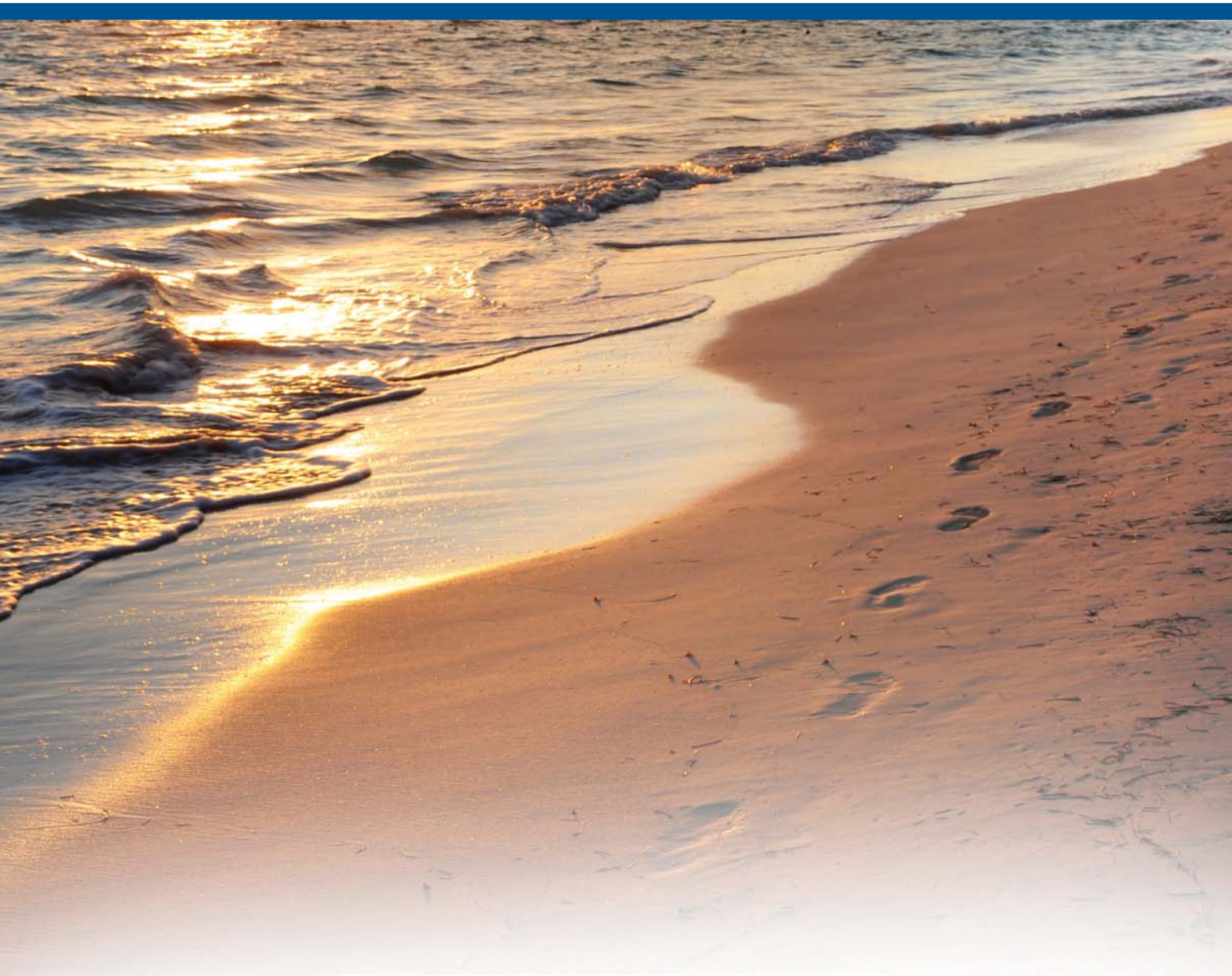
DIVORCE RECOVERY
GUIDE



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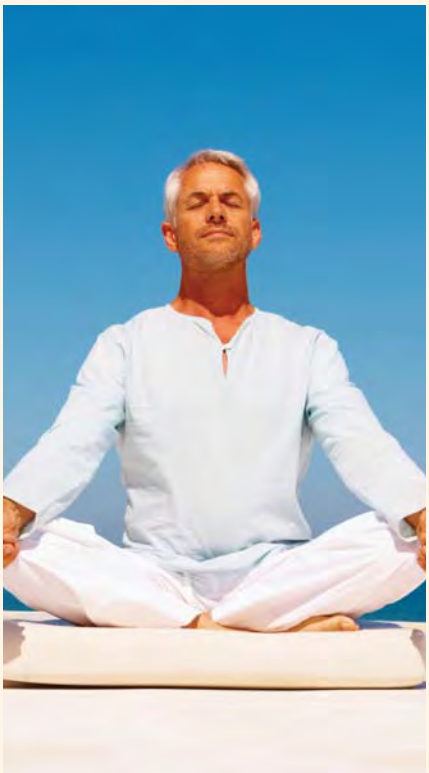

For most people, divorce is much more than a major legal process. It's also a challenging time of transition that can negatively impact virtually every area of life: emotional, psychological, domestic, parental, financial, physical health, social, vocational, and more.

This special **Divorce Recovery Guide** contains useful and supportive articles, book excerpts, advice, and more to help you recover from the inevitable stresses and pressures of divorce. It will empower you to build the satisfying, strong, and inspired new life-after-divorce that you desire – and deserve.

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Divorce Recovery

Recovering from divorce is like climbing a mountain, one challenging step after another. For most of us, it's a difficult journey – but the rewards at the end of the climb are worth it!

By Dr. Bruce Fisher
and Dr. Robert Alberti

Are you hurting? If you have recently ended a love relationship, you are. Those who appear not to hurt when their love relationships end have either already worked through a lot of hurt, or have yet to feel the pain. So go ahead, acknowledge that you're hurt. It's natural, expected, healthy, even okay to hurt. Pain is nature's way of telling us that something in us needs to be healed, so let's get on with the healing.

There's an adjustment process after a divorce – with a beginning, an end, and specific steps of learning along the way. While you're feeling some of the pain, you're more anxious to learn how to be healed. If you're like most of us, you probably have had some destructive patterns of behavior for years – maybe since your childhood. Change is hard work. While you were in a love relationship, you might have been comfortable enough that you felt no need to change. But now there is that pain. What do you do? Well, you can use the pain as motivation to learn and to grow.

The steps of the adjustment process are arranged into a pyramid of "Rebuilding Blocks"to symbolize a mountain. Rebuilding means climbing that mountain, and for most of us it's a difficult journey. Let us assure you that the climb is worth it! The rewards at the top make the tough climb worthwhile.

The rebuilding blocks are a guide and a map prepared by others who have already traveled the trail. As you climb, you'll discover that tremendous personal growth is possible, despite the emotional trauma you've experienced from the ending of your love relationship. Beginning at the bottom, we find denial and fear, two painful stumbling blocks that come early in the process of adjustment. They can be overwhelming feelings, and may make you reluctant to begin the climb.

Denial: "I Can't Believe This is Happening to Me"

The good news is we humans have a wonderful mechanism that allows us to feel only as much pain as we can handle without becoming overwhelmed. Pain that is too great is put into our "denial bag"and held until we are strong enough to experience and learn from it.

The bad news is some of us experience so much denial that we are reluctant to attempt recovery – to climb the mountain. There are many reasons for this. Some are unable to access and identify what they are feeling and will have difficulty adjusting to change of any sort. They must learn that "what we can feel, we can heal." Others have such a low self-concept that they don't believe they're capable of climbing the mountain. And some feel so much fear that they're afraid to climb the mountain.

Fear: "I Have Lots of It!"

Have you ever been in a winter blizzard? The wind is blowing so hard that it howls. The snow is so thick you can see only a few feet ahead of you. Unless you have shelter, it feels – and it can be – life-threatening.

The fears you feel when you first separate are like being in a blizzard. Where do you hide? How do you find your way? You choose not to climb this mountain because even here at the bottom you feel overwhelmed. How can you find your way up when you believe the trail will become more blinding, threatening, fearful? You want to hide, find a lap to

curl up in, and get away from the fearful storm.

How do you handle your fears? What do you do when you discover your fears have paralyzed you? Can you find the courage to face them so you can get ready to climb the mountain? Each fear you overcome gives you strength and courage to continue your journey through life.

Adaptation: "But It Worked When I was a Kid!"

Each of us has many healthy parts: inquisitive, creative, nurturing, feelings of self-worth, appropriate anger. During our growing-up years, our healthy parts were not always encouraged by family, school, church, or other influential experiences, such as movies, books, and magazines. The result was often stress, trauma, lack of love, and other hindrances to health.

A person who is not able to meet his or her needs for nurturing, attention, and love will find ways to adapt – and not all adaptive behaviors are healthy. Examples of adaptive responses include being over-responsible for others, becoming a perfectionist, trying to always be a people-pleaser, or developing an "urge-to-help." Unhealthy adaptive behaviors that are too well-developed leave you out of balance, and you may try to restore your balance through a relationship with another person.

For example, if I am over-responsible, I may look for an under-responsible love partner. If the person I find is not under-responsible enough, I will train her to be under-responsible! This leads me to "polarize"responsibility: I become more and more over-responsible, the other person becomes more and more under-responsible. This polarization is often fatal to the success of a love relationship and is a special kind of co-dependency.

Adaptive behaviors you learned as a child will not always lead to healthy adult relationships. Does that help you understand why you need to climb this mountain?

Loneliness: "I've Never Felt so Alone"

When a love relationship ends, the feeling is probably the greatest loneliness you have ever known. Many daily living habits must be altered now that your partner is gone. As a couple, you may have spent time apart before, but your partner was still in the relationship, even when not physically present. When the relationship is ending, your partner is not there at all. Suddenly you are totally alone.

The thought, "I'm going to be lonely like this forever," is overwhelming. It seems you're never going to know the companionship of a love relationship again. You may have children living with you and friends and relatives close by, but the loneliness is somehow greater than all of the warm feelings from your loved ones. Will this empty feeling ever go away? Can you ever feel okay about being alone?

John had been doing the bar scene pretty often. He took a look at it and decided: "I've been running from and trying to drown my lonely feelings. I think I'll try sitting home by myself, writing in my journal to see what I can learn about myself." He was beginning to change feeling lonely into enjoying aloneness.

Friendship: "Where has Everybody Gone?"

As you've discovered, the building blocks that occur early in the process tend to be quite painful. Because they are so painful, there is a great need for friends to help one face and overcome the emotional pain. Unfortunately, many friends are usually lost as one goes through the divorce process – a problem that is especially evident for those who have already physically separated from a love partner. The problem is made worse by withdrawal from social contacts because of emotional pain and fear of rejection. Divorce is threatening to friends, causing them to feel uncomfortable around the dividing partners.

Betty says that the old gang of couples had a party this weekend, but she and her ex were not invited. "I was so hurt and angry. What did they think – that I was going to seduce one of the husbands or something?" Social relationships may need to be rebuilt around friends who will understand your emotional pain without rejecting you. It is worthwhile to work at retaining some old friends, and finding new friends to support and listen.

Guilt/Rejection: "Dumpers 1, Dumpees 0"

Have you heard the terms "dump-er"and "dumpee" before? No one who has experienced

the ending of a love relationship needs definitions for these words. Usually there is one person who is more responsible for deciding to end the love relationship; that person becomes the dumper. The more reluctant partner is the dumpee. Most dumpers feel guilty for hurting the former loved one. Dumpees find it tough to acknowledge being rejected.

The adjustment process is different for the dumper and the dumpee, since the dumper's behavior is largely governed by feelings of guilt and the dumpee's by rejection.

Grief: "There's this terrible feeling of loss"

Grieving is an important part of the recovery process. Whenever we suffer the loss of love, the death of a relationship, the death of a loved one, or the loss of a home, we must grieve that loss. Indeed, the divorce process has been described by some as largely a grief process. Grief combines overwhelming sadness with a feeling of despair. It drains us of energy by leading us to believe we are helpless, powerless to change our lives. Grief is a crucial rebuilding block.

Anger: "Damn the S.O.B.!"

It's difficult to understand the intensity of the anger felt at this time unless one has been through divorce. Here's a true story from the *Des Moines Register* that helps us find out if an audience is primarily composed of divorced or married people: While driving by the park, a female dumpee saw her male dumper lying on a blanket with a new girlfriend. She drove into the park and ran over the former spouse and his girlfriend with her car! (Fortunately the injuries were not serious; it was a small car.) Divorced people respond by exclaiming, "Right on! Did she back over them again?" Married people, not understanding the divorce anger, will gasp, "Ugh! How terrible!"

Most divorced people were not aware that they would be capable of such rage because they had never been this angry before. This special kind of rage is specifically aimed towards the ex-love partner and – handled properly – it can be really helpful to your recovery, since it helps you gain some emotional distance from your ex.

Letting Go: Disentangling is hard to do

It's tough to let go of the strong emotional ties that remain from the dissolved love union. Nevertheless, it's important to stop investing emotionally in the dead relationship.

Stella came to take the seminar about four years after her divorce. She was still wearing her wedding ring! To invest in a dead relationship, an emotional corpse, is to make an investment with no chance of return. The need instead is to begin investing in productive personal growth, which will help in working your way through the divorce process.

Self-Worth: "Maybe I'm not so bad after all!"

Feelings of self-worth and self-esteem greatly influence behavior. Low self-esteem and a search for stronger identity are major causes of divorce. Divorce, in turn, causes lowered self-esteem and loss of identity. For many people, self-concept is lowest when they end the love relationship. They have invested so much of themselves in the love relationship that when it ends, their feelings of self-worth and self-esteem are devastated.

As you improve your feelings of self-worth, you're able to step out of the divorce pits and start feeling better about yourself. With improved self-worth also comes the courage you'll need to face the journey into yourself that's coming up.

Transition: "I'm putting out the trash"

You want to understand why your relationship ended. Maybe you need to perform an "autopsy" on your dead relationship. If you can figure out why it ended, you can work on changes that will allow you to create and build different relationships in the future.

At the Transition stage of the climb, you'll begin to realize the influences from your family of origin. You'll discover that you very likely married someone like the parent you never made peace with, and that whatever growing-up tasks you didn't finish in childhood, you're trying to work out in your adult relationships.

You may decide that you're tired of doing the "shoulds" you've always done, and instead want to make your own choices about how you'll live your life. That may begin a process of rebellion, breaking out of your shell.

Any stumbling block that is not resolved can result in the ending of your primary love relationship.

It's time to take out your trash, to dump the leftovers that remain from your past and your previous love relationship and your earlier years. You thought you had left these behind, but when you begin another relationship, you find they're still there. As Ken told Bruce, "Those damn neuroses follow me everywhere."

Transition represents a period of transformation, as you learn new ways of relating to others. It is the beginning of becoming free to be yourself.

Openness: "I've been hiding behind a mask"

A mask is a feeling or image that you project, trying to make others believe that is who you are. But it keeps people from knowing who

you really are, and sometimes even keeps you from knowing yourself. Bruce remembered a childhood neighbor who always had a smiling face: "When I became older, I discovered the smiling face covered up a mountain of angry feelings inside the person."

Many of us are afraid to take off our masks because we believe that others won't like the real person underneath the mask. But when we do take off the mask, we often experience more closeness and intimacy with friends and loved ones than we believed was possible.

Jane confided to the class that she was tired of always wearing a happy face. "I would just like to let people know what I am really feeling instead of always having to appear to be happy and joyful." Her mask was becoming heavy, which indicates she might be ready to take it off.

Love: "Could somebody really care for me?"

The typical divorced person says, "I thought I knew what love was, but I guess I was wrong." Ending a love relationship should encourage one to re-examine what love is. A feeling of being unlovable may be present at this stage. Here's how Leonard put it: "Not only do I feel unlovable now, but I'm afraid I never will be lovable!" This fear can be overwhelming.

Christians are taught to "Love thy neighbor as thyself." But what happens if you don't love yourself? Many of us place the center of our love in another person rather than in ourselves. When divorce comes, the center of our love is removed, adding to the trauma of loss. An important element in the rebuilding process is to learn to love yourself. If you don't love yourself – accepting yourself for who you are, warts and all – how can you expect anybody else to love you?

Trust: "My Love Wound is Beginning to Heal"

Located in the center of the pyramid, the Trust rebuilding block symbolizes the fact that the basic level of trust is the center of the whole adjustment process. Divorced people frequently point their fingers and say they cannot trust anyone of the opposite sex. There's an old cliché that fits here: when you point a finger at something, there are three fingers pointing back to you. When divorced people say they don't trust the opposite sex, they're saying more about themselves than about the opposite sex.

The typical divorced person has a painful love wound resulting from the ending of the love relationship, a love wound that prevents him/her from loving another. It takes a good deal of time to be able to risk being hurt and to become emotionally close again.

Relatedness: "Growing Relationships Help Me Rebuild"

Often after a love relationship has ended, you find another relationship: one that appears to have everything the previous union lacked. You think: "I've found the one and only with whom I will live forever. This new relationship appears to solve all of my problems, so I'll hold onto it very tightly. And I believe the new partner is the one who is making me happy."

You need to realize that what feels so good is that you are becoming who you would like to be. You need to take back your own power and take responsibility for the good things you're feeling.

The new relationship after a breakup is often called a "rebound"relationship, a label that is partly true. When this relationship ends, it is often more painful than when the primary love relationship ended. For instance, about 20% of the people who have signed up for the divorce class didn't enrol after their marriages ended: they enrolled after their rebound relationships ended.

Sexuality: "I'm Interested, but I'm Scared"

What do you think of when the word sex is mentioned? Most of us tend to react emotionally and irrationally. Our society over-emphasizes and glamorizes sex. Married couples often imagine divorced people as oversexed and free to "romp and play in the meadows of sexuality." In reality, single people often find the hassles of sexuality among the most trying issues in the divorce process.

A sexual partner was available in the love relationship. Even though the partner is gone, sexual needs go on. In fact, at some points in the divorce process, the sex drive is even greater than before. Yet most people are more or less terrified by the thought of dating – feeling like teenagers again – especially when they sense that somebody has changed the rules since they dated earlier. Many feel old, unattractive, unsure of themselves, and fearful of awkwardness. And for many, moral values overrule their sexual desires. Some have both parents telling them what they should do, and their own teenagers who delight in parenting them! ("Be sure to get home early, Mom.") Thus, for many, dating is confusing and uncertain. No wonder sexual hang-ups are so common!

Singleness: "You Mean It's Okay?"

People who went directly from their parental homes into "marriage homes," without experiencing singleness, often missed this important growth period entirely. For some, even the college years may have been supervised by "parental" figures and rules.

Regardless of your previous experience, however, a period of singleness – growth as an independent person – will be valuable now. Such an adjustment to the ending of a love relationship will allow you to really let go of the past, to learn to be whole and complete

within yourself and to invest in yourself. Singleness is not only okay, it is necessary!

Purpose: "I Have Goals for the Future Now"

Do you have a sense of how long you are going to live? Bruce was very surprised during his divorce when he realized that at age 40 he might be only half-way through his life. If you have many years yet to live, what are your goals? What do you plan to do with yourself after you have adjusted to the ending of your love relationship? It's helpful to make a "lifeline" and take a look at the patterns in your life, and at the potential things you might accomplish for the rest of your time. Planning helps bring the future into the present.

Freedom: From Chrysalis to Butterfly

At last, the top of the mountain!

The final stage has two dimensions. The first is freedom of choice. When you've worked through all of the rebuilding blocks that have been stumbling blocks in the past, you're free and ready to enter into another relationship. You can make it more productive and meaningful than your past love relationships. You're free to choose happiness as a single person or in another love relationship.

There's another dimension of freedom: the freedom to be yourself. Many of us carry around a burden of unmet needs, needs that may control us and not allow us freedom to be the people we want to be. As we unload this burden and learn to satisfy these needs, we become free to be ourselves. This may be the most important freedom.

Looking Backward

While climbing the mountain, one occasionally slips back to a rebuilding block which may have been dealt with before. The blocks are listed here from one to nineteen, but you won't necessarily encounter and deal with them in that order. In fact, you're likely to be working on all of them together. And a big setback, such as court litigation or the ending of another love relationship, may result in a backward slide some distance down the mountain.

Rebuilding Your Faith

Some people ask how religion relates to the rebuilding blocks. Many people working through divorce find it difficult to continue their affiliation with the church they attended while married, for several reasons. Some churches still look upon divorce as a sin or, at best, a "falling from grace." Many people feel guilty within themselves, even if the church doesn't condemn them. Many churches are very family-oriented, and single parents and children of divorced people may be made to feel as if they don't belong. Many people become distant from the church since they are unable to find comfort and understanding as they are going through the divorce process. This distance leaves them with more loneliness and rejection.

There are, happily, many churches that are actively concerned for the needs of people in the divorce process. If your church doesn't have such a program, we urge you to express your needs. Organize a singles group, talk to an adult class, let your minister know if you feel rejected and lonely. Ask your church leaders to help you educate others about the needs of people who are ending their love relationships.

The way each of us lives reflects our faith, and our faith is a very strong influence on our well-being. Bruce likes to put it this way: "God wants us to develop and grow to our fullest potential." And that's what the rebuilding blocks are all about – growing to our fullest potential. Learning to adjust to a crisis is a spiritual process. The quality of our relationships with the people around us, and the amount of love, concern, and caring we're able to show others are good indications of our relationship with God.

Children Must Rebuild Too

Many people ask about how the rebuilding blocks relate to children. The process of adjustment for kids is very similar to that for adults. The rebuilding blocks apply to the children (as they may to other relatives such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and close friends).

Many parents get so involved in trying to help their kids work through the adjustment process that they neglect to meet their own needs.

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THE POWER OF *Forgiveness*

If you're feeling stuck in your divorce recovery, you may need to forgive your ex – and yourself. Here's how.

By Dr. Pamela D. Blair

I never thought about forgiving myself or my spouse until I got into therapy after my second marriage ended. Naturally, anger was an important part of the healing process. My therapist told me I had to honor my anger to get the work of divorce done, to make sense out of it all, and ultimately, move towards forgiveness – to forgive not only my husband, but also the situation and, most of all, myself. By allowing room for my anger at my husband, I was able to create a place where forgiveness and understanding could be born.

Before I discovered the healing power of forgiveness, I was having trouble letting go enough to move forward – I was still wrestling with demons in the night. There's a passage in the Bible that reads: "I will not let you go unless you bless me." (Gen. 32:27). I believe we benefit the most from divorce if we choose not to "let it go until it blesses us" – until we can see the growth potential in it, and until we can understand our attachment to the past. Pain remains pain until our consciousness grows because of it. Then, it becomes power: the "blessing" that grows out of wrestling with the pain.

Some days, just surviving alone was an excruciatingly frightening experience. I felt victimized, traumatized, and paralyzed. In those early days, it never occurred to me that I had done anything that needed forgiving, and the thought of forgiving my husband was not even in my consciousness.

Then I began to look at the role I had played in my marriage, and realized I was responsible for giving away my power in the relationship. I began to see that my husband left in response to some of the dynamics that I had created in the marriage. For the first time, I could see the meaning of forgiveness. I forgave myself for thinking that the only way I could be loved was to abdicate my personal power, and I forgave him for not being able to love me the way I wanted to be loved.

I think the greatest awareness around this forgiveness process came when I realized my contribution to the ending of my marriage, and that divorce, for us, was inevitable.

The Meaning of Forgiveness

What does it mean to forgive? Merriam-Webster defines it as "to give up resentment against, or the desire to punish; stop being angry with; to give up all claim to punish or exact penalty." If we are to forgive, then we must first surrender the right to get even. We then cease defining the one who hurt us in terms of the hurt that was caused. Keep in mind, there's nothing in Webster's definition about the need to reach approval of the injurer's actions: you can forgive your spouse's infidelity, for instance, without approving of that infidelity.

If we forgive, then we can also reach a point where we wish our injurers well; this act of forgiveness then becomes some kind of miracle after we've made meaning of the situation.

If we forgive, then we can also reach a point where we wish our injurers well; this act of forgiveness then becomes some kind of miracle after we've made meaning of the situation.

How do we get to "meaning making"? One way to make sense of your divorce is to realize that your choice of partner may have been based on an old and unhealed need (probably from your childhood) – not on a current or realistic expectation. During the first seven years of our life we usually internalize that parent from whom we need the most approval; later on, this internal parent influences how we choose relationships.

According to Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. – one of North America's leading authorities on relationships and the author of the bestselling book *Getting the Love you Want* – you unconsciously chose your partner because he or she had some of the same traits as your primary caregiver(s). "We are attracted to people like our parents in order to finish the business we didn't finish with them." he says. "Unconsciously, we feel like we're in survival mode, and so when we meet someone who is similar to our parents, we go into a kind of euphoria because deep down inside we believe we're now going to get what we didn't get in childhood. That's what triggers the impulse most commonly called 'romantic love'."

If you're willing to acknowledge that your choice of partner was "beyond your control," then it becomes easier to forgive yourself.

Letting Go

"Forgiveness is integral to letting go. We are bound to the people we cannot forgive. Holding even a small grudge takes up space in the soul and captures the energy needed for moving on. To bless the people who are our oppressors is the only way to heal the wounds they have inflicted and to break the chains that bind us to them," writes Elizabeth O'Connor in *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*.

Letting go means letting go of the resentment, pain, and hate that has probably been an important "driver" – one that helps you stand up for your rights in the divorce process. However, holding on to resentment for too long will eventually consume you. How long is too long? I don't like imposing deadlines on grief work, but the short answer is that you should let go when you're tired of it – when you feel your energy so depleted that it's hard to get out of bed in the morning. Look at how much hating the other person is draining your own internal resources and blocking your growth.

Holding on to a dead relationship is usually the result of feeling a need to

put closure on unresolved issues. The desire to resolve issues in the present is a good one, but it becomes a problem if we get stuck in a determination that we must resolve the issue in a certain way. For instance, you might think: "I'm not letting go of this until my ex says he/she is sorry, or gives me all his/her money, or suffers as much as I have." Holding on can literally permeate your life, keeping you from living in the present; it can cause illness and can prevent you from experiencing new things. When you're stuck in anger, you become a slave to a kind of circular living and thinking, going around and around without attempting to move ahead. If you continue in this circular mode, you risk becoming hopeless, depressed, fatigued, and chronically negative.

You may be using your resentment to hold onto the relationship. It's common for people going through the pain of divorce to maintain their anger stance because it enables them to at least remain connected to the relationship in some way; they'd rather have a horrible relationship with their ex than no relationship at all.

The relationship has come apart, but in some way it still exists – especially if you have children. Letting go does not mean forgetting the good times, or that you must move from love to hate. Some part of you may always love your ex, and that's okay.

Letting go of your past is not the same as avoiding it. If you ignore or repress the painful events in your past because you believe they'd be too painful to relive, you prevent yourself from moving past them.

Stuck in the Past

Another way of getting stuck is by clinging to positive feelings or events. If you've blocked everything except your happy memories of the relationship, you might be afraid to move on – afraid that nothing will compare to the past. Recognizing and accepting this fear as normal is the first step to creating a world full of new experiences. You also need to allow plenty of room for the grieving process before you can trust there's a new world full of opportunity waiting for you.

Have you forgiven yourself? Most of us in the process of divorce or its aftermath find it more difficult to forgive ourselves than to forgive our partners.

Getting free from the hold the past has on you doesn't mean you have to forget the good times (or the bad). Remembering can serve some very important purposes. Remembering can occupy your mind with pleasant thoughts for a much needed "vacation from pain" – and most importantly, it can generate learning that will serve you in the future.

One key to letting go of past hurt is to focus on meeting your own needs in the present. Keep reminding yourself that forgiveness is a process, and it might be a longer one than you'd like. Have you forgiven yourself? Most of us in the process of divorce or its aftermath find it more difficult to forgive ourselves than to forgive our partners.

Being able to let go of negative feelings towards others is highly dependent on your ability to let go of negative feelings towards yourself. When you've developed the ability to let go of your own past mistakes and to acknowledge your humanness, it's almost magical how effortless it becomes to let go of the mistakes of others.

Suggested Actions

- Write the following affirmation out on a piece of paper and place it where you'll see it upon awakening each day: "I am now ready and willing to release, let go, and forgive myself for any contribution I have made to the ending of my relationship."
- Write down what you have difficulty forgiving yourself for. Now look at what you've written, noticing how you judge yourself, and make a conscious effort to understand and forgive yourself.
- Light a candle and say the following words as you look into its flame: "I release you, _____ (ex-spouse's name), into the light, and I do this for my highest good and yours." ■

Pamela D. Blair (Ph.D.) is an author, life coach, therapist, and couples counselor. As a therapist, she is known for her holistic approach and her innovative personal growth workshops. Her office is located in Shelburne, Vermont. However, she is not limited to only seeing clients in the Vermont area: all you need is access to the internet and you can do private sessions on Skype or Facetime. www.PamBlair.com.

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Boot Camp for the Broken-Hearted

By Audrey Valeriani

Having trouble getting over your divorce or separation? Here's a look at the stages of a broken heart – and some tips on mending your heart and moving on.

Understanding What's Happening

Falling in and out of love is a chemical reaction. When we fall in love, our brains generate certain chemicals (e.g. dopamine, and norepinephrine), which give us a euphoric-like feeling, temporarily blinding us from almost anything that may be construed as negative about our paramour (that's why they say, "Love is blind"). After a while, however, our bodies generate smaller amounts of those chemicals, which lead to a decline in that tingly feeling and sense of excitement. Usually, it can take anywhere from one to three years before these chemicals naturally lessen, but if your romance abruptly comes to an end, these levels can plummet and you feel as though your rose-colored glasses have been ripped off!

Your heart is sick – much like your body can be. Just like getting the flu, your heart can get sick and your spirit can take ill, so take care of them as you would your physical body. Take it easy. Don't put too much responsibility on yourself for a while. You're on an emotional roller coaster and, unfortunately, with all of that comes a process. Like mourning the death of a loved one, while grieving the loss of the relationship, you may experience any or all of these seven stages of grief:

1. **Denial.** You feel numb; may expect everything to go back to "normal"; the pain has not yet set in.
2. **Anger.** You're mad at him for leaving; at God for "making" this happen; at yourself for saying or doing something "stupid"; at everyone for no reason.
3. **Guilt.** You regret things that were said or not said, done or not done, which you are *sure* would have changed the outcome.
4. **Depression**. You're sad; there is weight loss or gain; anxiety; unable to cope with routine tasks; crying bouts; tiredness.
5. **Forgiveness.** You begin to come to terms with what happened and slowly let things go; you begin to forgive the other person *and* yourself.
6. **Acceptance.** You get used to your new situation; you are not upset all the time anymore; you begin to move on.
7. **Recovery.** You don't think of him so much anymore, and when you do, there is little discomfort; you are ready to move on!

You may also experience physical and psychological symptoms as well. Your body can feel tired, almost stiff, and may be resistant to any activity. Also, studies show that depression

can lower your immune system, which can make you susceptible to colds and even disease. Mentally, you may feel confused, forgetful, and scattered. You may be unable to concentrate, and following simple directions can feel overwhelming.

Change is not easy. Use this time for self-reflection and goal-setting. When we experience something that is potentially devastating, our minds tend to protect us from memories that can be too overwhelming or upsetting. For this reason, we may not always be able to remember the facts about certain events accurately. We may forget how irritating or cruel or controlling the person was, or imagine them to be more loving, desirable, or kinder than they were in reality.

Mental Conditioning

Let the Healing Begin. Now that you've gotten a better understanding of what's going on within you, let's examine ways to help you to begin feeling better. Instead of spending all of your time thinking about your ex, going over and over everything that happened in your mind, and just plain wallowing in your misery, it's time to take control over your thoughts and start focusing on you! On this page you'll find Tables describing things to focus on and do in order to get yourself moving in the right direction. Practice these suggestions as often as you can, and if you slip up, it's okay. Chalk it up to a bad day, let it all out, and start fresh the next day.

Heart Mending

- What to **focus on** to help you get over a broken heart. See Table 1.
- What to **do** to help you get over a broken heart. See Table 2.

If you're having trouble falling asleep during this time, try this visualization. Lie in bed and close your eyes. Think of all of the people and issues that are worrying you. One by one,

TABLE 1: What to focus on to help you get over a broken heart

Yourself	Don't think about what your ex is doing; keep your mind on yourself.
The Present	Concentrate on what you're doing in the moment.
Friends and Family	Let people who love you listen to you and help you.
Structure	Keep to your normal schedule as much as possible.
Your Spirit	Say prayers, affirmations; think positive.
Goals	Decide what you want, make a plan, and go for it.

TABLE 2: What to do to help you get over a broken heart

Have Faith	Believe in yourself and that you will be okay. Relinquish control over everything.
Keep a Journal	Write everything down – both good and bad thoughts. It will help you get rid of all the anger, confusion, and heartache you have.
Practice Self-Control	Keep focused on your responsibilities as much as you can by allowing yourself to get upset or dwell on your ex only at certain and for limited amounts of time.
Exercise/Move Around	When you're feeling overwhelmed, get up and move your body. It has been proven that changing the location and position of your body can break your train of thought.
Eat Right	This is not the time for a strict diet, nor is it a time to indulge. Foods containing sugar, caffeine, or alcohol can make you anxious, so avoid these when possible.
Keep to a Schedule	When you're feeling bad, there is a tremendous temptation to just stay in bed or lie around the house – but don't do it. Right now, your only tasks are to get yourself up and go to work.
Seek Positive Reinforcement	Review old books that inspired you. Seek out stories or articles that are uplifting, funny, and insightful.
Smile/Laugh	Studies have shown that when we smile, our faces send messages telling our brains that we are all right, and soon we feel better.
Volunteer/Do Things for Others	You'd be surprised how much helping someone else actually helps you! It takes your mind off of your problems for a while.

TABLE 3: Set your goals

SAMPLE GOAL	TO DO TODAY	THIS WEEK	THIS MONTH	IN SIX MONTHS	BY YEAR END
Become a paralegal	Research schools or training	Get brochures; choose school	Get financing; work out details	Go to class and study	Graduate!
Go to Paris	Get brochures	Save money	Book with travel agent	Pack and go!	Enjoy pictures!
Buy a Condo	Save some money	Talk to an agent	Get qualified by the bank	Look at properties	Move!

picture each of them and then shrink them until they are really tiny and can fit in the palm of your hand. Then pick one up at a time and place them on your night table. Pick up your ex, your boss, your mother, the bills – whatever – and place them on the nightstand next to you. Picture this little group standing together now, waiting patiently for you to address them again in the morning.

Worrying about things and rehashing events over and over does you no good – it just keeps you from getting a much needed good night's sleep. By (literally) taking them off your mind, you allow yourself to get the relaxation you need without the fear that your problems will go unaddressed.

Besides getting enough sleep, it's also important to make yourself feel comfortable during this time. Wear your favorite clothes, snuggle with your softest blanket, eat your favorite foods, then take a bath and put on your pajamas! Think of yourself during this time as being under the weather, and treat yourself kindly.

Planning Future Missions

Think about what you want and set some goals: fear, procrastination, and/or laziness are the only things stopping you from having what you want. Basically, there are three steps to achieving your goal:

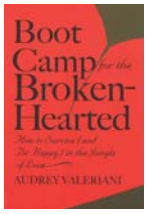
- Figure out what you want.
- Take steps toward your goal every day.
- Focus on it and don't give up.

Now ask yourself these questions: What do you want for your future? What have you denied yourself? What have you put off? What's important to you? What do you dream of being and/or doing? List your replies and write down the actual steps you can take to make it happen. For examples of how to set goals, see Table 3.

Tips

- Understand what's happening to you, both emotionally and physically.
- Allow (and help) yourself go through the whole process of ups and downs.
- Be gentle with and forgiving of yourself.
- Keep up with your normal routine as much as possible.
- Take time to examine your choices, and do what's best for you.
- Review what you've learned from your experience.
- Set some goals, and make your first move!

Hopefully, you're now feeling a little more optimistic and believe that life will go on after tissues, tantrums, and talk shows. ■



This article has been edited and excerpted from Boot Camp for the Broken-Hearted *(New Horizon Press) by Audrey Valieriani. Based in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, Valeriani is the creator of TheAccidentalExpert.com, which provides relationship coaching. You can order her book at* www.bootcampforthebrokenhearted.com.

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Nurturing Mind & Body during Divorce

Taking good care of yourself through the stresses of separation and divorce is absolutely vital.

By Diana Shepherd

Your teenage son has "borrowed" your car without permission again – so now you can't drive your daughter to Brownies. Your daughter is having a meltdown on your front lawn while your neighbors watch with disapproval. There's a message on your answering machine from your ex saying he/she can't take the kids this weekend because he/she got a fabulous deal on airfare to Bermuda and is leaving tomorrow for 10 days of sun and sand with his/her new love interest. The house is a mess, your savings account is down to double-digits, and your son says he "just has to have" that new pair of $150 running shoes, or he'll be branded as a "loser" at school.

Suddenly, you don't feel so good: your stomach is upset, your chest feels tight, and you can feel a wicked headache/backache/cold coming on. The stress in your life has risen beyond your ability to cope with it, and your body will respond with a "breakdown" wherever it's weakest. If you tend to catch viruses easily, you'll come down with a cold or flu; if you have a "bad back," it will get worse; otherwise mild allergies will become moderate to severe – you get the picture.

According to the noted Social Readjustment Rating Scale (also known as the "Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale"), except for the death of a spouse or child, divorce produces more stress than any other life event. If you ignore or deny your feelings of stress, you'll end up sick or injured (clumsiness often goes along with stress) – and then you'll feel even more stressed at having to cope with your disability in addition to all the other challenges you're facing. Divorce-related stress is unavoidable, but you can learn to manage your stress so that it doesn't seriously damage your body and spirit. The only thing that's required of you is a genuine willingness to change – everything else will grow out of your commitment to health and happiness. Without that commitment, however, any steps you take towards better health will be severely limited in both scope and efficacy.

Managing Stress

If you're facing the challenges of divorce right now, it's probably safe to say that stress is your constant companion. Researchers at Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington, D.C., have found that emotions can cause chemical reactions in our cells. This means that negative emotions (such as fear, anger, or even fretting) can have a detrimental impact on every part of your body – including the organs that support your immune system. If stressful thoughts and feelings can actually damage your physical health, you can see why managing stress properly – and taking better care of your body – is so vital at this stage of your life.

Yoga is an excellent way to treat mind and body simultaneously. From the Sanskrit word *yuj*, which means "to yoke," yoga is designed to yoke or join the mind, body, and breath.

So how do you relax and de-stress? If you're like most people, what leaps immediately to mind are "treat" behaviors: smoking, drinking, taking drugs (prescription or "recreational"), eating a carton of chocolate ice-cream – whatever gives you feelings of pleasure and well-being, no matter how transitory. Unfortunately, all of these are band-aid solutions – they temporarily ameliorate some of the symptoms without addressing the root of the problem – and none of them contribute to health and vitality.

Scanning for Tension

A good place to start an effective stress-reduction program is to find out where you hold stress in your body. The first time you try the following exercise, you should probably be lying down with your eyes closed. Take the phone off the hook, and tell your kids or housemates that you don't want to be disturbed for at least half an hour. In this exercise, you'll be scanning your body from the tips of your toes to the top of your head, looking for places where you hold tension then consciously letting that tension go.

Focus your attention exclusively on one part of your body at a time, starting with your feet. Wiggle your toes. Rotate your ankles, and flex your feet so your toes are pointing up towards the ceiling, then down and away from you. Is there any tension in your feet or lower legs? If so, intentionally increase the tension for a few seconds, then exhale deeply and relax that part of your body, imagining the tension flowing out of you with your breath. Move your attention upwards to your thighs, buttocks, and hips. Flex each muscle in turn, checking for tension and discomfort, then let it go with a deep exhalation. Repeat for your stomach, chest, and shoulders. Pull your shoulders up towards your ears, hold them there tightly for a few seconds, then drop them down as far as they will comfortably go while you exhale. Now examine your throat, mouth, cheeks, eyes, forehead, and scalp. Notice any tension, exaggerate then release it.

The benefits of this exercise are twofold:

1. you'll discover where you hold stress in your body
2. you'll give your body a break by releasing tense areas

Yoga and You

Yoga is an excellent way to treat mind and body simultaneously. From the Sanskrit word *yuj*, which means

"to yoke," yoga is designed to yoke or join the mind, body, and breath. Hatha Yoga (the most common type in North America) can help you release built-up tension and stress, strengthening the body while calming the mind.

Before trying yoga or meditation on your own, you should meet with a qualified instructor to learn how to do it properly – which poses you should practice, and which you should avoid. Your instructor will guide you through the correct positions, and teach you the basics of proper breathing, meditation, and other relaxation techniques. Once you've learned the poses, all you need to practice yoga is a quiet, comfortable place and about 20-40 minutes each day to breathe and stretch your stress away.

Food and Mood

Here are some suggestions on using food to improve your mood:

- **Cut back on caffeine,** including coffee, tea, cola, and chocolate. Women take note: caffeine has been found to play a huge role in PMS, from breast pain to mood swings. For some people, one cup a day is too much; you'll need to experiment to determine your threshold.
- **Drink pure water.** Ideally, you should be drinking about two liters of filtered water every day. This is one of the simplest, and yet most vital, steps you can take to improve your health.
- **Increase "good" fats.** Hundreds of studies have identified a relationship between depression and the absence of foods rich in poly-unsaturated fatty acids in the diet. According to Gary L. Wenk, Ph.D., author of *Your Brain on Food: How Chemicals Control your Thoughts and Feelings* (Oxford University Press, 2010), "Your brain needs a balance between Omega-3 fatty acids and a similar fatty acid called Omega-6." Both of these fatty acids influence many important brain functions, including depression. "However, it is imperative to get the proper balance of both Omega-3 and Omega-6 in order to achieve optimal brain function," warns Dr. Wenk. "My advice: include leafy green vegetables, flaxseed, canola oils, kiwi fruit, walnuts or marine fish in your diet every day." (To watch Dr. Wenk's TED talk on why food choices are key to a long, healthy life, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SvkaK2Al0o)
- **Take your vitamins.** "Vitamin B-12 and other B vitamins play a role in producing brain chemicals that affect mood and other brain functions," say Dr. Daniel K. Hall-Flavin, who serves as one of the Mayo Clinic's online experts. "Low levels of B-12 and other B vitamins such as vitamin B-6 and folate may be linked to depression." Ask your doctor about which vitamins or supplements might be right for you.
- **Butt out.** Aside from increasing your risk of lung cancer and heart disease, smoking triggers the release of stress hormones in the body.
- **Avoid Sugar.** In *Stress Management for Dummies* (second edition, 2013), author Allen Elkin suggests that you: "Avoid highly sugared treats. They'll give you a boost in the short run but let you down in the long run." He also suggests that you choose snacks that have "high energy proteins and are high in complex carbohydrates. They'll give you a longer-lasting pick-me-up." Elkin offers loads of great stress-busting tips and advice in this highly-readable book – everything from overcoming anger to goal setting, meditation to organizational skills.

If you really want to minimize the negative effects of divorce-related stress on your body, you need to exercise. What's the best form of exercise? The one you'll do.

Exercise your Options

If you really want to minimize the negative effects of divorce-related stress on your body, you need to do more than just eat right. You need to exercise.

What's the best form of exercise? The one you'll do. The best exercise equipment in the world won't do you a bit of good if you can't bring yourself to use it.

If you've been sedentary for the last few years, you *must* see your physician before you start an exercise program. If you haven't had a full physical examination in the last year, now's a great time to have one. Please be aware that pushing your body too hard too fast is a recipe for disaster – at the very least, you'll probably sprain or tear a muscle; at worst, you'll have a heart attack.

Unless your doctor vetoes the idea, a good place to start is by taking daily walks, slowly increasing the speed, distance, and duration. If you can't stand the idea of walking "aimlessly," give yourself errands to accomplish on your walks: instead of driving, walk to the bank/post office/milk store. Arrange to go for walks in scenic areas with friends so you can enjoy their company as well as the surroundings while you walk.

If your lifestyle can accommodate it, consider getting a dog: you're guaranteed daily exercise, and it's nice to come home to a happy, enthusiastic welcome instead of an empty house. (Also, you've probably heard of the

therapeutic side-effects of pet ownership: that stroking an animal lowers your blood pressure and decreases tension.) If owning a dog is out of the question, you could always "borrow" one: your neighbor would probably be thrilled if you offered to take her dog for a daily walk in the park.

Walking can also help you sleep better at night – good news for those suffering from divorce-related insomnia. In a study involving more than 700 men and women, researchers discovered that people who walked at least six blocks a day at a normal pace experienced fewer sleep-related problems such as nightmares, or trouble getting to or staying asleep; in fact, they were one-third less likely to have trouble sleeping until their wake-up time than people who didn't walk at all. And those who walked the same distance at an aerobic pace were 50% less likely to suffer sleep problems than non-walkers.

Dr. Andrew Weil, who has seen people achieve maximum fitness through walking alone, offers the following benefits of walking in his book *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health* (Ballantine Books, 1998):

- You already know how to do it
- You can do it anywhere
- It requires no equipment, just a good pair of shoes
- It carries the least risk of injury of any form of exercise
- It can provide a complete workout, equal to or better than any other activity

Touchy situations

Chances are, there wasn't a lot of positive touching during the last months – or even years – of your marriage. You've probably heard about the therapeutic benefits of touch, which include reducing stress and blood pressure and increasing relaxation and feelings of well-being. If you are without a romantic partner right now, how can you take advantage of these benefits? The simple answer is to get a massage.

Massage is one of the oldest natural remedies around: rubbing a sore spot on your body seems to be a basic instinct, like eating when you're hungry or the "fight or flight" response. If you've ever had a full Swedish massage, you know how relaxing it can be. But many experts believe that it offers other benefits as well, including:

- Reducing muscle tension, swelling, and inflammation
- Relieving "tension" headaches and chronic pain
- Soothing the nervous system
- Improving blood circulation
- Aiding digestion
- Increasing joint mobility.

If your lifestyle can accommodate it, consider getting a dog: you're guaranteed daily exercise, and it's nice to come home to a happy, enthusiastic welcome instead of an empty house.

Other common types of therapeutic touch include: Reiki, Shiatsu, Feldenkrais, Rolfing, and Craniosacral therapy. Some involve deep, vigorous massage; some work on acupressure points; and others involve the lightest of strokes.

Seeing Results

If you invest the time, energy, and commitment into caring for your body properly, it will repay you generously. But as an impatient North American, you're probably wondering when the rewards will start to show up.

"Both from observing the effects of natural therapies and from watching people try to make lasting changes in how they live, I have concluded that two months ... is the critical time for you to see effects of therapeutic regimens as well as to replace old habits with new," says Dr. Weil. "If you can follow a program of healthy living for two months, you will have made the commitment of time and energy necessary for it to work." ■

This article is provided for ***information-purposes only****. Do not begin any diet or exercise regimen without checking with your doctor first. Diana Shepherd is the co-founder and Editorial Director of* Divorce Magazine.

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Full ESTEEM Ahead

Reclaiming your self-esteem after divorce is a critical part of the healing process. Here are some suggestions to help you on your way.

By Diana Shepherd

Marlene was 36 years old and a successful real-estate agent when her spouse of seven years told her he wanted a divorce. An attractive woman who seemed to exude confidence, Marlene had many friends and a fulfilling career; she was well respected in her community and secure (or so she thought) in her marriage. All that changed with her separation and divorce: "It was like the ground had shifted under my feet... I couldn't get my bearings," she remembers. "My self-esteem dipped to an all-time low. I questioned every decision I made, and found it difficult to find happiness in my life. It took time and a lot of hard work to get back to my old self."

Few people even think about their self-esteem until it's threatened by a traumatic life event. Here, divorce takes top marks. Marriage is, for many of us, our single most important commitment; when it ends in divorce, it's hard not to feel that we've failed. During this difficult time, your self-esteem may falter, depending on how much you relied on your spouse – or the institution of marriage – for your self-esteem. "Everyone goes through a period of pain and sadness during divorce, maybe even depression, when they have that kind of loss," says M. Chet Mirman, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and co-founder of The Center for Divorce Recovery, a Chicago-area psychotherapy center specializing in divorce-related issues. "Some are able to bounce back in less time because they're able to find themselves more quickly."

Low self-esteem is often assumed to be closely associated with poor body image – but there's more to it than that. "When you ask people about their self-esteem, many will immediately refer to how they feel about their body," says Jeffrey Rossman, Ph.D., a psychologist and the director of the Behavioral Health Department at Canyon Ranch. "Our bodies are just one part of who we are... Self-esteem is how you feel about yourself – the positive and the negative. It's complex, because it comprises how you feel about several different facets of yourself: how you feel about your role as a spouse or ex-spouse, a father or mother, a son or daughter, a sibling, a member of the community, a colleague, a friend..."

A healthy sense of self-esteem is having not just a "good" self-opinion, but rather one that is realistic, affirming, and accepting, stresses Dr. Mirman. "It's a little like having a good parent inside your head: someone who can see you for who you are, and who doesn't require you to be the best at everything in order to love you and accept you."

Dr. Rossman agrees: "Simply put, having a healthy sense of self-esteem allows you to feel good about yourself and who you are: to be happy with yourself, to accept yourself. I'm not suggesting, however, being complacent or putting the blame on others in order to be happy with yourself," he adds.

The Silver Lining

Despite the obvious sense of pain and loss, Dr. Rossman believes that the divorce process can be a "very fertile opportunity" for learning, self-examination, and growth. "When you're married, you see yourself reflected back through the eyes of your partner," he says. "If you have a marriage that ended in divorce, that reflection may not have always been positive." The healing that needs to take place, he says, is to "see yourself as clearly as possible, in a way, to cleanse yourself of whatever distortion may have been coming back to you in that reflection from your ex-spouse."

The difficulty many individuals face is that, while society offers rituals to support grieving when there is a loss through death – such as visitations, shivas, funerals, wakes, etc. – there's just not the same sort of social support during divorce. "Rather than let you grieve, friends and family may say things like,

A healthy sense of self-esteem is having not just a "good" self-opinion, but rather one that is realistic, affirming, and accepting.

'You're better off without him' – comments that support your defenses against moving forward," says Dr. Mirman. It's important to recognize that you are entitled to your grief during divorce, he insists. "Know that this is a loss, so when you're feeling badly, you can access that internal parental voice that says, 'It's okay to feel sad now; it'll be alright.'"

Rebuilding Self-Esteem

Rebuilding your self-esteem after divorce can be hard work. But possessing a positive sense of self-esteem is critical in life: it frees us from our own inhibitions and self-doubts so we can take action with confidence, live fully and consciously, and grow dimensionally away the pain of divorce. Here are a few suggestions to help you begin the process towards a newer, more confident you.

Recognize that what you're going through is normal. "It's an emotional process," says Dr. Mirman. "It helps when someone's going through a divorce if they remind themselves that this is a normal part of the process – that this too will pass."

Go on living your life as fully as possible while grieving the loss of your marriage, advises Dr. Rossman. Know that the grieving can take place right alongside full engagement with life, he says. "And try to 'live well': That's a wonderful way to boost your self- esteem."

Calm, subdue, and wrestle those self-punishing thoughts to the ground. In their book, *Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice* (New Harbinger Publications), Robert W. Firestone, Ph.D., Lisa Firestone, Ph.D., and Joyce Catlett, M.A. note that: "The critical inner voice is the language of the defended, negative side of your personality; the side that is opposed to your ongoing personal development."

Work to replace the inner critic with a healthier voice. Pick up a copy of *Self-Esteem*, by Matthew McKay, Ph.D. and Patrick Fanning (New Harbinger Publications) – a great resource to help you create an accurate self-assessment. By creating a realistic inventory of your strengths and weaknesses, the authors claim you'll be able to develop a description of yourself that is "accurate, fair, and supportive."

Avoid assigning blame, either to your ex or to yourself. When you feel yourself blaming either yourself or your spouse, shift to learning, suggests Dr. Rossman. "Ask yourself, 'What can I learn from this?'" Avoiding the blame game is particularly important if you have children. Bad-mouthing your former spouse in front of the children may provide you with a sense of release in the short-term, but it's very damaging for the children in the long-term, stresses Dr. Rossman.

Take responsibility for your own happiness. In his book, *A Woman's Self-Esteem: Struggles and Triumphs in the Search for Identity* (Jossey-Bass), Nathaniel Branden (who also authored *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*) explores the origins of personal happiness and suggests that intrinsically happy individuals consciously commit themselves to their state of eternal bliss.

Develop a more positive body image. While physical appearance alone cannot determine an individual's self-esteem, learning to accept and appreciate how you look is important. In his book, *The Body Image Workbook: An 8-Step Program for Learning to Like Your Looks* (New Harbinger Publications), author Thomas F. Cash, Ph.D., discusses body-image distortions and offers guidance through sensitively written text and useful "Helpsheets for Change."

Start dating again – if you're ready. "Look at it as an opportunity to learn more about yourself. Each date is a chance to cultivate your skills; it's also an opportunity to get to know another person," says Dr. Rossman. But resist the temptation to look at dating as a "spouse hunt," he advises. "If you're on a date, and you decide that this is not the person of your dreams, you can feel like you've wasted your time. Even if that person is not going to be your life partner, there can still be something very worthwhile in getting to know him/her."

Learn to enjoy your own company. "How you think about it makes all the difference," says Dr. Rossman. "Instead of saying, 'Oh, I'm divorced and I'm home alone, what a loser I am,' why not say, 'What a nice opportunity to do whatever I want?'"

Feel the pain, experience the gain. "I think when people want advice about self-esteem, sometimes what they're really saying is, 'What can I do to feel better?' My advice is almost the opposite," concludes Dr. Mirman. "It's a really difficult and painful process, and if you allow yourself to feel bad, you're going to get through it better. There's going to be more happiness at the other side – but you need to actually give yourself permission to feel badly for a while in order to feel good later on." ■

Diana Shepherd is the Editorial Director and co-founder of Divorce Magazine.

For more articles to help with your emotional and physical recovery during and after divorce, please visit www.divorcemag.com/health-well-being.

The Good Karma Divorce

By Judge Michele F. Lowrance

Craft a "Personal Manifesto" that serves as a moral compass for your divorce journey. Let good karma, or good action, be your guiding principle.

From the Soul to the Page

The advent of a life crisis – breakup and divorce being among the most difficult – forces a person to chose a path. One direction can be destructive and therefore weakening, while another can build strength, wisdom and awareness. To help reduce pain and turmoil for the litigants in my courtroom, I asked them to write down their worst fears, concerns and ideal goals for their divorce. I began to notice the sheer act of writing these down created a major shift in the litigants' emotional responsiveness and malleability in settling cases.

I find that when you dump your emotions, concerns, and goals on the page, you free up much of the emotional energy you use to manage your feelings. Too often, this emotional content feels like something you chew and chew, but can never quite seem to swallow. With these circular thoughts on paper, you are free to focus on goal-setting and aspirational thinking. Writing will create what you will and is your most formidable ally in the divorce process – what I refer to as your Personal Manifesto. This document will be the tool you use to impose order on the disordered and chaotic experiences and emotions that lie ahead. You may think that goals and life purposes don't feel relevant to the pain you are in. But not to take command of your life plan is to allow the result to be guided by chance, which is no guide at all.

Your Personal Manifesto

A Personal Manifesto, or mission statement, is an organizing principle you will use to develop new perceptions and actions based on the core understanding that your old perceptions and actions may have created the problems you are now experiencing. Your Manifesto will become a sanctuary, a refuge, where you will be protected from the onslaughts of polluted thoughts about your divorce. On those days when you are feeling disconnected from your true self, distanced from your aspirational self (the person you would like to become), and almost completely stripped of optimism and hope, you will have in your drawer your self-made antidote pulling you away from the dark side. You will have created a psychological home that will always be available to you during times of vulnerability. Often the reading of one sentence can trigger a shift in your perspective and bring you back from the brink.

The process of developing your Manifesto creates your first shift in attitude. You will not only be sculpting your aspirational self; you will also be emphasizing positive emotions and qualities you can use to counter negative thought streams. Ultimately you will be able to assign meaning to the pain in your life, and you can start to envision the possibility that pain is not always destructive, but can be transformative. When you see pain in a new light, it changes your relationship to adversity. In time, the Manifesto will become your personal doctrine containing your own investigated truth, so that when you refer to it, it will give you moments of inspiration and transcendence.

What Does a Personal Manifesto Look Like?

Your Personal Manifesto can be half a page long or a dozen, although I think once you get started you'll probably find you have a lot to say. You may find yourself writing things you've never articulated to anyone – not even your former spouse or your closest friend. Keep this work in a safe place so you can be brutally honest and completely self-conscious.

As you begin, expect to create a series of lists, punctuated by the occasional revelatory moments. Don't stop writing until you get it all out. Grammar doesn't matter. Neither does spelling or penmanship. No one should ever see these early drafts but you. That being said, this is probably an appropriate place for us to talk about what is discoverable in a divorce action. Many people do not realize that unless it is part of a document you send to or work on with your lawyer, anything you write could be subpoenaed if relevant. This includes your diary, a letter to your sister, even your emails.

Obviously, early rambling drafts of your Manifesto in which you rant, rage, and vent are included. I would destroy the early drafts once you're finished with them, particularly if they contain thoughts, self evaluation, or destructive fantasies you would not want spoken aloud in a courtroom.

Getting Started on Your Personal Manifesto

As you begin the process, allow your writing to recognize both the good and the bad in your experiences with your former mate. Understand that we don't have to corrupt good memories in order to detach. Allow yourself to take into account your own multi-dimensionality as well as that of your spouse. Good thinking can become clogged with sabotaging thoughts and fears. You want to make sure you have not been tampering with the evidence.

Write out the following questions and answers and make notes on how you feel, including any insights that emerge:

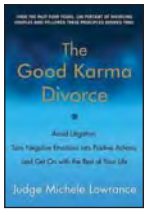
1. Recall five things about your mate that you once treasured.
2. Write down at least five offenses your mate has inflicted upon you.
3. List at least five offenses inflicted upon you by your mate that you have not mirrored to either your spouse or others.
4. Picture and describe the kind of person you want to be now. How do you want to remember yourself five years from now, when you look back at what you were like during your divorce?
5. Have someone take a picture of you when you are angry, then look at that photo and ask yourself how many times you want to relive that moment.
6. Make a list of five heroes, real or fictitious. Next to each name write three things you like about each one. What things do you have in common with them?
7. If you are a parent, list all the positive qualities you think a good parent should have. For the qualities you do not think you possess, write down why you think you do not possess them and are these issues you can work on.
8. Describe the ideal way you would like to handle your disappointment and resentment.
9. What are the three greatest benefits you've reaped from your relationship?
10. Make a list of things you are waiting for in your life before you can believe your life is "good". Then note whether your spouse is keeping you from that goal and note how much power you may be giving to your spouse.
11. Try reframing your negative thought patterns by shifting some attitudes.

Writing Your Personal Manifesto

Now, you can take each fear or negative and reframe it in a way that puts you back in control. Don't be surprised if the development of your Manifesto occurs in several states. Your Personal Manifesto may include any or all of the following:

- How you feel in the present
- Habitual and reactive behaviors you want to change
- How those changes will benefit your life
- The kind of person you would like to be
- Acknowledgment of your progress
- A statement about self-forgiveness for your setbacks
- Your intentions for your future
- A statement motivating yourself to keep going on this path.

Trying to live up to the aspirational portions of these sentiments should be the heart of your mission. Some days you will do better than others, but on those days that are challenging – between the life that was and the life that will be – remember that you have created a team of thoughts to protect you against your own negative impulses. Use your Manifesto as your mantra to get back on your chosen path and perhaps find an even better path. ■



This article was excerpted with permission from the book The Good Karma Divorce *by Judge Michele F. Lowrance (HarperCollins Publishers ©2010). Michele Lowrance has been a domestic-relations judge in Illinois since 1995. A child of divorce who was raised by her grandparents, Judge Lowrance has been divorced and has devoted her professional life to helping those similarly situated. For more information, visit* www.thegoodkarma divorce.com.

For more articles to help with emotional recovery after your divorce, please visit www.divorcemag.com/divorce-recovery.

REACHING RENEWAL

Scripting your post-divorce life can be exhilarating, rewarding – and a little overwhelming. Here are some suggestions to help you along your way.

By Jane Zatylny

Divorce is surely one of life's most elaborate productions, a play with many acts, each of which must be played out in succession. "First, there's the grieving period, with its blame or regret, then we go on to the next stage – acceptance," explained Debbie Ford, author of *Spiritual Divorce: Divorce as a Catalyst for an Extraordinary Life* and founder of the Ford Institute for Integrative Coaching. After acceptance, many people eventually come to see divorce as a renewing factor in their lives, an event that can help them grow and evolve. Sometimes, the transition into this life stage occurs naturally; other times, it must be induced, said Ford. "But once we get into renewal, we can start to see the gift of it, the greater good of it, and the possibility for our future," she explained.

It's a great opportunity for people to recreate themselves, agreed David Simon, M.D., author and medical director/co-founder of The Chopra Center. "It's not uncommon for people to get married at a stage in their lives when they're still in formulation," he said. "When that relationship undergoes a transformation that leads to divorce, it gives people an opportunity to consciously start to create a future that will bring them more well-being, passion, enthusiasm, power, or whatever they felt was lacking in their marriage." In other words, divorce can offer a chance for you to ask yourself, all over again, "What do I want to be when I grow up?" It's a second chance at life, and it's yours for the taking. Here are some suggestions to consider before you journey into your own personal renewal.

Be Sure You're Ready for Renewal

If you're going through a divorce, you're probably looking forward to experiencing a more positive stage in the process: you know, when it stops hurting. But experts warn that it's important to be ready for renewal before you move on with your life. Taking time to indulge in the powerful emotions associated with divorce is critical, said Dr. Simon. "If you short-circuit that emotional healing by pretending everything is okay too quickly, it will definitely show up in the next relationship."

Most people who experience divorce regard it as a failure, a loss of a dream, explains Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., author of *Keeping the Love you Find*

and co-founder of Imago Relationships International. "It's very important that people grieve that loss," he says. "A past that has not been grieved will interfere with the planning of a future, and it can be a true impediment to moving on." It's also important to realize that divorce is co-created, he says. "You need to forgive yourself – and your partner."

You'll know you're ready to move towards renewal when less of your mind and body are consumed with digesting the experience of divorce, said Dr. Simon. "Like any wound or trauma, it can take a brief moment for the wound to be created, but it may take weeks or months or even years for it to be healed." Give yourself the time you need to grieve and heal this primal wound.

There's Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself

During the recovery process, you may find yourself feeling afraid and anxious. Recognize that these are perfectly healthy and normal emotions in a time of change or transition. Divorce challenges our self-image, and the uncertainty it causes creates fear and anxiety about our future. "Anxiety, though, is really an impulse to consciously make choices that will help redefine who we want to be in the world," insisted Dr. Simon. "If you're not feeling some anxiety, you're not really embracing the opportunity to learn what's available in divorce." The growing pains of transition from divorce are not unlike those we feel when we're exercising, he added. "It may not feel good at the time, but you know that the end result is that you're going to be healthier and more fit."

Courage is always there, said Ford, but sometimes we choose to be fearful and afraid instead of being courageous and strong. "Ask yourself, 'Is this choice an act of faith or an act of fear?' Choose to acknowledge fear and stand in faith. Faith is having trust in the universe, trust in something bigger than yourself. Faith gives you courage," she said.

Share Your Journey with a Supporting Cast

Perhaps the most difficult part of renewal is getting over the sense of inertia and lack of control you felt during your divorce process.

Now is the time to enlist the help of a therapist, life coach, personal trainer, weight loss or other support group, friends, family members, your minister, priest, or rabbi – whomever you can count on to support you at this critical juncture in your life. "Knowing that your vital energy is really important right now, back away from negative people," stressed Ford. "Make sure you have people around you who are for you, who are cheerleaders for you." Identify which friends you can talk to about which issues, urged Jeffrey Rossman, Ph.D., director, Behavioral Health at Canyon Ranch in the Berkshires, Lenox, MA. "It really does help to have at least one person you can share this with, and sometimes through the sharing of it, you gain some greater understanding of your process."

Be careful though not to burn out friends, however, most of whom will get tired of hearing about your divorce long before you tire of talking about it. Don't be surprised if you lose some friends during the process: some people will feel threatened by your divorce (almost as though splitting up were a contagious disease they could "catch" from you), and some will feel compelled to side with you or your ex. If you are sharing with a close friend, try to choose someone who won't merely "merge"with your pain, added Hendrix. "You'll want someone who can be your mirror and your wall."

Imagine a New Vision for Your Life

The process of renewal truly begins when we close the door on the past and open new doors to our future, says Ford. Start by creating a vision that is inspiring: "Vision is the antidote for pain and suffering," she said. "Being in action on a vision moves people into new realms of consciousness." One exercise Ford recommended: Visit a local newsstand and choose any magazine that is attractive to you; then let that subject matter guide you in creating a new vision. "You could even cut out magazine pictures and words that affect you in a positive way and make yourself a little vision map," she said. Another way to develop a vision is to take a close look at someone who inspires you, says Ford. "For instance, you may be inspired by Oprah – but what about her inspires you? This is using the outer world to learn about the inner world."

Another way to get in touch with your true self is to identify your core values, said Rossman. "Then you can begin to craft a life that is based on those values, on what is really most important to you," he says. The key is to start small with a short-term goal. "It's got to be about you, and it's got to be something you have control over," said Ford. See this time as an opportunity to get back into shape, take up painting, learn a foreign language, join a club, plant a garden, or even just re-organize your closet. "If you're feeling overwhelmed, small projects can really give you a wonderful feeling of empowerment," added Dr. Rossman. "Once you string together a number of small successes, your confidence can really build."

Take Care of Yourself

Rome wasn't built in a day; your new life plan will also take time and patience to develop. In the meantime, invest in your success by taking care of your mind, body, and spirit. If one of your goals is weight loss, for instance, the key is nourishment. When you've gone through a difficult situation like divorce, you need to be very kind to you. Keep in mind that you're nourishing yourself, and that it's not just about the food. The combination of healthy eating and living gives people going through divorce back that extra little bit of confidence. When you reach small goals, whether it's weight loss or exercise, you start to feel as though you are accomplishing

things. Exercise is great for people going through divorce because it strengthens you while providing you with a healthy outlet for anger. It also relieves stress while increasing fitness, said Dr. Simon. "You feel better about yourself, and you generate natural anti-anxiety and natural anti-depressant chemicals," he said. "We also recommend that people learn and practice a meditation technique. This enables you to begin to access that quiet inner voice of your soul. That inner voice only wants four things for us: it wants us to be happy, healthy, to have love and be loving, and to find meaning and purpose in our lives." Of course, you should consult your doctor before starting a new exercise regimen – particularly if you have been a couch potato for some time.

Make Your Home a Sanctuary

Our homes reflect our spirit in so many ways. Now is the time to clear clutter from your path and make your home equally receptive to renewal. When life is good and a long-term relationship is going well, one's home can be the only place you want to be. But if the relationship ends, home needs to be redefined. Tune into the colors and textures that give you pleasure – check out decor magazines, films, nature, fashion – and introduce them into your new home. If you're moving to a new address, try to paint before you move in so that the space welcomes you and your new life. If you're staying put, the act of changing wall colors and furnishings that you never really liked can be rather satisfying.

When Ford was going through her own divorce, she changed out framed photos in her house of her and her former husband with photos of spiritual leaders she admired; she also found great comfort in music. "Is there anything in your environment that is bringing up feelings of loss or sadness or loneliness?" she asked. "If there is – can you – just for now, let them go?" It can also help to create a sacred place in your home, said Dr. Rossman. "For some people, that would be the place where they meditate; for others, it's the place they read.

Let the Outside In Again

When we are going through divorce, it's as if the outside world almost ceases to exist. We become thoroughly and utterly self-absorbed, necessarily, as we transition through the healing process. "When you're self-absorbed, your life energy circles 'round and 'round inside you," said Hendrix. "To get over self-absorption, you need to move your energy out, and one of the best ways to do that is to find something to do that means you give something of yourself away – whether it's doing something philanthropic, teaching a class, working in a soup kitchen, or planting a garden."

With self-renewal comes an interest once again in people, activities, and issues that fall outside our own inner world. Push yourself to seize these opportunities when they arise. "Reach out also to your closest friends," advised Dr. Rossman. "Sometimes, when people have gone through divorce, they might be feeling needy. One way to really reach out in a friendship is to give back to your friends."

Regardless of how you choose to extend yourself to the outer world, make a commitment to include more f-u-n in your life. "Most of us think we're too busy to have fun," said Ford. "But fun lightens our heart, and that is so renewing." ■

Jane Zatylny is the former Editor of Divorce Magazine.

Related Article

Divorce Ceremonies
Some people choose to participate in a divorce ceremony to heal their hearts, forgive past hurts and mistakes, and to free each other to move powerfully into new, and separate, futures.
www.divorcemag.com/articles/divorce-ceremonies

RECOVERY / CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

If you're a parent who is embarking on the Rebuilding journey, we recommend that you learn to take care of yourself and work through the adjustment process. You will find that your children will tend to adjust more easily as a result. Kids tend to get hung up in the same rebuilding blocks as their parents, so by making progress yourself, you will be helping your children, too.

Homework: Learning by Doing

Millions of people read self-help books looking for answers to problems in living and relationships. They learn the vocabulary and gain awareness, but don't really learn at a deep emotional level from the experience. What we learn emotionally affects our behavior a great deal, and much of the learning we have to do to adjust to a crisis is emotional relearning.

Some things you believed all of your life may not be true and you'll have to relearn. But intellectual learning – thoughts, facts, and ideas – is of value only when you also learn the emotional lessons that let it all make sense in your life.

Be aware that not all support groups are supportive. Choose carefully the others with whom you work through this process. They should be as committed as you are to a positive growth experience, and willing to maintain confidentiality of personal information. ■

This article has been edited and excerpted from Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends, *third edition © 2006 by Bruce Fisher and Robert E. Alberti. Reproduced by permission of Impact Publishers, P.O. Box 6016, Atascadero, CA 93423-6016, U.S.A.* www.impactpublishers.com.

CREATING A Satisfying Life

Contrary to what you might believe, personal happiness does not depend on life dealing you a good hand. How you respond to what comes your way will largely determine whether your life is fulfilling or not; here's how to move from dissatisfaction to real satisfaction.

By Jeffrey Cottrill

The breakdown of a marriage is one of the most traumatic things that can happen in your life. Divorce can cause profound feelings of loss, failure, regret, abandonment, emptiness, fear of the future, and/or powerlessness – especially if you didn't initiate the split.

There's no quick fix to your anger and grief, but there is a journey toward a more satisfying and fulfilling life that you can start right now. The transition from despair to satisfaction starts with your determination not to be a victim of your circumstances; happiness doesn't depend so much on what happens to you, but on how you deal with what happens to you. Change your way of thinking: decide that you're not going to let divorce take control of your life, and you'll be taking the first step towards recovery. If you are determined to wallow in defeat and sorrow, then the divorce has already won.

Feel the Pain, Then Let it Go

Divorce is a loss, so allow yourself to grieve. "You have to allow the hurt to run its course," says relationship expert, workshop leader, and best-selling author Bill Ferguson. "The more you allow yourself to feel the pain, the more it comes and the more it goes."

Divorce recovery is a process, and it takes time. How long you will take to heal depends on many factors, including the length of your marriage, whether you were abused, and the support you receive from family and friends. "You must take the process of recovery seriously," urges Micki McWade, who has developed a 12-step divorce-recovery program in her book *Getting Up, Getting Over, Getting On*. "People have high expectations of themselves; they think they should be getting over it quickly and immediately. But for every five years married, it takes about one year to get over it. Don't suppress your feelings or act as if it never happened, but give the process respect. If you bypass the process, it sets you up for a fall."

Erase Revenge, Blame, and Guilt

Even when the divorce is over, anger, blame, and/or guilt may dominate your thoughts. If you want to feel better, you'll have to work through and release these feelings. It's unlikely that either you or your spouse is 100% responsible for the end of your marriage; perhaps both of you should have put more effort into it, or perhaps you were simply not a compatible couple. Whatever your situation, you have nothing to gain – and a lot to lose – by lashing out at yourself or your ex-spouse.

Most definitely do not resort to revenge. It's a dish best not served at all, even if your ex has hurt you without shame. Vengeance doesn't make the hurt go away; it sets a horrible example of social behavior for your children, and it stalls you from moving on. Revenge never fulfills its intended purpose: it doesn't "teach a lesson"to the person who hurt you, but rather provokes that person to get back at you in turn, starting a cycle of tit-for-tat vengeance that causes unnecessary anguish on both sides. Revenge is extremely harmful at its worst and a waste of time at its best.

After all you've gone through, it may be tempting to see yourself as the eternal victim of your former spouse. But adopting this role prevents you from embracing responsibility for your own actions, whether or not you really have been a victim. On the other hand, it's no more constructive to blame yourself for everything. Immersing yourself in guilt,

or playing the "if only"game, will keep you stuck in the past and afraid to make a decision in case it's the wrong one. "You need to let go of the non- empowering emotions," advises Mike Lipkin, a Toronto-based motivational speaker and the author of *Your Personal Best*. "Anytime you stay angry at someone, you are letting them live rent-free inside your head."

Look for the Hidden Gift

"Problems are just opportunities in their work clothes," said the late Henry J. Kaiser. If you change your way of thinking to consciously look for the positive effects in any negative event, you may experience a radical change in your emotions and your outlook on life.

The "gift"that comes out of suffering isn't always immediately apparent. This is where you need to develop the ability to "turn lemons into lemonade," as the old saying goes. It takes courage, character, imagination, and perspective to accept the inevitable, and even use it as the basis to create something positive. Sometimes, the most beneficial thing to come out of bad times is what you've learned from them, and you should acknowledge that to yourself. You need to look at the situation and say, "What's the lesson here? What have I learned from this experience?" The benefits of doing this include a sense of empowerment from having used your experience to grow wiser, and using your newfound wisdom to avoid the same pitfall if it comes up again. Experience is a hard way to learn how to get through life, but it's a very effective teacher.

The Power of Choice

Now that you've grieved, let go of your hurt, and looked for positive aspects of your situation, it's time to start exploring your options as to where life can take you next, or, rather, where you will take it. If fulfillment is your aim, you have to proactively make choices about where to go instead of waiting for things to happen to you."In divorce, it's important to heal your hurt, and it's also important to get on with your life," Ferguson points out. "The main thing is to be active. Life is like being in water: as long as you're swimming, you stay above water, but if you stop moving, you sink. During divorce, some people get caught in upset and then withdraw from life, eventually sinking into depression. You need to move forward and start creating dreams. Find things that you love to do."

Weigh the pros and cons, then take action. If you're dissatisfied with your job or your financial situation, take the initiative to update your resume and look for something more fulfilling, or at least to work toward promotion to a higher position or ask for a raise. If you're feeling courageous, you might even switch career paths completely and start over, although you have to balance this desire with the need to put food on the table and maintain a roof over your head. If you want to improve your education or technical skills, or if you just have an unsatisfied hunger for learning, go back to school in the evenings.

"Between anything happening to us and our response is the power to choose our response," says Stephen R. Covey, renowned motivational expert and author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Through the power of choice, Covey has helped numerous people overcome setbacks in their lives and go on to make valuable contributions to their communities. "Use the power of choice to bring yourself new meaning and new relationships. It will transcend a difficult past and help you learn from it. The only real failure is a mistake not learned from," he says.

The power to learn from your past and choose where to go next is the opposite of seeing yourself as a victim with no control over your life. Covey points out the four "basic human endowments"that go into the power of choice:

1. **Self-awareness.** We can observe our own past and see how it has developed our own strengths and weaknesses;
2. **Imagination.** We can picture ourselves in a new way and reinvent ourselves. "Our memory is limited and self-limiting," says Covey, "but our imagination is unlimited and expansive, and it feeds on optimism and hope."
3. **Conscience**. Our inner sense tells us what is right and wrong; and
4. **Willpower.** The power of navigating your own life can awaken powers within you that you may have forgotten you had or of which you were unaware. It will at least revitalize your confidence and control, and this has to come from within. If your partner defined much of your self-image, you need to take a fresh look at yourself and decide who you are now, as well as who you want to be in the future.

Improve Your Outlook

Although it may take a while to completely recover from your divorce, there are many little things you could do to boost your spirits in the meantime. For example:

- Have a guys'/girls' night out with your friends.
- Do a good deed without expecting a reward.
- Join a club, sports team, arts group, support group, or any other special-interest organization.
- Play with a puppy or kitten.
- Take a night class in some subject you've always wanted to learn about.
- Surprise an old friend you haven't spoken to in months or years with a phone call or e-mail.
- Volunteer at a charity or cause.
- Buy yourself a treat. Stay within your budget, however, or this one will rebound on you. ■

Jeffrey Cottrill is a former staff writer and editor at Divorce Magazine.

BEFRIENDING YOUR EX

Befriending your ex-spouse is about forming a new and positive relationship that is different from the one you had as a married couple.

By Dr. Judith Ruskay Rabinor

What Befriending Is

Stereotypical tales of bitter divorces and their ensuing endless warfare have affected most of us. We have taken our cues about how ex-spouses behave and feel toward their exes from popular movies and stories. Yet, what I've experienced in my personal life and learned in my office is that many divorced people can and do form a friendly, supportive and communicative relationship with their ex-spouses.

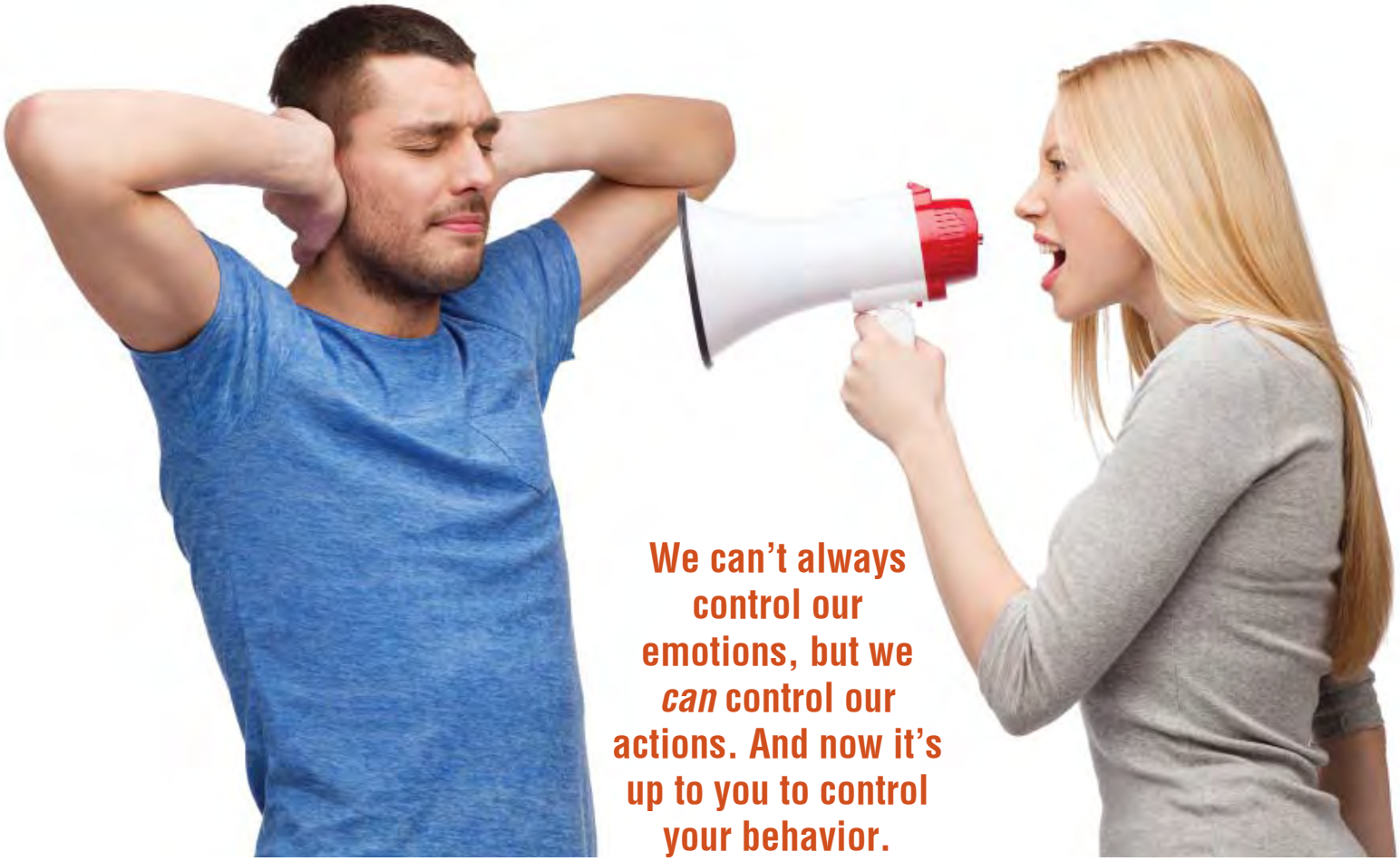
Befriending is a process and a relationship that takes time and effort. It may involve going through unique periods of darkness and pain, but can be accomplished if you are truly committed. The circumstances under which your marriage ended are very relevant to your relationship going forward and to the steps you will need to take to develop a befriended relationship.

Befriending Is about Developing a New Relationship

Befriending your ex-spouse is about forming a new and positive relationship that is different from the one you had as a married couple. It's starting over, making a conscious, mindful and deliberate effort to let go of past hurts, wounds, and beliefs. This new relationship is likely to begin when you focus on the best interests of your children, and it will continue to include emphasizing goodwill, collaboration and cooperation as you and your ex navigate the specific details of your life, and if you have children, their lives.

What's important is the quality of the relationship, what I call a commitment to the five "Cs" of befriending:

- Communication
- Collaboration



We can't always control our emotions, but we *can* control our actions. And now it's up to you to control your behavior.

- Compromise
- Compassion
- Celebration

What Befriending Is Not

Befriending your ex is not about retaining the intimacy you once had as a married couple. You can no longer expect to know the details of how your ex spends their time and money, or whom they see. You can no longer expect them to be available to you 24/7. You can no longer rely on them for emotional support for the events in your life that don't involve the children. Although you may find that your ex can be emotionally supportive, this shouldn't be a given. Your physical, or sexual, connection is over, even if at times you feel sexually attracted to one another. And – this may be the hardest one – although you may often have angry feelings toward your ex, you no longer have the right to act on them. We can't always control our emotions, but we can control our actions. And now it's up to you to control your behavior.

Why Befriend Your Ex?

- **For Your Children**
  If you and your ex-spouse share children, you have created a bond that is far stronger than anything that could be broken by a signature on a divorce decree. Regardless of your custody agreement, you won't be able to excise your ex from your life forever because your ex is your child's parent forever. One of the most important and consistent research findings regarding the adjustment of children to divorce is that children who have two involved parents adjust to divorce far easier than those who do not. Since you can't get your ex spouse out of your life completely, you might as well develop the most positive relationship you can.

- **Avoiding the Trickle-Down Effect**
  Ranked as one of the top stressors in adult life, divorce is said to bring out the worst in people. When compared to children from intact families, children in adversarial divorces are at greater risk of experiencing a whole host of future psychological problems. Being locked into a hostile or alienated relationship with your ex is arguably the worst stress for your children. Children absorb parental stress. Being mindful of this trickle-down effect will help you minimize the stress of your divorce on your children.

- **Children Benefit When Parents Cooperate**
  Arguably the number one predictor of how children of divorced parents fare emotionally and psychologically is the degree to which their

parents can cooperate and communicate. Even if you were in a high conflict marriage, the odds are that if you work at it, you will be able to get along as parents.

- **For Your Own Well-Being**
  Life is precarious, having enduring connections with others helps all of us feel more grounded and secure. Even if, right now, you are still soothing the wounds of your divorce, your ex might be able to be a compassionate co-parent and a generous collaborator. Hopefully, your ex is someone whom you once loved and who loved you. You don't want to worry about a continuing negative relationship with the person with whom you are likely to share many extraordinary moments in your children's lives. Remaining enemies with your ex is bad for your mental and physical health.

When You Should Not Try to Befriend Your Ex

Befriending an ex isn't appropriate for everyone. If your ex-spouse is physically or emotionally abusive, or neglectful to you or your children, you may need to create space rather than connection.

Substance abuse is another situation that mitigates befriending or at least requires careful evaluation. In this case, consider:

- Has your ex expressed genuine remorse?
- Has your ex begun treatment, and if so, do you see these behaviors changing?
- Does your ex agree that it's crucial that these behaviors be stopped?

If you answered yes to these questions, consider letting go of the past. If, however, you answered no, befriending may not be an appropriate option right now, and further changes and communication may be necessary before you can consider it.

What Gets in the Way of Befriending

Even with the best of intentions, roadblocks may emerge that make you stumble in your befriending process. These roadblocks fit into one of two categories:

- **Unrealistic Beliefs**
  Unrealistic beliefs about the kind of relationship we are "supposed" to have when we divorce surround us in the images found in popular culture and society. To overcome unrealistic beliefs, first examine your belief system, and second, let go of or revise any ways of thinking that are not useful, that are dysfunctional, and that may be getting in the way of befriending your ex.
- **Difficult Emotions**
  It's easy to harbour animosity, pain, or both toward your ex, who has undoubtedly hurt or angered you. You should embrace your emotions, regardless of how difficult it is to deal with them. However, that's not the same as having a license to act them out. In fact, the opposite is true: learning to feel, accept, and manage your emotions allows you to feel safer about embracing them if only because you won't fear being overcome by them.

Creating a New Vision

Whether you realize it or not, you are always choosing a perspective that either enriches or diminishes your reality.

In the book, *What Happy People Know*, psychologists Dan Baker and Cameron Stauth remind us that no matter how difficult your life is, you always have the power to rise above suffering. This idea is particularly important during divorce, since divorce always brings us face to face with new and challenging situations, events and emotions. We bring our chosen perspectives to every new challenge. Becoming mindful that we always bring our own biases or chosen perspectives to each new situation and event we face is an important step in assessing reality. ■

This article was condensed and adapted by Divorce Magazine with permission from New Harbinger Publications from the book *Befriending Your Ex* © 2013 by Judith Ruskay Rabinor.

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