

Chapter 1 : Divorce in the Changing Family Life Cycle

"The Changing Family Life Cycle" offers essential guidance in understanding what happens in families in terms of the flow of life over the generations.

Divorce has become endemic to the American society. Despite its prevalence, few spouses are prepared for the emotional and physical impact of divorce. Divorce affects family members at every generational level throughout the nuclear and extended family, thus producing a crisis for the family as a whole as well as for each individual within the family. The normal life cycle tasks, interrupted and altered by the divorce process, continue with greater complexity due to the concomitant phases of the divorcing process. Each ensuing life cycle phase becomes affected by the divorce and must henceforth be viewed within the dual context of the stage itself as well as the residual effects of the divorce. With the shape of the family irrevocably altered, the family continues to go on in a new form. Research indicates that family systems require one to three years to engage in the divorce process and restabilize and continue their "normal" developmental process Hetherington, If a family can negotiate the crisis and the accompanying transitions that must be experienced in order to restabilize, it will have established a more fluid system that will allow a continuation of the "normal" family developmental process. The sociocultural context of the family is another aspect to consider in understanding the impact of divorce, adding a vital and often overlooked dimension to the divorce process McGoldrick et al. Some ethnic and religious groups accept divorce far more readily than others; some religions do not accept divorce at all. The steepest rise occurred during the decade from to U. Bureau of the Census, Thus the number of divorces has almost tripled in 20 years. In the length of marriage at the time of divorce peaked at two years, declining gradually every year thereafter, with the median duration time for marriages seven years and the average age of the spouses at the time of divorce between 25 and 34 NCHS, a. Thus the time marriages appear to be most at risk is during the first phases of the family life cycle, before and soon after children arrive. Of the people who divorce, five-sixths of the men and three-quarters of the women will remarry Glick, , with the chances of remarriage far greater when the couple is in the early stages of the family life cycle. Of those remarriages, the divorce rate is even higher than for first marriages, with statistics varying according to sex and age groups. There are a number of etiological factors associated with marital instability: Age and premarital pregnancy: Less educated men and better educated women are more at risk than better educated men and less educated women Levinger, Compared with those who have not completed college or have postgraduate degrees, women who have completed four years of college are the group least at risk for divorce Glick, a. Divorce appears to run in families, though studies on the correlation between parental divorce and marital instability in the next generation have yielded mixed results. A Crisis of Transition In the past research focused on the relationship between divorce and psychopathology, with marital status linked to mental disorder. Divorced people are six times more at risk to be hospitalized for psychological disorders as married people Bloom et al. In addition, divorced people have twice the suicide rate of married people, more car accidents, more physical illnesses culminating in death cancer and heart disease , and more problems with substance abuse Bloom et al. In our view this pathological perspective on divorce has both major methodological and conceptual shortcomings. Thus the distress is seen as a "normal" short-term response to crisis. The lack of societal support or guidelines for the family going through this process adds to the difficulties. We need a model for divorce as a normative family transition Ahrons, a and believe this framework, based on a crisis theory paradigm, is a useful tool for conceptualizing the divorce experience for the family. Encompassing stages and processes for divorce-related adjustments and accompanying life stresses, it offers a more positive perspective, providing the potential for a growth-inducing experience as family members develop new capacities to adapt. In the past decade. While recent media coverage has called attention to the plight of grandparents with respect to visitation rights, the divorce-adjustment process of the family system as a whole--grandparents, siblings, and other extended-family members--is often overlooked. We believe that each and every member of the nuclear and extended family is affected in ways that influence the process for all, depending in part on the life cycle phase of the family. In reviewing the literature, we look

first at the impact of divorce on the family as a system and then at special issues for children of divorce. The Impact of Divorce on the Family According to the Holmes and Rahe scale of stressful life events, divorce ranks second only to the death of a spouse. Many interrelated factors influence the response: The adjustment process takes place in stages over a two- or three-year period, beginning with the predecision period and ending either with some sort of homeostasis established within the new one-parent household or with remarriage Hetherington, ; Ahrons, a. The transition is gradual. Ahrons a postulates five overlapping stages of this adjustment process, each one involving specific role transitions and tasks. This period is often characterized by heightened stress, with considerable fighting, bitterness, blaming, devaluing the partner, depression, anxiety, and. There may be an affair, which often serves to expedite the decision. A time of great distress, for some families this may be the time of greatest disequilibrium. If the family copes well at this point, the couple may be able to separate with well-thought-out decisions. In the majority of divorces, one partner wants out more than the other. This is a very hard time for all the family, the outcome depending largely on how the preceding stages were handled. The more reactive the family, the greater is the crisis. Initially each spouse is in a state of heightened emotional vulnerability that can interfere with normal functioning. Common symptoms include the inability to work effectively, poor health, weight changes, insomnia and other sleep disturbances, sexual dysfunction, and use of alcohol, tobacco, and other substances Hetherington, There is always ambivalence. For the vast majority, lingering attachment persists despite anger and resentment--the more the attachment, the greater the distress Weiss, Over time the anger and attachment decrease, with anger remaining longer. There is a sense of helplessness, a lack of control over life events, feelings of incompetence--socially and sexually, loss, loneliness, anger, frustrated dependency needs, and identity problems. Many are not satisfied with the new lifestyle and wish they had tried harder to make the marriage work. The person who initiated the separation may regret it and want to reconcile, while the noninitiator spouse may have gone into therapy or started to rebound and be unwilling to risk becoming vulnerable again. Throughout this stage and all ensuing stages, each spouse is prone to tremendous emotional upheavals, to highs and lows. As soon as the emotional turmoil appears to be abating, something new will occur that sets the individual reeling one more time. This process repeats itself over and over for a period that usually peaks at one year, and may last as long as two years or more. With time the intensity of each swing slowly diminishes--like an upward spiral swinging back and forth, gradually reaching an end point. For those who functioned marginally before the separation, divorce may increase their difficulties; for others divorce stimulates their personal growth in a way that was not possible within the marriage. For many women it may be the first time in their lives they have felt autonomous; consequently they experience a newly found sense of competency and well-being. There may be a series of separations and reconciliations--half of all married couples separate at least once Weiss, --creating boundary ambiguities as the marriage moves back and forth from off to on, with family members uncertain as to whether or not to reorganize to fill absent roles. Premature contact with lawyers often escalates the crisis. When the separation becomes public and legal proceedings are initiated, the crisis may escalate still further. At the time of initiating proceedings, women tend to be significantly angrier than men at their spouses, especially if they perceive the spouse as angry at them Kelly, They tend to meet the stress of divorce head on, go through a period of emotional turmoil, become angry or depressed, and then recover Chiriboga et al. Many men deal with their unhappiness by throwing themselves into work and later experience an overall low sense of well-being Chiriboga et al. In the long run, there seems to be a significant difference between how women and men adjust emotionally to divorce. Many people will play a pivotal role: Support from family and friends is crucial for both men and women. While initially married friends may be supportive, after the first months there is often a sharp decline, particularly for women. Without such support the overall adjustment is more difficult. It may be self-imposed, as some people respond by withdrawing from family and friends at the time support is most needed. In any case the social network of separated people often shifts from old, married friends to new, single, more casual acquaintances. The adjustment tends to be faster when there is more social interaction Hetherington, All members of the family experience the disruption and confusion that accompany the divorce process and have difficulty negotiating the transition during this stage. The more the nonresident parent is excluded, the greater is the potential for

family dysfunction. The challenge for the family systems becomes one of reorganization rather than dismantling. New rules and patterns must be developed for all the habits and routines of daily life that were taken for granted no longer apply. Roles, boundaries, membership, and hierarchical structure change, with virtually every subsystem within the family affected: Relationships with all systems outside the nuclear family change as well: All of this takes place in the absence of norms or social supports for divorced families. Consequently the changes are a source of great stress, creating added conflict that interferes with making the transitions. For the couple the process of terminating the marital relationship while maintaining interdependent ties as parents is difficult, especially since there are few useful role models to use as a guide. In fact many divorced people are clearer about what they do not want to do, based on seeing the experience of others, than what they do want to do. What makes the process even harder is that any ongoing relationship is considered suspect--a form of holding on. A recent five-year study that examined the nature of former spousal relationships all parents found that half the couples studied were able to achieve an amiable relationship: Preliminary findings of a recent study by Kelly found that child-focused communication was significantly better than discussion of marital issues, an encouraging indicator for cooperative postdivorce parenting. A combination of positive and negative feelings coexist, though neither to an extreme. Most discussions center around issues of parenting, with the major areas of disagreement revolving around finances and child rearing practices. Despite a high incidence of conflict Ahrons, ; Goldsmith. What makes the relationship work is not the interaction itself but clear and agreed-upon boundaries Ahrons, ; Goldsmith, Just as a new relationship aids the emotional adjustment process, economic stability eases the transition to a new life. Frequently a host of practical and financial concerns serves to escalate the crisis, and unless there is a great deal of money, economic necessity will dictate many changes. Separation may herald an entire change in life-style; in any case financial concerns become a major preoccupation for most divorcing people, regardless of income level. Sweeping changes in divorce laws across the country, intended to treat both sexes more fairly, have led to some form of no-fault divorce in 48 states, with the financial decisions based on the view of marriage as an economic partnership. Marital assets are evenly or equitably divided, and, for the most part, alimony has become outdated. In a ten-year study on the effects of no-fault divorce in California, Weitzman concluded that women and children have become "the victims of the divorce revolution. This is especially difficult for women who have been out of work for along time or have never worked at all, have no marketable skills, or have young children. Bureau of the Census.

This work has rapidly achieved prominence as a standard text in social work curricula, family therapy training programs, and clinical practice. Diverse ethnic and socio-economic lifestyles are examined through shared developmental stages, offering student and therapist alike new insights on family problems and ways of approaching and alleviating them.

The ultimate goal at this stage is to achieve interdependence, which occurs when you are able to fully enter into a relationship with another person. Interdependence also requires that you share goals and that you are able to sometimes place the needs of another above your own. But before you can achieve interdependence, you must first have a high degree of independence. The relationship skills you learn in coupling serve as a foundation for other relationships, such as parent-child, teacher-student, or physician-patient. Within a couple, you learn: Common spiritual and emotional development goals. How to form boundaries in relationships. When to place the needs or importance of the other person above your own. Most research shows that early on, a happy marriage is full of passion and sexual intimacy, which can become less important in later successful marriage. A satisfying marriage at this stage includes a high amount of considerate or kind acts such as doing something nice for the other person without being asked and praise. The life skills you learn in this stage are important in developing true interdependence and the ability to have a cooperative and healthy relationship. Some of the challenges of this stage include: Transitioning into the new family system. Including your spouse or partner in your relationships with friends and family members. Being committed to making your marriage work. Putting the needs of another ahead of your own. You and your partner will have less stress if the transition into a new family system is smooth. Less stress often means better health. Your specific goals for this stage of the family life cycle are: Forming a new family with your partner. Realigning your relationships with your family of origin and your friends to now include your spouse. Babies Through Adolescents Making the decision to have a baby At some point in your relationship, you and your partner will decide if you want to have a baby. Some couples know going into a relationship that they do not want children. Parenting is one of the most challenging phases of the family life cycle. The decision to have children is one that affects your individual development, the identity of your family, and your relationship. Children are so time-consuming that skills not learned in previous stages will be difficult to pick up at this stage. Your ability to communicate well, maintain your relationships, and solve problems is often tested during this stage. Introducing a child into your family results in a major change in roles for you and your partner. Each parent has three distinct and demanding roles: As new parents, your individual identities shift along with how you relate to each other and to others. The skills that you learned in the Independence and Coupling stages, such as compromise and commitment, will help you move to the Parenting stage. Along with the joy that comes from having a child, you may feel a great deal of stress and fear about these changes. A woman might have concerns about being pregnant and going through childbirth. Fathers tend to keep their fears and stress to themselves, which can cause health problems. Talking about your emotional or physical concerns with your family physician, obstetrician, or counselor can help you deal with these and future challenges. Parenting young children Adapting children into other relationships is a key emotional process of this stage. You will take on the parenting role and transition from being a member of a couple to being a parent. While you are still evolving as individuals, you and your partner are also becoming decision-makers for your family. Continuing to express your individuality while working well together as a couple results in a strong marriage. Children benefit when their parents have a strong relationship. Caring for young children cuts into the amount of time you might otherwise spend alone or with your partner. If you did not fully develop some skills in previous phases, such as compromise for the good of the family, your relationship may be strained. For example, divorce or affairs may be more likely to occur during the years of raising young children if parents have not developed strong skills from earlier life stages. But for those who have the proper tools, this can be a very rewarding, happy time, even with all of its challenges. Optimally, you develop as an individual, as a member of a couple, and as a member of a family. Specific goals when young children join your family are: Adjusting your marital system to make space for children. Taking on parenting roles.

Realigning your relationships with your extended family to include parenting and grandparenting roles. Parenting adolescents Parenting teenagers can be a rough time for your family and can test your relationship skills. Families that function best during this period have strong, flexible relationships developed through good communication, problem solving, mutual caring, support, and trust. Most teens experiment with different thoughts, beliefs, and styles, which can cause family conflict. Your strengths as an individual and as part of a couple are critical as you deal with the increasing challenges of raising a teenager. Strive for a balanced atmosphere in which your teenager has a sense of support and emotional safety as well as opportunities to try new behaviors. An important skill at this stage is flexibility as you encourage your child to become independent and creative. Establish boundaries for your teenager, but encourage exploration at the same time. Teens may question themselves in many areas, including their sexual orientation and gender identities. Because of what you learned when you developed your identity in the earlier stages of life, you may feel more prepared and more secure about the changes your child is going through. Flexibility in the roles each person plays in the family system is a valuable skill to develop at this stage. Responsibilities such as the demands of a job or caring for someone who is ill may require each person in the family to take on various, and sometimes changing, roles. This is a time when one or more family members may feel some level of depression or other distress. It may also lead to physical complaints that have no physical cause somatization disorders such as stomach upsets and some headaches along with other stress-related disorders. Nurturing your relationship and your individual growth can sometimes be ignored at this stage. Neglecting your personal development and your relationship can make this shift difficult. You also may begin thinking about your role in caring for aging parents. Making your own health a priority in this phase is helpful as you enter the next stage of the family life cycle. Specific goals during the stage of parenting adolescents include: Shifting parent-child relationships to allow the child to move in and out of the family system. Shifting focus back to your midlife relationship and career issues. Beginning a shift toward concern for older generations in your extended family. Launching Adult Children The stage of launching adult children begins when your first child leaves home and ends with the "empty nest. Free from the everyday demands of parenting, you may choose to rekindle your own relationship and possibly your career goals. Developing adult relationships with your children is a key skill in this stage. You may focus on reprioritizing your life, forgiving those who have wronged you maybe long ago , and assessing your beliefs about life. If you struggled with previous life phases, your children may not have learned from you all the skills they need to live well on their own. If you and your partner have not transitioned together, you may no longer feel compatible with each other. But remember that you can still gain the skills you may have missed. Self-examination, education, and counseling can enhance your life and help ensure a healthy transition to the next phase. This is a time when your health and energy levels may decline. Some people are diagnosed with chronic illnesses. Symptoms of these diseases can limit normal activities and even long-enjoyed pastimes. Health issues related to midlife may begin to occur and can include:

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"The Changing Family Life Cycle" offers essential guidance in understanding what happens in families in terms of the flow of life over the generations. The current edition provides a more in-depth perspective on the impact of gender on family life at each stage of the life cycle and on cultural variations in life cycle patterns.

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Family life cycle theory suggests that successful transitioning may also help to prevent disease and emotional or stress-related disorders. Whether you are a parent or child, brother or sister, bonded by blood or love, your experiences through the family life cycle will affect who you are and who you become.