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Why Divorce is Often Not the Best Option: Rationale, Resources, and References

By Brent A. Barlow, Ph.D.

THE CROSSROADS

Not long ago I was talking to a friend who asked if I could help in some way with a difficult situation that had arisen in her family. Her daughter and son-in-law of several years were contemplating a divorce. They had two children. She said the young couple wasn't sure at the time, however, if they should divorce or stay together. They were looking at both options and were, therefore, at the crossroads of marriage. I told my friend I would send her some materials and references that might assist her daughter and son-in-law with this critical decision. Since that time, I have had numerous similar requests from married couples, their friends or family members, as well as from several young adults who were seriously contemplating marriage even as their parents were considering divorce.

The decision to divorce or remain together to work things out is one of the most important decisions you will ever make. It is crucial for those considering divorce to anticipate what lies ahead in order to make informed decisions. Too often the fallout from divorce is far more devastating than many people realize when contemplating the move.[1]

LARGE NUMBERS AT THE CROSSROADS

A large number of married couples in the United Sates apparently approach the crossroads. Approximately 40-50 percent of couples in first marriages arrive at this point and eventually choose the path of divorce. The divorce rate for couples in second marriages is between 50-60 percent. Many other couples apparently

reach the crossroads but decide, for various reasons, to stay married. A Gallup Poll conducted in the United States found that 40 percent of married individuals had considered leaving their partners, and 20 percent said they were dissatisfied with their marriage about half the time.[2] Stated another way, nearly half the couples in the United States currently divorce, and another 20 percent have seriously considered it.

Many newlyweds reach the crossroads of marriage during the first or second year of marriage: Even newlyweds face serious problems during the first year of marriage. A study of several hundred newlywed couples found that 63 percent had serious problems related to their finances, 51 percent had serious doubts about their marriage lasting, 49 percent had significant marital problems, 45 percent were not satisfied with their sexual relationship, 41 percent found marriage harder than they had expected, and 35 percent stated their partner was often critical of them.[3]

SOME DIVORCES ARE WARRANTED

While advocating marriage, we must be sensitive to those who have chosen to terminate their marriage. There could be legitimate reasons or grounds for divorce. An estimated 30 percent of the divorces in the U.S. involve marital relationships with a high degree of conflict.[4] Sometimes violence, physical and mental abuse, and/or threat of life to spouse and children are also present in these highly conflicted relationships. In these situations divorce is most often in the best interest of those involved. Chronic addiction or substance abuse, psychosis or extreme mental illness, and physical or mental abuse are also reasons to divorce.[5]

Couples who divorce, particularly for the reasons noted, often need the help and support of family, friends, neighbors, religious leaders, and others in their respective communities. This is particularly so where children are involved. The adjustment to divorce is often difficult and apparently lasts for a considerable period of time. Legal assistance is needed, and sometimes couples may need counseling or therapy before, during, and after the separation for themselves and their children, if they have them. Competent counselors and therapists are available to assist in this transition.

POINTS TO PONDER

If you are at the marriage crossroads and trying to decide whether to divorce or stay married–or if someone you know is–carefully consider the following thirteen items before you make your "informed decision":

1. The Other 70 Percent of Divorces

When we note that 30 percent of divorces involve couples in highly conflicted marriages, a question arises about the other 70 percent: Should they divorce or stay married? There are, perhaps, strong reasons for separating in some of these relationships as well.

One study reported that the major reasons marriages fail are (in rank order) (1) infidelity, (2) no longer in love, (3) emotional problems, (4) financial problems, (5) sexual problems, (6) problems with in-laws, (7) neglect of children, (8) physical abuse, (9) alcohol, (10) job conflicts (11) communication problems, and (12) married too young.[6]

Interestingly, physical abuse was ranked as number eight in reasons for divorce, and "no longer in love" ranked as the number two reason for divorce. Many marriages seem to end from burnout rather than blowout. A significant number of these couples could work through their problems, revive their love, and stay married if they desired and worked at it. Only the husband and wife involved in a particular marriage, however, can make that decision as they are the ones who must ultimately abide by the consequences of their choices.

It is becoming increasingly evident, however, to those who study marriage trends in the United States, that a large number of divorces could, and perhaps should, be avoided in the best interests of those involved.

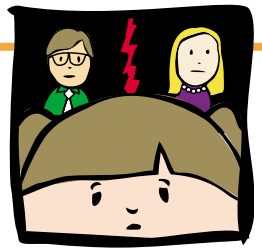
> *It is finally time to renounce –openly and clearly–the self-serving platitudes about independence and fulfillment and look at the reality of divorce. We act too frequently as if every infirm marriage deserves to die, based simply upon the emotional report of one distressed partner. Rather than viewing a separation first with alarm, we're full of*

sympathy for a divorcing friend, and we offer understanding of the temporary insanity involved in severing old ties.... If you hear someone for whom you have any feeling at all hinting at separation, instead of tacitly endorsing the move, instantly protest. Nearly every marriage has something worth preserving, something that can be restored. Revitalizing a relationship brings triumph and ongoing reward.... Avoiding divorce spares those concerned from the greatest trauma of their lives.[7]

2. What are the Benefits of a Stable Marriage?

Several researchers and authors have reported the importance of a stable marriage for adults:

As the researchers have gone to press with their work and produced an enormous literature, one of the most consistent findings is that men and women do markedly better in all measures of specific and general well-being when they are married, compared to any of their unmarried counterparts. Married couples are healthier–physically and mentally–and they live longer, enjoy a more fulfilled life, and take better care of themselves (and each other). This has been shown consistently over decades, but it is rarely mentioned in the popular debate on the family. One of social science's best-kept secrets is that marriage is much more than a legal agreement between two people. Marriage truly makes a difference in the lives of men and women.[8]



Half of the children born this year to parents who are married will see their parents divorce before they turn 18.

3. What Can Be the Impact of Divorce on Children?

It is obvious that a large number of children of divorced parents survive the experience and later become capable and stable adults.[9] But it is also becoming increasingly evident that many children of divorce are at risk for developing detrimental behaviors, personality disorders, and disruptive lifestyles. Some of the variables in adjustment of children to parental divorce are (1) age of child at divorce, (2) amount of conflict in the marriage, (3) access to both parents after the divorce, (4) adjustment to a step-parent, if there is one, and (5) access to other nurturing adults during the childhood years.

Each year, over 1 million American children suffer the divorce of their parents; moreover, half of the children born this year to parents who are married will see their parents divorce before they turn 18. Mounting evidence in social science journals demonstrates that the devastating physical, emotional, and financial effects that divorce is having on these children will last well into adulthood and affect future generations. Among these broad and damaging effects are the following:

- *Children whose parents have divorced are increasingly the victims of abuse. They exhibit more health, behavioral, and emotional problems, are involved more frequently in crime and drug abuse, and have higher rates of suicide.*
- *Children of divorced parents perform more poorly in reading, spelling, and math. They are also more likely to repeat a grade and to have higher dropout rates and lower rates of college graduation.*
- *Families with children that were not poor before the divorce see their income drop as much as 50 percent. Almost 50 percent of the parents with children that are going through a divorce move into poverty after the divorce.*
- *Religious worship, which has been linked to better health, longer marriages, and better family life, drops after the parents' divorce.*[10]

The divorce of parents, even if it is amicable, tears apart the fundamental unit of American society.[11]

There are two other similar myths about divorce:

> *Two faulty beliefs provide the foundation for our current attitudes towards divorce. The first holds that if the parents are happier the children will be happier, too.... Children are not considered separately from their parents; their needs, and even their thoughts are subsumed under the adult agenda.... Indeed, many adults who are trapped in very unhappy marriages would be surprised to learn that their children are relatively content. They don't care if mom and dad sleep in different beds as long as the family is together....*
>
> *A second myth is based on the premise that divorce is a temporary crisis that exerts its more harmful effects on parents and children at the time of the breakup....The belief that the crisis is temporary underlies the notion that if acceptable legal arrangements for custody, visits, and child support are made at the time of the divorce and parents are provided with a few lectures, the child will soon be fine. It is a view we have fervently embraced and continue to hold. But it's misguided.*[12]

In many states, if you do file for divorce and you have children, you will be required to attend a two-hour class on divorce education before your divorce is granted. This class is not designed to tell you whether you should divorce but rather reviews how to deal with it to have the least negative impact on children. It may be that some couples who file for divorce and attend the required divorce education class are among those who decide not to proceed with the termination of their marriage. Perhaps serious thought of the impact of divorce on children should precede filing for divorce as well.

4. Many Later Regret Divorce

Once people have made the decision to divorce, how do they later feel about the choice? There may be some immediate relief in many instances right after the divorce, but how do husbands and wives feel months or even years later? My current estimates are that about one-third of the couples who divorce feel they made the right decision, another one-third are uncertain or have mixed feelings about their divorce, and approximately one-third of divorced couples eventually regret the decision within five years.

In addition, many divorced people in the United States apparently wish they had made a greater effort to make their marriage work. In Minnesota, 66 percent of those who are currently divorced answered "yes" to the question, "Do you wish you and your ex-spouse had tried harder to work through your differences?" In a New Jersey poll, 46 percent of divorced people reported that they wished they and their ex-spouse had tried harder to work through their differences. Research from Australia indicates that of people who divorce, "one third regret the decision five years later. Of the individuals involved, two in five (40 percent) believe their divorce could have been avoided."[13] A recent letter-to-the editor in a large U.S. newspaper reflected the sentiments of one man among the estimated one-third who regretted his divorce. Under the title "Divorce Isn't Worth the Cost," he wrote:

> *I would wish to comment on the letter that ran Jan. 2 concerning the weakening of men and children through divorce. Anne Smart-Pearce was the author. To my great sorrow, I must admit I am a divorced husband and father. Anne speaks of the terrible price that is being paid and then asks, "If a mother had an equal fear of losing her children, would she so readily seek a divorce? Or would she do all in her power to avert such a tragic outcome?"*
>
> *Might I add this, husbands and wives, if there is even one-half of an ounce of friendliness left in your marriage, take each other by the hand, look at each other's eyes and then remember the love that brought you together in the first place! Let each other know, somehow, that you are needed, loved, and wanted! If you fail, you will reap the whirlwind, especially you, fathers. You will lose all that is important, near and dear to you. And that is your sweet wife, your wonderful children, and your home.*
>
> *Oh, that I had been more wise and not let my pride be my downfall. I can tell you with*

The following books deal with ways to strengthen marriages and with the realities of divorce:

- Diane Medved, *The Case Against Divorce* (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc. 1989).
- Michele Weiner Davis, *The Divorce Remedy: The Proven 7-Step Program for Saving Your Marriage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).
- Michele Weiner Davis, *Divorce Busting; A Step-By Step Approach To Making Your Marriage Loving Again* (New York: Simon And Schuster, 1992).
- Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).
- Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).
- Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and Susan Blumburg, *Fighting For Your Marriage* (New York: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001).
- Glenn T. Stanton, *Why Marriage Matters* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Pinon Press, 1997).
- James Dobson, *Love Must Be Tough: New Hope for Families in Crisis*, (Nashville, Tenn.: Word Publishing, 1996). Contains suggestions for husbands or wives who are in the process of losing a spouse to another person, excessive hours at work, or various kinds of addiction such as drugs or pornography. The book is written from a strong Christian perspective.

knowledge that a seemingly endless tragedy does await! The mornings do come when you awake, call her name, and then realize that you are alone in a house that is ever silent and does not answer back.[14]

5. Should Couples Work on Their Marriage?

Nearly all, if not all, marriages go through peaks and valleys, times of highs and lows. Most of married life, however, is spent cycling between these two extremes. During difficult times, between 40-50 percent of currently married spouses seek divorce and follow through with it. And, as previously noted, about 20 percent of those who stay married consider leaving a marriage partner but later choose not to do so. The vast majority of unhappily married couples in the United States apparently do improve their relationship if they stay married. (See sidebars, pp. 25 & 29, for several suggestions on available resources.)

6. The Big Bounce Back

Researchers have asked and then answered this question:

How many unhappy couples turn their marriages around? The truth is shocking: 86 percent of unhappily married people who stick it out find that, five years later, their marriages are happier, according to an analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households. Most say, they've become very happy indeed. In fact, nearly three-fifths of those who said their marriage was unhappy in the late '80s and who stay married, rated this same marriage as either "very happy" or "quite happy" when interviewed again in the early 1990s.

The very worst marriages showed the most dramatic turnarounds: 77 percent of the stable married people who rated their marriage as very unhappy (a one on a scale of one to seven) in the late '80s said that the same marriage was either "very happy" or "quite happy" five years later. Permanent marital unhappiness is surprisingly rare among couples who stick it out. Five years later, just 15 percent of those who initially said they were very unhappily married (and who stayed married) ranked their marriage as not unhappy at all.[15]

Also, it is important to note that, according to recent research, unhappily married adults who divorced were no happier or healthier five years later than unhappily married adults who stayed married, even if the divorced spouses remarried.[16] Apparently divorce is not a good bet to make us happier and healthier. Indeed, the evidence is just the opposite.

7. Calculate the Financial Consequences of Terminating Your Marriage

The financial costs to married couples for divorce are often substantial. These costs include legal or lawyers' fees, which average $7,000 per couple ($3,500 per person) in the United States.[17] Some divorces cost

more; others less. An uncontested divorce involving no children in Utah costs between $500-$1,000. If the proceedings go to court and there is litigation, costs go as high as $10,000-$20,000 for legal fees. If there is a sizeable amount of property and prolonged litigation, costs could be $40,000-$60,000 and even as high as $100,000 or more in some cases. The hourly wage for many lawyers today is $200-$300. The use of accredited divorce mediation services can help reduce the costs.

There will also be additional costs for housing, moving expenses, transportation, potential loss of income during divorce proceedings and transition, additional occupational training–particularly for custodial spouse of children (if children are involved)–child care, partial loss of retirement benefits, and sometimes additional costs to state government, extended family members, and charities if initial income is minimal. There may also be considerable financial consequences during retirement for husband, wife, or both.

Also consider that "Families with children that were not poor before the divorce see their income drop as much as 50 percent. Almost 50 percent of the parents with children that are going through a divorce move into poverty after the divorce."[18] Perhaps the greatest costs of divorce, however, are not financial, but the emotional costs that were previous noted.

Love lost can be regained in time with new skills and effort.

8. Think about the Long-term Consequences of Your Decision

Many who divorce are satisfied with the decision to end their marriage. But it is becoming increasing evident that a significant number, as many as one-third, later regret their divorce. This is particularly so when the long-term consequences are experienced or actually encountered. Seriously consider not only the apparent immediate benefits of divorce but also the long-term consequences many others have experienced. Divorce is a decision that many make but later regret. And most divorces are forever.

9. Take Time to Make Your Decision

The decision whether to divorce is one of the most important ones you will ever make. And if you do decide not to divorce right away and want to work on improving your marriage, take several months to do so. As previously noted, 86 percent of unhappily married couples bounce back within five years. Your marriage, however, may not take as long to turn around. Also, be aware of questionable advice you may receive during this time from others, particularly peers who are divorced or unhappily married. Remember, love lost can be regained in time with new skills and effort.

10. Use Discretion When Seeking Marriage Counseling

If you do seek marriage counseling, be very careful in choosing your therapist. Make sure the therapist understands your desire to work on improving your marriage, and ask your therapist to help you in this endeavor. Also, make sure the therapist has been trained in helping couples stay together, where possible. Professional and competent counselors will honor this request. Discuss the fees in advance, which range from $60 to $100 or more for a fifty-minute session. Many Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) currently do not pay for marriage counseling. In addition, if you seek personal counseling, HMOs will often determine whom you will see and the number of sessions you are allowed. Choose wisely from among the therapists allowed on your insurance program, if you have one. Remember: they are working for you and your marriage! Before you choose a counselor, review the article "How Therapy Can Be Hazardous to Your Marital Health," by

William J. Doherty, Ph.D. Read his comments about "therapy-induced marital suicide."[19]

Although marriage counseling with a competent therapist can be invaluable for some distressed couples, most couples turn their marriages around without formal counseling. Of course, many couples seek help from their religious leaders, with men generally preferring religious-based help.[20]

THE FIRST BOND OF SOCIETY IS MARRIAGE.

11. Consult with Your Religious Leaders or Advisors

If you and/or your spouse are religious people and belong to a particular faith or denomination, I urge you to seriously consider talking to your religious leaders. They often are a great source of hope and encouragement by adding the spiritual dimension to marriage during difficult times. Consider attending religious services while you are making your decision about divorce. Married couples who do attend religious services on a weekly basis have a one-third lower divorce rate than those who do not.[21]

12. Learn from Other Married Couples who have been at the Crossroads

There are couples in the United States who have seriously considered divorce and then decided to work on their marriages and stay together. Some of these couples are available to conduct seminars and workshops. One such national and nondenominational group is *Retrouvaille* (A French word meaning "rediscovery" and pronounced "retro-vi".) When both husband and wife attend *Retrouvaille* meetings and work at their marriage, the success rate of staying together is 85 percent.[22]

13. Remember the 9/11 Alert

Almost everyone in the United States will remember September 11, 2001 (ninth month, eleventh day) when the two planes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City and another plane crashed into the Pentagon Building in Washington, D.C., and fourth in Pennsylvania. We all witnessed over and over the tragic details of these events and the aftermath as it was broadcast again and again on national and local television programs. These vivid images will likely remain with us for many years to come.

What some may not know, however, is that immediately following these tragic events, many married couples withdrew their applications for divorce on file before September 11, 2001. In Houston, Texas, for example, "Dismissals in divorce cases have skyrocketed in the Harris County Family Law courts since the terrorist attacks of September 11th. Family-law cases, the vast majority of which are divorces, have been dismissed in nearly three times the volume in the days after the tragedy as in the days before it."[23] Similar trends apparently occurred elsewhere, although they did not last long .

What does this brief trend after September 11, 2001, suggest? Why were so many military personnel married in the following weeks before they were deployed for duty abroad? Why is it that in times of crisis we place higher value on marriage and family relationships? Michael Von Blon, a family law attorney in Texas, stated that in times of tragedy, "people stop and think about the most basic things in life: companionship, love and family" (ibid). Why do we need a national tragedy to remind us, once again, of the importance of marriage and family relationships? Apparently, such events help us realize the value of ancient wisdom:

> *Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him*

up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.[24]

In presenting this information, I have tried to provide a balance by first noting that there are situations when divorce is warranted. It is evident that some individuals are better off not married to each other. I also have indicated and stated the reasons why I believe it is beneficial for many, if not most, husbands and wives to stay together and work through their differences in their marriage. Hopefully, married couples will take the time to make an "informed decision" when contemplating divorce.

Over two thousand years ago, Roman statesman and orator Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC) stated, "The first bond of society is marriage." I believe it still is.

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Thanks to David Schramm, David White, and Lisa Evans who helped write this article.

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[19] See www.smartmarriages.com.
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[22] See website at www.retrouvaille.org.
[23] Mary Flood, *Houston Chronicle* (25 Sept. 2001).
[24] Ecclesiastes 4:9-12.

The following websites contain valuable information on strengthening marriages:

- www.utahmarriage.org
  Created with Utah residents in mind. Married couples and/or individuals can access information and/or helpful resources.
- www.divorcebusting.com
  Has many tips for helping couples with marriage. Michele Weiner Davis has also created a ten-hour audiocassette program and work book titled "Keeping Love Alive" marketed at this website.
- www.smartmarriages.com
  Created and maintained by Diane Sollee. The Web site lists a number of current articles on marriage and marriage education programs available throughout the United States. Organizations promoting marriage are also listed.
- www.marriagemovement.org
  A twenty-nine page document describing the current Marriage Movement in the United States. You are invited to endorse the document.
- www.family.org
  Has many helpful materials on marriage from Focus on the Family, a Christian Organization founded by Dr. James Dobson.
- www.divorcereform.org
  Contains trends in divorce reform legislation in the United States and some interesting statistics on contemporary divorce.