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## ***On the Road from Divorce to Healing***

### ***Heading toward Divorce***

While there are many reasons that marriages fail, it is rarely due to a lack of good intentions. So how is it that these good intentions are not enough to sustain a satisfying marriage? Various factors may come into play: there may be issues of neglect, infidelity, abusive words and/or actions, mental illness, substance abuse, imbalance of power and control, disengagement and submission.

Resolving marital issues requires an honest effort from both spouses. If one partner tries to address the conflicts, while the other partner responds by feeling attacked or criticized and then disengages from the discussion, the avoided issues go underground, where they fester like poison, eroding trust and intimacy in the relationship. When the conflict of values, ideas and control remain unresolved, the capacity for positive, caring connection breaks down. This can leave each partner feeling alone and abandoned in a marriage--a wounding that is difficult to survive. Many spouses seek to leave the relationship in order to end their emotional pain, but not without a deep sense of failure, inadequacy, grief and loss.

Often, a period of growing discontentment and unmet needs occurs long before divorce becomes an active consideration. More often than not, it is the wife who becomes aware of marital problems before the husband. Typically, it is she who is generally more attuned to and affected by the lack of emotional intimacy in the marriage, while her husband tends to more easily avoid and ignore the problems that exist in the marriage. This is usually due to his extreme discomfort with emotionally-charged situations and discussions. Although men may also be experiencing emotional distress and emotional distance in the relationship, they may have a more difficult time articulating their feelings.

There are multiple reasons why partners get divorced: too much arguing, especially about finances and sex; lack of commitment and emotional intimacy; inequalities over roles, especially regarding chores, child care or careers; physical or emotional abuse; lack of shared activity, goals or values; and infidelity. Infidelity is often the result of lack of emotional intimacy in the marriage and the disengagement of one partner. While it may be a symptom of a problematic relationship, it is never the cause of the failure of the marriage and should not be used to blame one partner for the end of the marriage. Sometimes there is a conviction that one has married too young or chosen the wrong person. Often a person feels unprepared for the challenges of marriage or has unrealistic assumptions or expectations of one's partner.

### ***Choosing Divorce***

The decision to divorce typically begins when either or both partners begin to express or act upon discontent over their unspoken problems and emotional distance. Without good communication, listening and conflict-resolution skills, discussion of problems can lead to patterns of blaming, fault-finding, defensiveness, and/or expressions of hostility and contempt. This can cause polarization, a sense of hopelessness, and a desire to end the emotional pain suffered by one or both partners. Regardless of who is the initiator of the divorce, it is emotionally traumatic

for each individual. Feelings of grief, failure, guilt, anxiety and fear are a normal result of the decision and continue throughout the divorce process.

The separation process and filing of legal papers involves significant financial expense and uncertainty about the future, as well as no guarantee that the choice to get divorce will bring any improvement over the present bad situation. Decisions must be made regarding who is moving out of the marital residence; necessary financial support; how to tell the children; the decision making process, residency of the children, parenting time, and transportation to activities. Both partners and their children will be significantly affected by the inherent financial strain, and the current standard of living and routines will be significantly disrupted. Given the highly mobile world we live in, there is the possibility of one parent relocating out of state and now having to arrange to transport the children long distances to accommodate parenting time. Because of the significant complications involved in divorce, partners with children should give serious consideration to working hard on their relationship in couples therapy, prior to seeking the choice of divorce and its inherent hardships.

### ***Psychological Impact***

While the physical, financial, logistical and legal consequences of divorce are severely disruptive to the daily lives of both partners and their children, the psychological and emotional fallout is often devastating. Uncertainty, insecurity, and anxiety about the future are only part of the trauma. While some individuals may experience a sense of relief, these positive feelings are often tempered by a loss of identity, feelings of abandonment and confusion, and a sense of failure and grief over the death of their nuclear family. Indeed, few people go through divorce without experiencing a sense of personal failure, as well as feelings of depression, loss and anxiety.

If either partner has some pre-existing problems with anxiety, depression or other mental illness, the trauma of divorce often exacerbates the symptoms and makes it more difficult to cope with the increased demands of the divorce process. At such times, difficulties with concentration, memory or maintaining clear thinking may impair coping skills and decision making. Feeling emotionally overwhelmed and mentally scattered may contribute to increased anger at one's partner, with aggressive words and/or actions. Problems with sleep, loss of appetite, and anxious ruminations about the future and negative events in the marriage are common. These difficulties can impair one's ability to adaptively cope with the multiple challenges and decisions involved in surviving the legal process of divorce.

### ***A Time for Hope, Healing and Recovery***

Adjusting to the changes that occur from divorce takes time. Each partner is profoundly affected, with worries about finances, housing, loss of friends, and the adjustment of the children. Each partner is engaged in the process of rebuilding his or her life. Support can often be found through churches and community organizations that offer support groups. Focusing on positive, self-nurturing activities, such as exercise, good eating habits, receiving therapeutic massage or yoga, can be beneficial to one's coping. During this period of emotional turmoil, it can be extremely helpful to seek mental health treatment to facilitate a positive adjustment in coping with the multiple social, economic, and psychological effects of separation and divorce.

Seeking support through individual psychotherapy can be a critical step in the process of healing and recovery. Moreover, it can be a foundation for support, growth and hope. Divorce recovery focused therapy provides one with a safe, empowering and supportive environment, in which to move beyond the pain and on to healing. A psychotherapist can give concrete recommendations on maintaining a good support system and creating a more fulfilling life for oneself. During a period of emotional turmoil and crisis, therapy can help to address and alleviate the disruptive symptoms of depression and anxiety that interfere with one's capacity to make adaptive, healthy and positive decisions during and after the divorce.

Beyond the alleviation of emotional and cognitive symptoms, psychotherapy can facilitate the rebuilding of self-esteem and help to reshape one's identity as an independent person. Issues of guilt, regret, anger and hostility can be eased with compassion and forgiveness for oneself and eventually one's former partner. Therapy can be instrumental in helping an individual cope more adaptively with the legal process of divorce, as well as facilitating the rebuilding of a new and fulfilling life after the divorce is final. Divorce, like any major life event, requires a period of total reappraisal of one's self and roles. You no longer see yourself as a spouse lover or married person and you are trying to redefine yourself during a rudderless period. Therapy can assist your progression through this period more quickly and orderly, with both support and guidance.

The difficulties and challenges of divorce require a period of healing and transformation: It is a time of reflection upon how to reorganize one's life in a meaningful way. The successful resolution to the many challenges of divorce is a valuable accomplishment and sign of personal growth. A competent psychotherapist can be an invaluable companion on the road from divorce to healing.