

RESTRUCTURING AND RESTABILIZING During Divorce and Separation

Divorce is often viewed as simply two individuals ending their relationship through legal means. However, it doesn't take long to realize there is more to divorce than ending a relationship. Divorces often reflect a long-term process consisting of different phases. Bohannon (1) found that in most divorces, participants experience multiple overlapping **stations of divorce**:

1. **Emotional Divorce** - Involves the disappearance of love, trust, and attraction
2. **Legal Divorce** - The formal dissolution of the marriage
3. **Economic Divorce** - Involves assets, liabilities, and economic impact
4. **Co-parental Divorce** - Shifting from parenting together to parenting between homes
5. **Community Divorce** - wherein relationships with others (relatives, friends, etc.) change;
6. **Psychic Divorce** - Shift from being married to single

Divorce and separation can be difficult even under the most amicable of circumstances. The family suffers loss – the loss of “family” as once known – possibly the loss of two incomes – possibly the loss of the family home – the loss of extended family members and possibly family friends (for those who have taken sides) – the loss created by shared parenting. Be aware, as families move through the stations of divorce these losses may cause grief. Here is an example the **stages of grief** (2) you and your children may experience during the divorce and separation process:

Shock and Denial- “This isn't really happening” “No, this can't be.” In this stage you may deny the experience. You may be tempted to lie about the situation and tell yourself that this is just temporary and everything will be back to normal soon.

Anger- “Why me?” “How dare this happen to me.” “What have you done for me lately?” “I wouldn't be thinking divorce if it wasn't for them.” You may feel generalized rage at the world for allowing something like this to happen. You may think it's unfair and may feel betrayed. Outbursts of anger in unrelated situations can occur. It's easy to target your spouse.

Bargaining- “If I do this I can make it better. “I can fix things.” You may feel guilt and feel it is some else's responsibility to fix the problem. You may attempt to strike bargains with your spouse. You may try counseling, dress differently, attempt things to improve the relationship.

Depression/Sadness- “My heart feels broken.” “I guess I'm just stuck here forever because I can't do anything about this.” At this stage you may be absorbed in the intense pain you feel from having your world come apart; you can be overwhelmed with feelings of helplessness and sadness.

Acceptance- “This happened, but I have great memories.” “It's sad but look at what I have learned from this.” Eventually you will feel a great sense of relief that the weight of the pain is off your shoulders, and a whole new world is opening up for you. The loss is accepted and you begin to work on alternatives to coping with the loss and to minimize the loss.

Professionals trained to work with divorcing and separating families understand the discomfort caused by each station of divorce or stage of grief and will be supportive of your efforts to make good decisions that will help your family restructure and restabilize during the divorce and separation process. You will eventually move through these stages, and those professionals can help you through that process.

(1) Bohannon, P. (1970). *Divorce and after: An analysis of the emotional and social problems of divorce*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.

(2) Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York: Macmillan.