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THE DIVORCE PROCESS: DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS
FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

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Introduction

We are experiencing today in the U.S. a divorce epidemic. The media batters us regularly with the statistics of aggregate marital dissolution. Since the mid-seventies our country has recorded roughly two million marriages each year, and roughly one million divorces. If this trend continues year-in, year-out — and there seems to be little reason to predict a great change in the figures in the near future — then we can expect nearly half of all marriages entered into today to end in divorce (1).

The statistics of aggregate marital dissolution are translated to all of us regularly in a very human, and painful manner. We see our friends, our relatives, our colleagues, ourselves struggling with what has to be one of life's greatest challenges: Coming to grips with aloneness, after the dreams of oneness have been unhappily shattered.

Indeed, there are books on Creative Divorce to remind us that good things do come out of bad. And researchers all across the country are hearing countless people tell them that "all in all, life turned out for the better." Each of us hears from people experiencing divorce exciting stories of individual growth, the development of personal competencies, the triumph of will over adversity.

And yet, the process of divorce is "no piece of cake." One young mother, attending law school and rearing a preschooler alone, did once tell me that divorce for her was, indeed, "a piece of cake." I probed and probed, skeptical of her allegations, but she seemed to be accurate in her terminology. The breakdown of the marriage and the divorce and its aftermath had been exceedingly smooth for her, remarkably clean.

This young woman, however, stands out in my experience as a teacher, counselor, and researcher who has for the past eight years been very interested in why people divorce and what happens when they do. Much more commonly I hear stories of how difficult it is to live in a failing marriage, and how difficult it is to make the transition to satisfying singlehood.

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Developing a Program

In 1978 I decided that a good way to invest much of my life was in the burgeoning marriage enrichment movement. Not long after, we had a course on the books at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln called "Individual, Marriage and Family Enrichment." By all standard measures, the course appeared to be a success. The University was no doubt pleased, because each time the course was offered people appeared in ever-growing numbers. More than 70 showed up to take the course the last time it received tiny notice in the jam-packed schedule of course offerings printed each semester. The students in general were highly enthusiastic about the course when asked to rate it anonymously each evening after our sessions. And, some modest changes evidently occurred in many of their lives, for pre-test/post-test questionnaires indicated statistically significant gains on Likert scale-type questions purportedly measuring satisfaction with relationships. Modest gains, but significant.

There was something missing, however. As professionals we have a responsibility to not only try to help develop strong marriages; we also have, I think, a responsibility to serve those experiencing divorce. Most people who divorce will remarry, and the quest for a strong marriage can start just as easily when one is divorced, as when one is sweet, young, and never-married.

We began to develop, then, a course called "Coping with Divorce." It would look in depth at why marriages fail, and what happens when they do. The course would complement the "Individual, Marriage and Family Enrichment" course, which focused on how to make marriages succeed. As it turned out, the two courses operate quite successfully in tandem.

Educational Philosophy and Method

David and Vera Mace (1975, 1976, 1978, 1979, 1983) have spoken and written eloquently on the notion of enrichment being a middle ground between education and counseling, bridging the best of both worlds. In our program we decided to present practical ideas which people could use to make their lives better, if they so chose. And, we wanted to develop a supportive atmosphere, making effective use of small discussion groups much of the time so that people would go away from our meetings feeling good about themselves and others.

The "Coping with Divorce" course lasts eight weeks; each session is three hours long. A typical session would begin with 10 or 15 minutes of banter on numerous topics: some funny or moving stories from real life; current events of interest; details on assignments or readings; questions and comments from the class. A short lecture might follow by the instructor or a graduate student who wanted 15 or 20 minutes to develop what s/he judged to be an important theme.

This would be followed by an hour presentation from a visitor or visitors with special expertise in a specific area of divorce and coping.

Or, a panel of what we called "just-plain folks" would discuss an issue. Panels might have two or three people, or as many as 10 or 12. There didn't seem to be any relationship between the panel's size and how well it went. Some large panels went exceedingly well; some small panels bombed. And vice versa. The instructor or a graduate student usually would moderate the panel, asking probing questions, and making sure that no one dominated the discussion, and that everyone got to participate.

We have found that an eight-session series works quite well. We have been successful going up to 16 sessions, but less than eight is not long enough. It takes about four sessions before people get comfortable with each other. After an hour and a half or two hours of large-group presentations and panels each week we would break up into our regular small groups. A graduate student receiving practicum work credit for the experience would be group leader for eight or ten class members. The first few sessions would be spent building rapport: telling stories, getting to know each other better. Some very serious discussions usually begin to occur in the small groups by about session number four. This is roughly the time when light bulbs begin to go on in people's heads, and they start saying, almost on cue, "Gee whiz, I thought I was the only person in the world who felt this way." Or, "Gee whiz, for a while I thought I was crazy, but I guess I'm just normally crazy."

We have aptly dubbed this the "Gee-Whiz Phenomenon." When a small group has reached this point, we know we are successful. Once a person feels his or her problems aren't much different than anyone else's problems, then the person can talk about these problems with a certain amount of openness. When someone opens up in small group, the other members almost invariably offer a comforting environment in which to tell the story, and a few good ideas on what to do next. The individual with the burden, of course, has the right and responsibility to pick and choose among the ideas. Every person must carry his or her own cross, even though there's a lot of advice given on how to avoid backache.

Honesty and openness are of high value to the group. We do not encourage people "to bare their soul," nor do we try to pander to anyone's "prurient interests." But, we have found that time was too precious to be spent floundering around and about while neglecting the "gut-level" issues; we most often choose to focus on the tough questions, for people aren't coming to class simply to pass the time.

As a teacher I have always looked somewhat dimly at mechanical marvels. I probably will be one of the last people dragged kicking and screaming into buying a home computer. (I didn't buy a pocket calculator until the price had plummeted to a small percentage of the cost of the original models.) I will use films and videotapes on rare occasion in class, but only if dead certain they will be helpful. Many times I see them used as only a way to fill time: white noise for students who wish to write a letter to their girlfriends. But one mechanical marvel that I cannot live without as a teacher is the teleconference hook-up. These can be purchased from a

telephone company for a few hundred dollars, or rented for a reasonable fee. We had the phone company put a wall jack in the room where class met, and if you adjust that \$15 expense for five years of inflation, I'd guess you could get that done today for less than \$30.

The teleconference hook-up is nothing more than a telephone, its cradle, and a speaker all in a box about the size of a very-portable typewriter. It simply makes it possible for a whole class of people to talk with other people on the phone and hear their responses projected loud and clear into the classroom.

This machine has two obvious advantages that make teaching a delight:

First, you can reach anybody in the world and talk with them. All you need is their willingness, the machine, and a creative administrator who can cover your less-than-modest phone bill. (Using the University WATTS line, we get by for \$15 an hour.)

Second, you can talk about any topic in the world, no matter how sensitive. This, I think, is a major reason why people are enthusiastic about the Coping with Divorce course. If an issue is critical to the divorce process, we can talk about it in a straight-forward manner.

For example, violence and divorce are closely linked. Estimates by professionals vary, but possibly thirty or forty percent of all divorce scenarios include physical altercations. Now people, of course, aren't very comfortable talking about this. And the thought of speaking in front of a class of 70 or more people can strike fear into the heart of even the most experienced performer when the topic is how you beat up your wife or how your husband beat you. The teleconference eliminates these problems.

As moderator of a teleconference dialogue, I typically ask the graduate students helping in the class and class members themselves to find people to talk with us. "The topic next week will be violence and divorce," I might say. "We need four or five battered spouses and battering spouses to talk with about the dynamics of family violence." The graduate students and the class always come through. By the next week we would have the telephone numbers of three or four or six people who had been contacted and had agreed to talk with us. They would remain anonymous to the class and to me.

One evening we spoke to parents whose adult children had divorced. We had three different couples on the phone, and I did not know who they were, nor did they know each other. By accident, we found out later, two couples were neighbors and old friends of each other. They spoke on the teleconference panel for an hour, and never realized each other's identities!

On occasion someone will recognize a person's voice on the phone, but this happens only rarely. And, we pledge panelists and class members to confidentiality, or our experiment in bringing the issues to life will be imperiled. The system has yet to backfire.

Some people are more open in small groups than others. A rare few never offer much more than name, rank, and serial number. We feel that is sad, for opening up can be quite helpful. But opening up is not mandatory to receiving a good grade in the class. And, of course, some problems are too deadly to get into without the help of trained and experienced professionals. The class discussions occasionally demonstrate this.

For example, the subject was child abuse and divorce one evening. A young woman was on the teleconference circuit. No one knew who she was. She talked for an hour and a half about how her father had abused the family when she was a child. One time he held the mother and the young daughter in the barn hostage for several hours. He trained a double-barreled shotgun on his family and threatened to kill them and himself. On another occasion the father ran off raving into the night. "He's down by the crick," the mother told the daughter, then about 7 years old. "If I go down to get him he'll kill me. You go get him. He won't kill you. He likes you." It was three a.m., and the young woman described what it felt like to go after a crazed father in the pitchblack night so vividly that the class sat riveted to their chairs.

A young man came up to me after class was over. He was shaking so uncontrollably that he could barely speak. He and I went for a walk in the night around the campus. We walked for 45 minutes before he finally calmed down a bit. He was so angry with his father for being "a tyrant" that he wanted to kill him. Hearing of the terrible fears that the young woman had experienced triggered this young man. I helped him find a good counselor in the University Counseling Center that night, and he began the very next day the long process of trying to work through his anger.

So, no, we certainly don't try to wade into problems that are far too great for our small groups to handle.

When we began teaching the course, it was assumed that only divorced or divorcing people would be interested in coming. We were very, very wrong. The first evening we met, a poll showed that 60 percent were not divorced. This was a real shock at the time. Should we throw the non-divorced people out? Will the divorced feel like they're in a fishbowl? Can we have honest discussions with so many non-divorced people?

We put these questions to the group. They discussed them at length, and voted anonymously and unanimously to stay together. The divorced didn't want to be segregated away from the rest of society, and the non-divorced all had legitimate, sincere reasons for being there.

A non-divorced person can learn a lot about marriage from divorced people. And single divorced people often show up for our marriage enrichment programs. "I want to learn what a good marriage looks like," a middle-aged divorced man once told me in explanation for why he wanted to be in a group of couples.

Developing Curriculum

Since the students invest time and money in the Coping with Divorce class, they have a lot of say regarding what happens in class. The first class meeting will invariably be spent figuring out interest areas we wish to probe. I'll have a lot of ideas about what I think is worthwhile looking at. And class members will offer their ideas. These will be written on the blackboard. Then, after class, I'll take all the ideas and try to fit them into a logical, orderly sequence of topics.

Below is a list of interest areas that our class members have come up with over the years, and some quick suggestions on how best to approach them:

The Account. A good way to start a series on divorce is by talking about what happened and why. Many people come to class blaming the ex-spouse for everything from a bad marriage to inflation in Israel. A panel of more thoughtful divorced people, carefully picked for discussion in front of the total group, can go a long way toward underlining the complexities of the divorce process. It seems to be helpful to hear many views of what happened in a number of marriages — the wife's account, the husband's, the children, the relatives, friends.

My experience as a counselor, court investigator in child-custody disputes, and mediator has taught me that the causes of a divorce are usually elusive; one will never know for sure what happened or why. But divorced people need to sift through the rubble and at least try to learn something so that they can try to avoid these problems in the future.

Chemical dependency and divorce. Addictive behaviors figure heavily among the causes of divorce. Alcoholism is especially prevalent and worth a whole evening's discussion. Other drugs are also commonly involved. (The addiction of gambling shows up, too.) A good approach for this sensitive topic is a panel via teleconference. It's useful to get some spouses on the phone who have suffered through the alcoholism of their partner; and it is also very important to have the dependent one to speak for himself or herself.

Violence and divorce. This just can't be ignored. Panels work much better than studies and statistics. The discussion will be stunning.

The other woman, the other man. These people figure in many divorces. We once had a teleconference panel of five other women and men scattered across our state. They didn't know us and didn't know each other. The dialogue went for an hour and a half, and no one in the room appeared bored. The panelists learned a lot from each other in the discussion, also; at times it appeared like a group-therapy session for the panelists with an audience listening in.

The courts and divorce. It's good to know the nuts and bolts of the system, and the best way I know how is to invite lawyers, judges, court investigators, and families who have gone through the process.

Maternal custody, paternal custody, joint custody, and split custody. Our own research with 738 families in 47 states indicates that each option is viable. (2) The key is to fit the right approach to the right family. A panel of folks representing each option is very illuminating.

Children of divorce. This is also very sensitive, but essential to the class' understanding. We have had successful panels of children and their parents in person or on the phone. It's just not enough to wade through the studies; lecturing the class on what the researchers have found is helpful, but never enough. And we haven't seen any evidence that having the kids talk about the divorce in our class has hurt them; we've seen a number of occasions where it helped them tremendously.

Children don't cause divorce, nor do they have much power when it comes to preventing a divorce. But, they certainly are the unwitting victims in many divorce struggles. How to spare the children needless pain is a difficult and especially important question to deal with. My own experience as a court investigator and expert witness in custody fights has made me acutely and painfully aware of how terrible the battle can be if you're stuck in the middle as a child.

I come down strongly on the side of those favoring mediation of child custody disputes when possible. Taking the battle to court is hopelessly messy and inefficient. A \$3,000 to \$8,000 bill for such combat is nothing. I was once astounded to hear that a father had spent \$100,000 fighting for the kids.

I believe that lawyers are important as advocates of the rights of their clients. But if my own daughter came up to me and said she wanted a divorce, I'd quickly write her a check for \$1,000 and say, "Spend this on a mediator. If that doesn't work, then get yourself a good lawyer."

Parents of adult divorcing children. What do middle-aged parents feel when their adult child divorces? A good panel can get a lot of these feelings out into the open.

The emotions of divorce: Loneliness, anger, depression, elation. One panelist told us she was so depressed that she thought of suicide. "But I spent all my time in bed. I was so depressed I couldn't even get out of bed to get the pills and kill myself." The class members can have images literally seared on their brain by divorced people who wish to help others by talking about their experiences.

Feeling okay as a single. Most people adjust to singlehood relatively well, and there are a lot of advantages to it. A panel of happily functioning singles is a good role model for the group.

Money and divorce. In my own experience as an educator and counselor, I see two key issues in coping with divorce: managing one's emotional life successfully, and simultaneously managing one's finances. There seem to be more problems than answers in this area. Many divorced people will open up if asked to discuss money and how they manage. Many women who were full-time homemakers make a transition of going to work or going back to school. Managing a job, school, children and a household often appears overwhelming at first.

The term "feminization of poverty" is in vogue today, and one of the main reasons is the high divorce rate. Much of the increase in the number of poor women can be attributed to the financial catastrophe many suffer after a divorce. And, for many men divorce is also a difficult blow: "I lost my house, my car, my kids, my wife. I don't have anything left," is the very common story.

The family economics professionals, with their special expertise in financial management, thus can be especially important to those experiencing divorce.

Community services for the divorced. Private counselors, child guidance clinics, community mental health, Cooperative Extension, family service associations, Parents Without Partners, church support groups... There is a long list of community services and good people staffing them on a professional and volunteer basis.

How to find a new partner. Where does one look? Joining clubs and groups, professional computer dating services, using the personal column in the newspaper, etc.

Dating and sexuality. What it feels like to be 18 again.

Remarriage and stepparenting. There's a growing body of good research in this area now, and a number of good support groups around the country to tap for speakers and ideas. Remarriage, of course, is not the goal of all divorced persons, nor should it be. Rather, it is only one option.

These are just a few of the topics we have discussed. Each group selects its own course agenda. That makes the course a lot of fun, because it's different every time.

Evaluating the Students, Evaluating the Course

Graduate students take care of most grading. They don't receive money for their services, but get three university credits (which they pay for), and individual attention from the professor. The graduate students meet with us for lunch once a week to talk about how class is going and what to do next. These are informal but very valuable meetings.

To receive two credits for the eight-week course, students must attend at least seven sessions and write a one-page reaction paper after each of the sessions on how they felt about the experience. Buttering-up is not allowed; honesty, rather, is encouraged. Those who offer constructive criticism are seen as being helpful in the process of developing a good course. Students also must read two books or several articles and write two- or three-page papers on each — what ideas were personally useful to them, and what ideas didn't make a whole lot of sense to them. The emphasis always is on utility. How can an idea be successfully applied to life?

These papers are graded, but the grades are generally quite high because the emphasis is on honestly communicating feelings, rather than on library research.

The effectiveness of the course is evaluated a number of ways. Each week the graduate students read the small group members' reaction papers and report back to the professor how things are going. The graduate students also offer their ideas on what could be done better and how. An over-all evaluation of the course is written in the final session at the end of eight weeks. Using this on-going evaluation system, we generate a good deal of information: More than 500 papers of individual evaluation in a typical course. We like to think we're very well attuned to the needs of the group. Their final measure of us concurs with this judgment. Over the years 60 to 70 percent of the students have rated the Coping with Divorce course "Superior" on a five-point scale. Twenty-five to thirty percent have rated the course "Good," which is the second-highest point on the scale we use. The remaining five percent have rated the course "Average." We have never gotten a rating below "Average."

Generalizing To Other Educational Programs

Our graduate students trained in this approach have entered the professional community and have been successful applying it to community mental health programs, churches, private counseling agencies, and in Cooperative Extension. I won't go into detail on this, because I think a professional in a particular agency will readily see what facets of our model easily adapt to another framework.

I'm especially interested in seeing the approach applied in churches and in Cooperative Extension. A good Coping with Divorce program can be a preventive program. A lot of problems can be alleviated before they become major ones that need the services of our overworked and expensive counseling agencies and private practitioners. Many divorced people can afford to pay two or three dollars an evening to come to a Coping with Divorce series in a church or lecture hall, but going to a counselor for \$35 to \$50 per hour is another matter.

I'm certainly not trying to put counselors out of business, for I do a modest amount of private counseling myself. But there simply are a lot of divorced people who need a little shot in the arm, and not a major overhaul (to mix metaphors a bit).

Volunteer help is essential for getting a program started, and for keeping it going. I know of no agencies that could do this type of program any other way. And, volunteers do an excellent job. I'd look for someone who has some battle scars; someone who has gone through a divorce, experienced the divorce of his or her parents, or is in the midst of a good, happy marriage. A sensitive married person can understand divorce just as well as a divorced person, for as one cynic noted, "The major cause of divorce is marriage."

The volunteers gain a good deal from the experience: Foremost is the opportunity to be involved in a program that can really make a difference in their own life, and in the lives of others.

Parting Remark

Getting involved in such a program holds out the possibility that the lives of others will be enriched. Most certainly, the life of the person developing such a program will be enriched. Frustrations will come, of course. But the rewards of seeing ourselves and others involved in the process of marriage and divorce -- both the fear and the joy of involvement in a great adventure -- are too great to pass up.

Resources

There are good films and videotapes out there on divorce, but they're hard to get your hands on. And, most human and family service organizations don't have enough money to rent them.

Good things to read also abound, and are cheaper to come by. I especially like the books listed below.

Bernard, J. Remarriage: A Study of Marriage. New York: Dryden, 1956. A classic study by one of the nation's best researchers and writers.

Bohannan, P. (ed.). Divorce and After. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970. Excellent articles by a wide range of authors.

Eisler, D. Dissolution: No-Fault Divorce, Marriage, and the Future of Women. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977. A systematic analysis of marriage and divorce laws.

Goode, W.L. After Divorce. New York: Free Press, 1956. Still stands as one of the best studies of divorce.

Hunt, M. & B. Hunt. The Divorce Experience. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977. A fine 1970s follow-up to their earlier study of the divorced, The World of the Formerly Married, published in the 1960s.

Levinger, G & O.C. Moles (eds.). Divorce and Separation: Context, Causes and Consequences. New York: Basic Books, 1979. An excellent book of readings; the list of authorities with articles in the book is impressive, and the topics are comprehensive.

Roosevelt, R & J. Lofas. Living in Step: A Remarriage Manual for Parents and Children. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976. A nuts-and-bolts primer for stepfamilies.

Wallerstein, J.A. & J.B. Kelly. Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce. Wallerstein and Kelly have spent as much time as anyone working with children's problems in divorce.

Weiss, R. Marital Separation. New York: Basic Books, 1975. A sensitive study of the challenges people face.

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Mace, D.R. Marriage and family enrichment—A new field? The Family Coordinator, 1979, 28, 409-419.

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Notes

1. Paul Glick and Arthur Norton estimated at the end of the 1970s that 40 percent of all marriages entered into by the current generation would end in divorce. See "Marrying, Divorcing, and Living Together in the U.S. Today," Population Bulletin 32 (Washington, D.C.: Population Reference Bureau, 1979). The marriage-to-divorce ratio has held at roughly two-to-one into the 1980s, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, and we would expect that Glick and Norton's 40 percent figure will be revised upwardly. (See National Center for Health Statistics Monthly Vital Statistics Reports, Vol. 30, No. 13, December 20, 1982; Vol. 32, No. 3, Supplement, June 27, 1983; and Vol. 32, No. 5, Supplement, August 18, 1983. Hyattsville, Md.: U.S. Public Health Service.)

2. We're currently working on a book-length manuscript based on our data. For anyone interested, we can send a short synopsis of the research.