses through the final decree and beyond, and the sort of emotional and practical issues that you're likely to experience, as well as the order in which they are likely to occur. These are the developmental stages of divorce—the sequence of things that divorced people typically go through. You can help yourself by recognizing which phase of your divorce work is most relevant to your life now, understanding what emotional and life tasks are involved, and identifying and working through your feelings and experiences.

There are any number of ways to describe what people pass through from the first announcement of a divorce to the point at which they're able to move on with their new lives, free of old emotional bonds. But there are two clear processes of divorce that coincide with and actively affect one another: the *legal* route to separation and the dissolution of the marriage and the *emotional* roller coaster that you're no doubt already on. Although these two aspects of divorce are separate from one another, they happen simultaneously in different arenas of your life, and one clearly and definitely influences the other. *Divorce Counseling Homework Planner* focuses strictly on the *emotional* process of

divorce. Nevertheless, like the legal side of the divorce process, there's a predictable sequence of feelings and events you'll experience and a set of tasks you'll have to accomplish to deal most successfully with those experiences.

Despite the ebb and flow of feelings and the constant turbulence of the postdivorce years, divorced people do go through recognizable stages as they deal with and pass through the legal and emotional processes of divorce. Understanding these stages can help you to make sense of your feelings and accept them as a normal and expected part of the emotional process. Such understanding can aid you in working on the necessary emotional aspects of your divorce work, which include:

- Facing the reality of the divorce
- Working through painful feelings
- Experiencing the full range of emotions associated with the breakdown of your marriage
- Coping with the situational and lifestyle changes resulting from your loss
- Adapting to the change and reconfiguring your life

## THE FOUR STAGES OF DIVORCE

Although everyone's experience with divorce will be somewhat different, you can expect to go through four distinct stages, which combine an emotional reality that begins with the announcement of divorce and the practical considerations that follow your separation.

Although there's a timeline—the sequence of things that will happen and the emotional phases you'll pass through in a particular order—there's no straightforward measure of how long it will take to progress through this timeline. Generally, you can expect it to take 1 to 3 years before your life resumes its course, in the main unaffected by your divorce—but, of course, this varies widely. There's no correct formula to tell you when you should feel a particular way or when you should stop feeling that way. The concept of emotional divorce work is intended to help you understand and stay on top of your emotions, so your brain, not your feelings, shapes the path of your divorce and your life.

The first stage of the divorce typically passes the most quickly. It's the quick hit and sometimes numbing shock wave as you realize your marriage is over. It represents the first phase of adjustment. The second and third stages represent the bulk of your active divorce work—covering the most substantial legal, practical, and emotional changes in your life during and after divorce. Most of the issues raised by and about the divorce will be addressed, worked through, and hammered home during these two stages. During the fourth and final stage you are moving away from the divorce and into your new life. This stage really has no formal end and is marked by your full acceptance of the divorce, as well as the resolution of most of the practical issues and many of the emotional issues. This stage is characterized by your recognition that you're capable of having a life—and, indeed, *have* a life—outside of your former marriage, and that you're getting on with that life.

#### 4 THE STAGES OF DIVORCE

- Stage 1: Shock and disbelief
- Stage 2: Initial adjustment
- Stage 3: Active reorganization
- Stage 4: Life re-formation

*Stage 1, shock and disbelief*, begins as soon as the idea of a separation and divorce is introduced and sinks in. Sometimes during this stage people don't really believe the marriage is over. Of course, sometimes this is true, and reconciliation does follow. But the emotional work of this stage can't really begin until you accept the reality of the separation. If you choose to believe that your marriage isn't really over or that this is just a phase the marriage or your partner is going through, then you're in a state of suspended disbelief, and your life will remain frozen while you wait for it to return to normal. But regardless of whether you believe that your marriage is really over, the work of Stage 1 begins with that first announcement of divorce, and it involves four major tasks and issues to be worked through.

- *Facing reality.* You have to come to grips with what has just happened. One of you in the marriage has announced the intention to separate and get a divorce.
- *Self-esteem and inadequacy.* One of the early tasks you face concerns how you see yourself, and the feelings of inadequacy, and even shame, that you might experience as you question what *you* did wrong.
- *Telling the world.* This task is directly connected to self-esteem and shame, and involves letting others know what's happened: family, friends, coworkers, and other people in your life.
- *Support and help.* You'll experience a full range of emotions in relation to the end of your marriage, and many practical obstacles and challenges will suddenly appear. This task involves getting the emotional support and practical help you need from friends, family, and others who are part of your life.

As you work your way through this stage, you will pass from initial disbelief to a point of acceptance. You may still not believe that things are final and perhaps you still hope for reconciliation, but if you are successful in dealing with the issues and tasks of this stage, you'll reach a point where you accept the facts of your situation and begin to actively plan for and accommodate the fresh reality of your new life.

*Stage 2, initial adjustment*, involves your ability to actively adapt to this new phase of your life. The initial shock at the end of your marriage has passed, and as the numbness wears off you start to feel the pain and squarely face the many real changes that have taken place in your life. The primary goal in this stage is to adapt and muster the personal resources you'll need to manage the many emotional and practical changes you're going through. Four major tasks of this stage are:

- *Functioning and responsibility.* Even if it doesn't feel that way, you still have a life. It's important that you continue to function effectively, appropriately, and responsibly during this very difficult—and critical—time in your life.
- *Practical reality.* Part of your adjustment will involve immediate attention to practical matters—housing, financial stability, child care, and so on. Initial adaptation very much means ensuring a stable base for your life as you tend to the immediate and longer-term emotional, legal, and practical tasks.
- *Legal matters.* Even if you have a completely amiable and straightforward divorce, you still have to sever legal ties and the marriage itself. During this early stage, you will be involved in the first steps of your legal divorce. This will likely include your early search for or initial interactions with an attorney.
- *Managing emotions.* Throughout this stage you will likely be inundated with powerful emotions of all kinds, from the self-esteem and shame issues you experienced in Stage 1 to feelings of anger, betrayal, and revenge. A primary task involves finding ways to cope with your emotions so you're not swept away or overcome by them. At this time, you may decide to seek help from a counselor for yourself or your children, if you or they are experiencing emotional difficulties.

Stage 2 begins as emotional numbness and disbelief wear off, and you adjust to your new situation. It ends with your acclimation to the situation—your ability to live within this new life, even though you may not like or even accept it. Neither adjustment nor acclimation signifies your ability to control your emotions, nor do they mean that you're on top of things—but successfully working through these tasks does mean you've accomplished a great deal and have laid the foundation for the work ahead.

*Stage 3, active reorganization,* centers around the way you're living your life and how you're coping with the tasks of being suddenly single—perhaps being a single parent—and the huge tasks of redefining yourself and your life. By now, you've become aware of some of the enduring changes that you'll have to make (or have already made) and are addressing these very real issues. The issues and tasks you'll face during this stage involve the following:

- *Lifestyle and practical affairs.* This covers the issues that surround how you live your life and manage your affairs. Perhaps it involves moving to a new home or changing the locks on your existing home, or permanent child care arrangements.
- *Redefining relationships.* By now, many of your relationships have been redefined to some degree—you've sorted out those people you can count on and those who have moved away from active involvement in your life. In this stage, you'll more clearly define relationships with people from your married life, including your ex-spouse, of course, as well as former in-laws and friends you previously shared with your former partner.

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- *Reconstructing personal values and beliefs.* After the experience of a failed marriage, you no doubt feel devastated. During this stage you'll be thinking hard about yourself, what you want and what you don't want, what's important in your life, and how to find meaning in your postmarried life.
- *Concluding legal procedures.* During this stage, you'll pass through the most active elements of the legal divorce process. How you handle this will be enormously important—for many people, a great deal rides on the outcomes, including child custody, finances, and the splitting of shared property, as well as emotional consequences for both yourself and any involved children.

The beginning of the third stage is marked by the consolidation of your resources—your life is physically more settled and you know what's available to you and what isn't. Even though emotional, practical, legal, and lifestyle issues are far from resolved, your life has taken a clear direction. By the end of Stage 3, your life is more clearly defined, and things are beginning to fall into place.

*Stage 4, life re-formation,* represents the final steps as you pass through to the other side of your divorce—the worst is behind you, and you have the opportunity to build a new life. In this final stage, you'll deal with the emotional issues and life choices involved in resolutely moving on with your life.

- *Constructing relationships.* As you move onward, you'll not only redefine but, in many cases, you'll rebuild old and existing relationships, as well as construct new ones. These may be platonic, romantic, work-related, or social in some other way.
- *New interests.* You have the chance to explore new interests or revisit old ones that were perhaps not viable in the past. These interests, like new relationships, provide part of the foundation upon which your postmarried life will be built.
- *Personal responsibility.* As you work through this final stage, you'll come to terms with the fact that you're fully responsible for your own life—your emotional and physical health, your finances, your social relationships, and your choices. Where you go will be up to you.
- *Accepting your new life.* In successful emotional divorce work, you finally reach the point where you're able to fully acknowledge and accept that your marriage is over. Like it or not, you have a new life.

Stage 4 is characterized by a clarification of the way things are as you enter this final phase of your divorce work. Much of the work of fully defining your relationship with your ex-spouse has been accomplished. The successful conclusion to Stage 4 is recognizing your ability to set the pace for your own life, wherever it may take you.

## **STAGES OF DIVORCE: GETTING LOCATED**

### **GOALS OF THE EXERCISE**

This is a straightforward homework exercise designed to help clients think about the stage they are currently in along the divorce continuum and the tasks associated with each stage.

### **TYPES OF SITUATIONS FOR WHICH THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL**

This exercise will help clients think about their current divorce work stage, thus helping to identify the emotional, behavioral, and life management tasks they may have already completed, are facing at the moment, or are yet to face. This is an especially useful exercise for helping therapists and clients identify current concerns and issues, and for setting the pace for ongoing therapy.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH CLIENTS**

- Does the idea that there are stages to divorce fit your own experience with your separation?
- Are you able to identify and recognize your current stage in the divorce process?
- What are the related divorce work tasks you most need to work on right now?
- Are you feeling encouraged, or does the divorce work ahead seem overwhelming?
- Do you recognize the differences and the relationship between the legal and emotional aspects of the divorce process?
- Which tasks seem most pressing right now?
- Which tasks seem the most overwhelming or difficult to think about?

## STAGES OF DIVORCE: GETTING LOCATED

Based on the descriptions of the stages of divorce work, circle the letter that most closely describes where you are *right now* with each task: A = I can't deal with this task; B = I'm working on this task; C = I've completed this task.

### Stage 1 Tasks

Facing reality	A	B	C
Dealing with self-esteem issues	A	B	C
Telling the world	A	B	C
Getting support and help	A	B	C

### Stage 2 Tasks

Functioning and responsibility	A	B	C
Practical reality	A	B	C
Legal matters	A	B	C
Managing emotions	A	B	C

### Stage 3 Tasks

Addressing practical affairs	A	B	C
Redefining relationships	A	B	C
Reconstructing values and beliefs	A	B	C
Concluding legal procedures	A	B	C

### Stage 4 Tasks

Constructing relationships	A	B	C
Developing new interests	A	B	C
Accepting personal responsibility	A	B	C
Accepting your new life	A	B	C



**EXERCISE I.A**

You're now aware of the stages of divorce and how they typically progress, with respect to each of the emotional and practical tasks of divorce work. Look at the answers you've circled above:

1. Which four tasks are the most relevant to you *now*, in your current divorce stage?

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2. What do the tasks you've picked tell you about your current divorce work?

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3. What's your current divorce stage? (If it's difficult for you to easily identify your current stage, go directly to the next question.)

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4. Was it difficult for you to easily identify your current divorce stage? If so, why?

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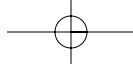
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**EXERCISE I.A**

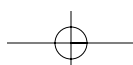
5. What are your *thoughts* as you complete this exercise?

I'm thinking . . . \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. What are your *feelings* as you complete this exercise?

I'm feeling . . . \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Remember to bring the completed worksheet to your next appointment.*



## IDENTIFYING YOUR FEELINGS

### GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

This is a checklist-based exercise that will help clients identify immediate and significant feelings and concerns, providing important information to the therapist regarding the most pressing issues to be addressed in therapy.

### TYPES OF SITUATIONS FOR WHICH THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL

This exercise is useful in helping the clinician to understand the client's current emotional state in general, as well as helping to identify any concerns about emotional stability and the diagnosis of significant mental health concerns such as depression, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorder, or adjustment disorder.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH CLIENTS

- Are there specific questions you need to answer for yourself before continuing with your divorce work?
- Do you have a clear sense of the issues, feelings, and tasks that you'll be facing in your divorce work?
- Have you ever experienced feelings of this sort before?
- Why do you think you're having these particular feelings?
- Are you afraid your feelings will never pass?
- Are the problems you're experiencing so severe or debilitating that you're having trouble functioning in your day-to-day life?
- How did you feel as you were completing the exercise?

## IDENTIFYING YOUR FEELINGS

Divorce work, like any emotional work, isn't a matter of tenacity—it's a matter of the heart. *Thinking* about what you've lost is an important component of any emotional work. But the key to healing is allowing yourself to *experience* the mass of feelings that has followed the announcement of the divorce, and then sorting through and expressing these feelings.

It's not the goal of emotional work to find ways to avoid or bypass difficult and unpleasant feelings. Instead, its purpose is to find ways to recognize and accept difficult feelings, and learn to tolerate, manage, and work through them. In fact, your feelings can help guide the way. In order to understand and manage intense emotions, you need to recognize, experience, and express them.

Check all of the emotional states that best describe how you are generally feeling at this point in your divorce.

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|-------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Abandoned  | You feel discarded and pushed off to one side. This may be the case especially if your ex-spouse seems to be moving along with his or her life just fine or is already involved in another relationship.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Afraid     | You're scared of what life will be like now. You may be fearful about your ability to cope emotionally, or you may be uncertain about practical concerns such as money, raising the children, or where you'll live.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ambivalent | You're not sure how you feel about this whole thing. The divorce may even be your idea, or you may think that your spouse is right in seeking a separation.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Angry      | Anger often feels like a physical thing. Your muscles tense up and you may feel like yelling at someone or hitting something. Your anger is most likely directed toward your ex-spouse, or you may find yourself getting angry at other people, or even yourself.                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious    | Anxiety is distinct from fear and is often a generalized feeling. If you're afraid, at least you know what scares you. If you're anxious, on the other hand, you're likely to feel agitated without knowing exactly why. You may experience cold sweats, hyperactivity, or edginess. |

**EXERCISE I.B**

- \_\_\_ Ashamed  
You may feel that this divorce is a reflection on you, and you therefore experience a sense of personal failure or a fear that others will see it that way. Or you may feel a sense of shame when you tell others about your separation or they ask about it. Shame has a great deal to do with your self-esteem, but even people with the healthiest self-regard can feel ashamed when it comes to divorce.
- \_\_\_ Bitter  
You feel cheated by your ex-spouse and perhaps by others in your life. You may feel jealous and resentful toward others, and generally feel like a victim.
- \_\_\_ Concerned about legal issues  
You have significant concerns or questions about the legal process, your rights, what to expect from the divorce process, or how to best approach the legal and divorce issues ahead.
- \_\_\_ Concerned about new relationships  
You're concerned and perhaps confused about forming new relationships. Perhaps you're scared of another relationship failure, of making a commitment, or of the effects on your children.
- \_\_\_ Concerned about old relationships  
You find yourself worried about what will happen to old relationships that were attached to your marriage, such as those with in-laws and shared friends.
- \_\_\_ Concerned about your children  
Whether they're minors or adults, you're not sure how your children will respond to your separation and divorce.
- \_\_\_ Concerned about the relationship with your ex-spouse  
There may be many circumstances that require a continued relationship with your ex-spouse, from children to a genuine desire to maintain a relationship. You may feel unsure about what you want, how to proceed, or how to deal with your ex-spouse.
- \_\_\_ Confused  
You may be unsure of what you're feeling, or your feelings may change quickly. Your thoughts may be unfocused and it may be difficult to concentrate, or you may have a hard time knowing what to do and how to make good decisions.
- \_\_\_ Depressed  
Depression can manifest itself as a general mood of melancholy or as a full-blown experience that is all-encompassing and seems to have no end. In a major depression, your mood, appetite, sleep, memory, and ability to concentrate are seriously impaired. You may feel the impulse to do self-destructive things in an effort to find relief.

EXERCISE I.B

- \_\_\_ Guilty      You find yourself feeling guilty, perhaps because the divorce is *your* choice or because you feel as though you've hurt or let down your ex-spouse or other family members. You might also feel that you could have made more of a go of it.
- \_\_\_ Helpless      Things seem to be out of your control. You may be feeling as though you're on a roller-coaster ride that you can't get off, that you can't cope with the practicalities of your everyday life, and that you are unable to control or manage your feelings.
- \_\_\_ Hostile      Your anger and resentment toward your ex-spouse are leading you to feel hostile—as though you want to engage in battle, whether in the courtroom or elsewhere.
- \_\_\_ Inadequate      You're feeling as though this divorce is your fault—that if you had been a better spouse or a smarter person, this would never have happened. You feel as though you're not good enough.
- \_\_\_ Incomplete      Without your former spouse, you feel empty and unable to function as an individual, that you are incapable of fulfilling your own needs.
- \_\_\_ Lonely      You feel empty and alone, with no one to share your feelings or your life. Perhaps in some way you feel uncared for and friendless.
- \_\_\_ Lost      You're not sure which way to turn, or how to respond to your ex-spouse or to life in general.
- \_\_\_ Overwhelmed      You simply can't cope with the barrage of emotions, thoughts, and changes facing you. You feel like running away or escaping by using alcohol or drugs. You want someone to rescue you, to make it all go away.
- \_\_\_ Preoccupied      You can't stop thinking about your marriage. Perhaps you replay certain scenes in your mind, agonize about what you did wrong, or repeatedly get angry with your ex-spouse. It's difficult to concentrate on your everyday responsibilities or engage in a conversation without your mind wandering.
- \_\_\_ Sad      Sorrow and heartbreak color everything. You feel the separation deeply, and it affects and pervades all you do. It is a mood that simply won't go away.

**EXERCISE I.B**

- \_\_\_ Shocked                      You are bewildered and still can't believe what has happened. You're hoping to wake up from a bad dream.
- \_\_\_ Violated                     You may feel that you have somehow been taken advantage of, or that you've been degraded or emotionally abused in some way.
- \_\_\_ Yearning                     You long for the return of the marriage and your ex-spouse. The loss of your marriage hurts so much that you feel it in the pit of your stomach. You're constantly aware of the absence of your spouse, and you feel empty. Nothing can fill the void.

Of the feelings you checked off, which three are most intense right now?

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Complete these five sentences:

1. As I complete this section, I feel like . . .

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2. Right now, I'd like to . . .

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3. Lately, I've been feeling like . . .

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4. My most important current task is . . .

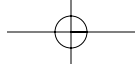
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**EXERCISE I.B**

5. I feel like I most need to work on . . .

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*Remember to bring the completed worksheet to your next appointment.*

